

Meeting of the Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont

Topic: Safety in Libraries

Friday, July 28, 2023, 9:02am to 11:45am

Working Group Meeting

Topic: Safety in Libraries

July 28, 2023

Minutes

Working Group members present: Maria Avery, Jeannette Bair, Catherine Delneo, Denise Hersey, Kelly McCagg, Karen McCalla, Susan O'Connell

Working Group members not present: Meg Alison, Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup, Andly Kolovos, and Wendy Sharkey

Department of Libraries Staff Members Present: Thomas McMurdo, Janette Shaffer, Josh Muse, April Shaw, Karen Gravlin, Joy Worland, Jonathan Clark, Lilly Talbert, Kevin Unrath, Gina Hruban

Link to Meeting Recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vU2Bld4Qxx0>

I. Call to Order [00:00:16]

Catherine Delneo called the meeting to order at 9:02am.

Roll call of Working Group Members.

Roll call of others in attendance.

Working Group website can be found here: <https://libraries.vermont.gov/services/initiatives-and-projects/working-group-status-libraries-vermont>

Written comments can be found at: <https://libraries.vermont.gov/services/initiatives-and-projects/working-group-status-libraries-vermont/testimony-working-group>

II. General Public Comment [00:04:36]

Catherine Delneo invited public comment. There were no members of the public present and no public comment was offered.

Chair Catherine Delneo provided an explanation of how the topic of Safety in Libraries was added to scope of the Working Group's study:

In March and April, 2023, the House Committee on Education asked Catherine Delneo to testify on miscellaneous Senate Bill 133, An act relating to miscellaneous changes to education law and specifically on language in the bill that would add the topic of gun safety in libraries to the charge of the Working Group. Catherine was also asked to testify on this topic at the Senate Committee on Education April 19, 2023.

During testimony, Catherine shared with the legislators that the topic of gun safety is very narrow and that the Working Group is not expert in gun safety in libraries. Catherine further shared that the Working Group

and the Department of Libraries (the Department) had heard from the library community libraries of all types about the broader topic of public and staff safety in libraries. Catherine requested that the legislators broaden the language in the bill to focus on safety in libraries. Catherine also requested the Legislature change in the due date of the Working Group's report as it would be challenging to meet the original deadline. The Legislators proposed changing the report deadline to December 20, 2023, so that the Working Group would have more time to complete their work and the Legislature could also move forward with any recommendations in the 2024 Legislative session. While passed by both the Senate and House, S. 133. While the Working Group may not be required to consider the topic of safety in libraries, Catherine decided to proceed with the meeting on safety as scheduled as the legislation gives the Working Group some discretion.

The Department had also heard from library staff at the Large Libraries meeting that they wanted this topic to be considered by the Working Group. Despite this specific request and the scheduling and announcement of the call for public comment on this topic via the regular channels, no directors of the large libraries provided written comments to the Working Group specifically on safety in libraries.

At the July 28th meeting, Catherine shared with the Working Group that they had receive no written comments from either the public or members of the library community on the topic of Safety in Libraries, and reminded the Working Group that they had heard comments in other meetings on safety in libraries that could be incorporated into the subject report on this topic. During those prior comments, the Working Group members had observed that when talking about safety in libraries, some members of the community have demonstrated a degree of trauma response. Based on personal extensive experience with incidents of safety while working in large, suburban and urban public library environments in previous jobs, Catherine acknowledged that these experiences and ensuing trauma staff experiences can be very personal. For these reasons, Catherine did not prompt any members of the library community or the public to share oral or written comments because in doing so they might feel that the State Librarian was reaching out to them and saying, "You need to share your personal trauma in our public meeting setting."

While the Department has typically rounded up subject experts to present on topics under consideration by the Working Group, the topic of safety in libraries does not have clear experts either at the state or national level. For that reason, no experts were scheduled to present. The Department does not receive reports of safety incidents in libraries in Vermont, nor does statute require it to do so. Safety incidents in libraries are handled locally by library staff, library boards, school administrators, and local law enforcement.

Catherine stated, "The topic of safety in libraries is very important to me. I feel that all members of the public should feel safe and welcome in libraries. I feel that all library staff deserve a respectful, peaceful, and safe working environment. Like all of you, I recognize that these desires I have are aspirational. Like you, I acknowledge that librarians have long been challenged to ensure public safety and that the trustees have long been challenged to ensure staff safety in libraries. My sense is that this concern is particularly challenging in a public library environment on a day-to-day basis, but school and academic library environments also have the potential for significant and often more extreme safety challenges – including gun violence."

Catherine encouraged each Working Group member to consider their unique perspective serving Vermonters in libraries and to consider their roles as representatives of their community to this public body. Catherine acknowledged that given the lack of specific comments from the public on the topic of safety in libraries, the

Working Group may keep its conversation general and focus on broad topics of safety – and what recommendations it can make to Vermont legislators to improve safety for the public and library staff.

The Working Group had opportunity for questions and comments on Catherine’s statement.

Kelly McCagg thanked Catherine for sharing her experiences. She shared: “I want us to think about the fact that libraries are supposed to be welcoming for all and that we live in a very rural state and not where I work, but where I live, it is not unusual to walk into the grocery store and to see someone carrying a handgun. I think it's very important that we don't do anything to make that demographic feel that a library is not for them. I think it's important that we are just as aware that law abiding people who also feel it is their right to carry a firearm, feel that same safety and that same welcoming.”

Karen McCalla thanked Catherine for sharing.

Catherine thanked Kelly and Karen and suggested the Working Group save further discussion for the later agenda item.

III. Changes to Agenda [00:20:54]

Catherine proposed the following change to the agenda: Adding Joy Worland’s presentation on behalf of the Department on Safety in Libraries (item V). The Working Group agreed to this change in the agenda.

Catherine shared that in order to provide ample time for the public to share their comments on safety in libraries with the public, the meeting’s agenda included the topic of public comment on safety in libraries. Catherine suggested that the Working Group pause its conversation if a guest arrived in the meeting so that the Working Group could hear from that community member. The Working Group agreed to that suggestion.

IV. Approval of Minutes [00:22:48]

Possible action to approve minutes of the Working Group meeting of May 26, 2023.

Explanatory document: May 26, 2023 (Draft Minutes)

https://libraries.vermont.gov/sites/libraries/files/InitiativesProjects/LibraryWorkingGroup/2023_05_26_Minutes_WorkingGroup_Approved.pdf

Catherine Delneo called for any changes to the document. There were no comments or suggestions for a revision. Denise Hersey made a motion to approve the minutes, Susan O’Connell seconded the motion. The minutes were unanimously approved by the Working Group.

V. Department Presentation on Safety in Libraries [00:24:50]

Joy Worland, Professional Development Consultant, Department of Libraries

Joy shared a presentation entitled Safety in Libraries in which she reviewed:

- Information the Department shares with library staff and trustees through its Continuing Education program,
- Safety tips specific to one-person libraries often found in Vermont’s in small, rural communities,
- Books and web resources on safety in libraries, and

- Safety training providers provided by the Department and other continuing education platforms for librarians (including the Public Library Association, Library Journal, Library 2.0, and the University of Wisconsin's iSchool Continuing Education program).

Supporting document:

https://libraries.vermont.gov/sites/libraries/files/InitiativesProjects/LibraryWorkingGroup/Supporting/Safety/nLibrariesPresentation_070823.pdf

The Working Group had the opportunity for comments and questions.

Jeannette Bair thanked Joy for her presentation and said she agrees with the content that Joy shared as someone who has worked alone in a small library for almost 19 years.

Catherine Delneo thanked Joy for her great work supporting the education of library staff on this topic – particularly those that work at small and rural libraries.

VI. Public Comment on Safety in Libraries [00:39:52]

Catherine Delneo called for public comment. There were no public comments.

VII. Working Group Discussion [00:40:29]

Working Group members discussed the topic of guns in libraries.

Points raised included:

Libraries regularly have rules and have a practice of restrict behaviors that threaten safe use of the library. For example, people cannot bring pets to the library.

Public libraries need to serve all community members and some people may feel unwelcome if they cannot visit the library in the same way they visit other public spaces. Those who carry firearms to the grocery store may feel very unwelcome if they cannot stop by the library as usual while carrying their firearm.

The potential for causing greater division between communities on either side of the political spectrum, and the possible impacts on library service to some Vermont communities.

The right to bear arms is embedded in our country's constitution in a way that the right to bring pets is not – so this topic is thornier than other possible restrictions on behavior in libraries.

State laws exist that prohibit bringing guns to other locations, including schools and hospitals.

Whose safety do we prioritize? I don't think there's an easy answer to that."

Catherine shared a link in the meeting chat to 3 V.S.A. § 4004, Possession of dangerous or deadly weapon in a school bus or school building or on school property.

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/13/085/04004> Catherine shared a link in the meeting chat to 3 V.S.A. § 4023, Possession of firearms in hospital buildings prohibited.

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/13/085/04023>The question of whether academic institutions are considered “schools” within state statute.

[Additional note per 16 V.S.A. § 570i, “Educational institution” means a Vermont public or independent school or a postsecondary school that offers or operates a program of college or professional education for credit or a degree in Vermont.”

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/16/009/00570i>]

The University of Vermont does not allow firearms on campus unless you are authorized as security or police. As guns are not permitted on UVM campus, they are not permitted at UVM’s academic libraries.

<https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/UVM-Policies/policies/firearms.pdf>

At least one other state, New York, prohibits guns in libraries.

The amendment of 2021 S. 51001 was signed into law in New York’s 2021-2022 Legislative Session and reads: “§ 265.01-e Criminal possession of a firearm, rifle or shotgun in a sensitive location.

1. A person is guilty of criminal possession of a firearm, rifle or shotgun in a sensitive location when such person possesses a firearm, rifle or shotgun in or upon a sensitive location, and such person knows or reasonably should know such location is a sensitive location.
2. For the purposes of this section, a sensitive location shall mean:
 - (a) any place owned or under the control of federal, state or local government, for the purpose of government administration, including courts;
 - (b) any location providing health, behavioral health, or chemical dependence care or services;
 - (c) any place of worship or religious observation;
 - (d) libraries, public playgrounds, public parks, and zoos;”

Supporting document: <https://legislation.nysenate.gov/pdf/bills/2021/s51001> (See page 8, line 47.)

The group discussed that it might be good to refrain from a recommendation for the entire state on this topic as decisions currently lie with individual libraries and this may impact some communities more than others. For example, a library in a small community may offer a hunter safety class and the library may be the only building in their community that can house this training in-person.

Catherine suggested the Working Group bear in mind that it is not in charge of gun safety in the community. And shared that it is relevant to consider that libraries do need to ensure the public feels safe to use libraries so they can access information and use libraries to meet their needs. Catherine also shared that in addition to public safety it is important to think about the obligation library boards and administrators have to ensure staff safety in the workplace. Catherine asked that the point people back to the state statute about how libraries are essential and in what way – and that per Vermont Statute, public libraries “are essential to the general enlightenment of citizens in a democracy and that every citizen of the State of Vermont should have access to the educational, cultural, recreational, informational, and research benefits of a free public library” (22 V.S.A. § 67) so seem to be a piece of the educational structures of our state to some degree. Supporting document:

<https://legislature.vermont.gov/statutes/section/22/003/00067>

Catherine added: We haven't been asked to make recommendations to public libraries, we've been asked to make recommendations to the legislature. Our specific charge is recommendations to the legislature, and it could be that we don't recommend anything to the legislature on this. It could be that we recommend further discussion by the Legislature and that this is too big of a topic to just have our small Working Group making recommendations.

Denise Hersey commented: Do we want to address that in our recommendations, the idea that we should we fall into a specific bucket? because we don't. Is that what we are saying, that it's a discussion we want to have as part of our recommendations?

Catherine Delneo suggested that the Working Group might consider that point as part of the governance topic in general. A possibility would be to recommend to the legislature that when they write legislation, if they intend to include all libraries or public libraries, , they call out those libraries specifically and not rely on language about municipal buildings. . We might suggest that when they consider rules for educational or school settings, that they also contemplate if are they interested in those rules for public safety for public libraries.

The group continued to discuss the topic by sharing opinions and experiences including concerns that many seemingly simple conversations in libraries escalate and tone, and that if people have their guns with them, they are more likely to use them to threaten or hurt others at the library.

One member of the Working Group shared that they had a library user threaten to go home to get their gun because the community were upset when informed of an overdue fine.

VIII. Break [01:35:40]

The Working Group discussion on Safety in Libraries continued.

Concerns were expressed about the Working Group's level of expertise to be making recommendations to the Legislature on the topic of limiting the right to bring guns into public libraries.

The Working Group discussed the idea that it make a recommendation that libraries be considered to be included in the legislation that already exists that protects schools, hospitals and courthouses.

Catherine suggested and put in chat that the Working Group could recommend

“The Legislature they look at public safety laws that already apply to educational facilities (including gun laws, drug laws, and criminal threatening laws) and consider if they think it would be appropriate to apply those same protections to public libraries in the state (both municipal and incorporated). Also recommend that they consider public libraries when enacting future public safety legislation relevant to public buildings and/or schools.”

The group unanimously agreed to the inclusion of that recommendation.

The group discussed then decided not to issue a formal recommendation on the topic of staffing levels in libraries related to safety and determined this would be better addressed through training provided to library staff and trustees by the Department.

The group discussed the inclusion of a recommendation that municipalities communicate with incorporated and municipal public libraries during emergencies (e.g., floods, winter storms) to ensure public safety. The Working Group will consider adding that recommendation to the Emergency Response section of the report.

IX. Report Writing [02:16:14]

Catherine Delneo shared a PowerPoint entitled 'Report Writing Progress' with the Working Group.

Supporting document:

<https://libraries.vermont.gov/sites/libraries/files/AboutUs/LibWorkGroup/Working%20Group%20Meeting%20Report%20Writing%20Proposal%2007%2028%2023.pdf>

Six summary reports have been received to date: Continuing Education, Emergency Preparedness, Facilities, Social Services, Staffing, and Technology.

Five summary reports are outstanding: Collections, Inclusive Services, Intellectual Freedom, Library Structures and Organizations, and Programming.

Catherine shared concerns about capacity to write the Working Group report in a timely manner, given the many other responsibilities of the Department. Catherine recommended that any of the remaining funds not spent from the Working Group's \$12,000 appropriation, be spent on hiring a Report Writer per the proposal in the Report Writing Progress PowerPoint.

Kelly McCagg made a motion to hire a report writer using the Working Group's funds up to \$5,000.

Jeannette Bair seconded the motion.

Catherine called for a vote; the group unanimously approved the proposal.

Catherine requested that any outstanding summary reports be submitted to her by August 11th.

Catherine invited the group to share any additional comments on the report writing. There were no additional comments.

Catherine proposed changing the date of the Working Group's August special meeting to August 18th, due to conflicts for some of the Working Group's members with school schedules and suggested that the meeting begin at 10am rather than 9am to accommodate for travel by Working Group members

The group agreed that the meeting will be held in person on August 18th from 10am-4pm at the Vermont Department of Libraries office; 60 Washington Street, Barre, Vermont.

Karen McCalla made a motion to adjourn the meeting, Susan O'Connell seconded the motion. The group voted unanimously to adjourn the meeting.

X. Adjournment [02:43:36]