

**Cindy Weber, Director**  
Stowe Public Library

State Library Testimony  
Meeting of the Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont  
Community Comments on Social Services  
March 24, 2023

Hello. I am Cindy Weber, the Director of the Stowe Free Library. I have overseen the Stowe Free Library, a much beloved municipal library, for the past 11 years. The library is located within the town village in a historic Greek Revival building, established as a school in 1863 and renovated as a public library in 1981. The library was founded in 1866 and was said to have been previously located in a village inn, a store front, and a town administrative building.

The Town of Stowe is a destination for adventurers and tourists from the 4 corners of the world as well as home to “true” Vermonters, as defined to me, an original Midwestern flatlander, by the number of generations families have lived in Vermont and more specifically in the community of Stowe. The town with a population of 5,223, an increase of 20% since the pandemic, includes several religious denominations, independent businesses, forests, farms, preserved lands, restaurants, schools, recreational areas, community organizations, and more.

As you would expect, being in what others would view as a “gold town”, the library is well supported by the community. The library has a healthy budget, a supportive and collaborative Board of Trustees, a staff of five full-time professionals, and a generous Friends group. The library offers many materials, resources, and services to community members, i.e. Stowe residents, library members, and visitors alike. The library is a valued asset in the Stowe community, but it competes financially with the many demands put upon the municipality from its constituents who desire a safe, healthy, sustainable, beautiful, educated, and inviting community.

Working in a public library, the Stowe Free Library staff encounter patrons of all walks of life – the young and the old, the struggling reader to the lifelong learners, the well-to-do and the not so well off, the healthy and the suffering, the employed and the unemployed, the business owners and the seasonal workers, the homeowners and the homeless. Yes, the Town of Stowe has unsheltered individuals within its community. Their “homes” are essentially the forest, the walking trail, and the shelter its picturesque bridges provide, etc. and their meals are provided by the leftovers carelessly thrown in trash cans and dumpsters.

I have met many homeless individuals at this exceptional library, from the very first day I started working there. We had a local gentleman who graced our library for years with his voracious literary appetite, which we gladly fed with library owned and donated works of fiction, many times not returned, but we were happy to do what we could. He lived on the walking trail, and I suspect sometimes on the library lawn, frequently migrating to other communities or spending time in the Veterans Hospital, until his recent demise, which was widely publicized in the local papers.

Another time, an extremely, exhausted, and disheveled young mother, who had been living in the woods, stopped in with a crying baby. My Youth Librarian took it upon herself to hold the baby while the mother took a nap. She started sleeping in a chair, but then spread herself out on the floor in our periodical room. Word spread throughout the community about one in need, and a police officer stopped into the library to check on her. He provided some assistance through his connection with social services.

Occasionally, we would see other homeless individuals, who we knew by name and who frequented the Stowe Free Library periodically. This winter, all our regulars and a few newly established "regulars" have converged in Stowe and the library. Currently, my staff and I know at least 6 homeless individuals by name, and they may all visit the library on any given day.

At the beginning of February, with the weather conditions reaching negative temperatures, community members voiced concern about the homeless individuals to the Town Manager and the Town Selectboard members. The Stowe Free Library was designated as a "warming station" for the remainder of that week. We kept the building open for an extended amount of time, allowing individuals to congregate in our lobbies. The library was opened as normal and the homeless gladly entered for an extended stay. For the first time ever, we received a visit by representatives of the Lamoille Shelter Organization and the United Way of Lamoille County, and received offers of assistance by a local rabbi, a local pastor, and their congregational volunteers. The staff handled most of the situation, but one of the representatives spoke for several hours to one individual who strongly denied the offer of bed and comfort in a local shelter. I spoke with the representatives and voiced my gratitude for their appearance and the concerns the staff and I have had. The representatives gave me their contact information, which made me hopeful.

We have had increasing concerns about the homeless individuals and their impact on the services we provide. They arrive with an abundance of personal possessions, including a sharpened walking stick. We advise them to keep clear of access to materials and services, but one had a verbal confrontation with a patron regarding her possessions blocking access to the public computers and later accused another patron of being rude to her, while the same patron made the same complaint against her. Several have arrived with differing malodorous scents, a deep scent of wood smoke, a lingering smell of mold and mildew, and a combination of these along with extreme body odor. Patrons have complained and have been obvious about avoiding areas that the homeless are occupying within the library. This week, one repeatedly hit himself in the face, but when the police were called for his own safety, he replied that he was fine and gave no indication to the police officer that this event even occurred. The same individual likes to occupy all the nooks and crannies of the building, from the elevator to the bathroom, to the basement entryway. Many ramble on about the injustices of the world. One likes to change his clothes in the lobby. All of them appear to be fighting mental issues and addictions.

I reached out to the agency representatives for advice on how to address these issues. Regarding personal hygiene, I was told that public showers are being considered but it may take up to a year for them to be installed. I was offered sanitary wipes. I was expecting more

assistance in a timely manner, but one email sent out was not responded to in almost a week. Calls are unanswered. I know that these individuals and organizations are busy dealing with the many things that we are dealing with, but I feel more needs to be done to help them and to relieve the stress it is putting on the communities and my staff. I am working with the Town Manager and others within the municipality to come up with some plan going forward, but I wonder how much this burden should be on the municipalities and specifically librarians who are not trained in social work. My staff do their very best to treat everyone equally and cordially, but we are experiencing burn out, what with our own stressors and staff turnover since the epidemic.

Libraries are known to be the third place (beyond work and home) where communities gather for quiet reflection, learning, and socializing. Libraries are open to all. We strongly believe in the tenets of intellectual freedom and equal access. We are happy to welcome all. We go above and beyond to recommend resources when needed or requested, but we do not have any resources to provide these individuals. Our only resources are warm space and the town's emergency personnel, who work in town departments that are understaffed.

This extreme situation has arrived at a time when the library was not prepared. We do not have policies or protocols to deal with the odors, the disruptions, the passive aggressive behavior, the number of possessions, the mental illnesses, the addictions. I am reaching out to other libraries to see what policies they may have, but I find it overwhelming because I know that policies must reflect equality and fairness, but there are so many nuances with this issue.

Social Services are needed within libraries and frankly everywhere in this state. People are hurting. It is a disservice to them to let this continue. I know that we are the land of the free, but some individuals are freer than others. The homeless are bound by their fears, their addictions, their illnesses. Library staff are ill equipped to deal with their demons.

I thank Vermont and the Working Groups for taking on this assessment of public libraries and all the aspects thereof, and I appreciate the time you have given to listen to the many testimonies regarding library services in this great state of Vermont.

Thank you!