

New Haven Community Library
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Re: Testimony for the Working Group on the Status of State Libraries: Staffing

To the Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont

I have yet to work at a library or within a network of libraries that is not challenged by the constraints of an incredibly lean budget, tasked to maximize every single penny beyond its full value. When it comes to hiring staff in rural libraries—especially single-staff libraries—this means search committees often look for a hard-to-find, highly skilled candidate while some larger libraries and other industries/fields can solve the challenge with multiple hires that specifically fit one or two expertises. Job duties for a single-staff library director can include administrative tasks, collection and circulation management, readers advisory, reference & research, grant writing, fundraising, social, web, & print marketing, janitorial & building care, program coordination, volunteer recruitment, IT management & training, and community engagement. It is almost impossible to find a person with this level of skill let alone be able to compensate for the full value they may bring depending on their skill set if they do apply.

As innovative and new technologies are incorporated into a library's plan of service, the scope of what a rural library must be prepared to help with further increases. Add that many single-staff organizations continue to bulk up programming efforts with events like book clubs, story hours, maker spaces, summer reading for all ages, after school programs, and guest speakers—it becomes all too clear that for some library staff, job tasks feel more like a toppling to be read pile that will never be finished.

A band-aid on this issue is volunteer support, and volunteer programs are a great way to build community in your local area. But like we saw with the COVID-19 pandemic when it became unsafe for volunteers to enter the building, tasks typically assigned to volunteers came back to staff and areas of work that became possible because of volunteer support became impossible. The pandemic laid bare the overzealous use of volunteers to keep the library services running.

As employers decide or are required to give leave for childbirth, illnesses, family care, and even emergency sick leave due to the COVID-19, some libraries are at a greater disadvantage of weathering those storms due to their lack of forethought of adopting policies and plans that take these issues into consideration before they become law or a unavoidable consideration. Because these conversations aren't being had, libraries are missing out on opportunities to hire qualified staff or retain those who become burnt out from the level of dependence the organization impresses upon them. What's worse is that any shift in a smaller organization has a seismic effect on its stability and can leave communities in vulnerable positions.

Systems like a local substitute list do help manage planned short-term leaves and many emergency illnesses. New Haven maintains a substitute list of 4- 5 volunteers who all receive basic training on circulation tasks prior to starting and come in for training updates periodically as library processes greatly shift. I've found this system to be helpful keeping the building operational in my absence, but it doesn't solve the dependency in which the organization relies upon my "perfect" work attendance overall.

One support system I've greatly appreciated is Vermont's Public Librarianship Certification program. As a new hire in NYS, I had a basic director orientation, cataloging training, and access to a continuing education calendar featuring one or two-day professional development classes. While I took advantage of these opportunities for myself, I also found these brief training sessions to be limited in helping me advance my knowledge on librarianship. Vermont's Public Librarianship Certification program allows non-MLIS credentialed staff to work on their library literacy in a capacity that gives them a solid framework for the how and why of librarianship. I've appreciated a more rigorous process and advanced curriculum as it has tremendously helped me further my knowledge as a director.

Another support I found helpful during my tenure as a director in New York was through our membership with the North Country Library System, a Cooperative Library System. This type of library system brought together 65 libraries from four adjacent counties into a consortial relationship. Our library relied on our system for InterLibrary Loan, IT support, consulting from MLIS professionals who specialized in different areas of librarianship, cataloging materials, workshops and continuing education, our library websites and phone app, and OverDrive.

The biggest advantage to being part of a library system meant small libraries were provided with additional, necessary support to help them work towards staying at pace with modern library services. It was also a cost effective way to have access to some of the more expensive aspects of library service while paying a smaller fee for those services because of a collective agreement—though it should be

noted a large portion of library system funding in NYS is provided for through system aid, not individual libraries budgets.

Yet these advantages came at a cost. The System also tried to standardize parts of libraries' operation, including universal cards, returning borrowed titles to non-home libraries, requiring all libraries to allow transit on new titles, and accepting patron payments on fines and fees from another library. Practices like these made it difficult to understand resident and non-resident use, added labor for staff to process stacks of titles checked out from neighboring libraries and prep them for transit, inequitable access to new materials, and confusion and liability issues for accepting payment for items from a separate organization.

Though a cooperative system keeps libraries autonomous, many processes within the library are now tied within a system and are subject to system rules, making it hard for individual libraries to be dynamic to community needs. It also creates a skewed perception about the ability of rural libraries compared to its more municipal counterparts. While there are services provided through my former Library System that I miss, I think the individuality and strong sense of mission that each library in Vermont carries is absolutely invaluable. I would hate to see our state forsake its defining characteristic solely for some of the services a system provides unless it has better protections in place that keep libraries truly autonomous.

Sincerely,

Katie Male-Riordan
Library Director