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Vermont Humanities

Written statement for the Working Group meeting on November 11, 2022

As you've heard in past testimony, the Vermont Early Literacy Initiative's original goal was to improve the cognitive content of public library's early literacy programming. At the time, this was almost exclusively story time. No matter how tiny or how huge your library is, if you're a librarian, you do story time. Story time is and always will be a song, a finger play, a story, and a craft, and maybe another song. And there's nothing wrong with that!

But it was the dream of a past VTLIB children's consultant—Grace Greene—that librarians would learn just how important those story time interactions were. When you have a group of babies, you also have a group of parents. You're reading to the babies, but you're also talking to the parents. You're modeling the reading. You're also giving parents tips on reading to their baby, talking to their baby, all of that. So those early trainings served as continuing education as they helped to raise the bar and allowed librarians to understand that what they were already doing was important, good work; they just needed to do it with *intentionality*. We wanted them to make it clear to their communities how important the public library was, if they didn't know it already.

As one librarian said in her testimony, after VELI, story time was no longer considered just entertainment. It was education.

Librarians from 98 public libraries attended those trainings over a decade—and VELI eventually expanded to include other topics such as social-emotional development, STEM, visual literacy, you name it. Librarians also made connections with and trained community child-care providers. At first librarians said they didn't know how to train child-care providers and there was real pushback at first, until they realized that they *are* literacy experts and they have valuable knowledge and experience to offer.

Vermont Humanities is now the home of VELI. In 2020 we began by reconnecting with 11 of the VELI libraries in a first cohort and planning to offer trainings on “big-picture” topics while providing books and materials for programming. And then, we all know what happened in early 2020. Much like how librarians had to pivot with their communities, we did as well. As time went on, it began to make more sense to have regular personal contact with the 11 libraries, rather than try to get together for in-person conferences. We asked them, “What do you need? How can we help?” And that help was wide-ranging and unique to each community. The kinds of programs that were popular before the pandemic may not meet the needs of children, families, and other community members in this ever-evolving landscape. What was needed in Bennington (where the community was welcoming new Americans from Afghanistan) was not what was needed in Bradford (where the library was the new meal-distribution location for the community). In Enosburg Falls, the librarian had always wanted to put together circulating take-home bags with books and materials around a topic. They've been so popular, she's making more. In Orwell, the librarian wanted to connect with middle-schoolers for the first time—a notoriously hard-to-get audience—and she did that through a Humanities Camp. In Barre, the

librarian is restarting his in-person programs for child-care providers, something that had been suspended over the pandemic. Clearly, it could not be a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Therefore, we shifted our focus to making routine site visits to observe programs, deliver books, and speak with librarians about the challenges they face and offer advice, which could come from other librarians, in some cases. We held regular Zoom meet-ups, where librarians could offer each other advice about particular topics. Even in the larger towns, librarians often feel isolated, and we see part of our role as bringing the librarians together. In a recent meeting two of the librarians talked about how they hadn’t had an in-person story hour in so long and had almost forgotten how to do it. One said she wasn’t sure she was doing a “good job” anymore! If anyone could understand how she was feeling, it was the others on the call, and they were able to talk it over together.

As a humanities-centered organization, we strive to bring the humanities disciplines into communities and to use literacy, learning, and discussion as tools for community-building as much as for education and enrichment. We feel very strongly that public libraries serve a vital role as community hubs that align and help further our own mission, and we know that VT librarians are working incredibly hard to meet the specific needs of their communities. In that vein, we want our relationship with librarians to be a partnership, where we offer our strengths as facilitators and administrators first and bring our backgrounds as subject matter experts into conversations, workshops, and trainings when it is directly relevant to their work—and help them share their expertise with one another whenever possible.

We still plan to offer more “formal” learning opportunities for the VELI cohort and are excited to introduce these in the near future, but we will continue to meet the librarians where they are because we believe this is valuable to librarians professionally.

In summary, librarians have to be dynamic and generous and nimble—it’s part of the job description! We strive to provide librarians this same support as they form new community collaborations, welcome new audiences into the community and the library, all the while they grow as professionals.