



Executive Summary

Every Vermonter should have access to the benefits of a library, but the goal of equitable access to library service has yet to be met. The one constant throughline in community feedback, information shared by experts, and data on library services in Vermont shared with the Working Group is that access to library services in the state is inconsistent.

The Working Group heard that disparate levels of funding for public libraries around the state cause gross inequities in library services, including facilities, collections, and programs. The Working Group also heard that library staff and trustees around the state want to provide their communities with the best service, but that many libraries simply lack the resources to meet the needs of their communities.

In this context, shared, statewide services are key to ensuring that Vermonters have access to library materials and information. Statewide systems and programs, including Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and shared online databases, encourage resource sharing between libraries and are pivotal in increasing Vermonters' access to books and information. The Working Group shares its strong support of centralized, statewide collections and programs that provide a core set of materials for all Vermonters to access through their libraries. These resources help to equalize access across communities with different levels of library funding.

However, as the costs of printed books, electronic books, and online databases rise, it is becoming increasingly difficult for academic, public, and school libraries in Vermont to maintain adequate collections that meet the needs of the communities they serve. The costs of printed materials continue to grow while the budgets of many libraries remain level. As a result, many libraries in Vermont struggle to afford materials that meet the reading and learning needs of the public. Print resources remain essential elements of Vermont's libraries. Print materials ensure equitable access to information, as using them does not depend upon having access to the internet or computer, tablet, or phone. Printed books are also a key tool in literacy development. According to Maryanne Wolf, the director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners, and Social Justice at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, "Reading development begins well before any teaching. For young children, physical books are best, audio is second best, and tablet is a clear third." (<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/why-printed-books-are-better-than-screens-for-learning-to-read-q-a/2023/03>)

“Books are really one of the greatest tools for the mind and should never be lost until we are assured that the same processes that were advantaged there are not being diminished by the other mediums.”—Maryanne Wolf



That said, libraries are challenged to continue to provide print materials for the public while also meeting the growing demand for online resources, including eBooks and databases.

Online resources, meanwhile, can be ephemeral. Publishers used to sell libraries physical copies of books and journals, which libraries could lend and use as long as the library binding held together. Today's procurement model for libraries is one of licensing with a finite period of access to online materials. For that reason, the Working Group asks the Legislature to consider legislation to address the pricing structures that impact Vermonters' access to eBooks and eAudiobooks through their libraries and to bear in mind the rising costs of shared statewide database resources when allocating funds to support schools and libraries.

Vermont's libraries face increased worries that the very words on the page of the materials they collect for patrons and the programs they curate for their communities will be challenged or banned. While calls for book bans are thankfully few in Vermont to date, the Working Group heard from members of the community that a type of "soft censorship" is becoming common in libraries—particularly those in smaller communities. Worries about defending potential challenges to materials in the library collection increasingly impact the comfort library staff have in selecting well-written, relevant materials for their collections. High-profile challenges to library programming in the state have some library staff and trustees backing away from inclusive programming. While Vermont has, so far, faced fewer challenges to materials and programs than many other states, the feeling on the ground is that it is just a matter of time until these issues will impact Vermont libraries significantly. Libraries have long been a place where ideas and information can be shared freely, so this changing climate poses a threat to the very nature of libraries and the role they serve in the community.

Limits to the accessibility of books threaten not only Vermont's libraries, but its democracy. While library materials serve as a place where one can access facts and data, the library is also a shared repository of stories. And through these stories, we can learn about and from others and build empathy and understanding. "Marcus Aurelius insisted that to become world citizens we must not simply amass knowledge; we must also cultivate in ourselves a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities with us" [Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998)]. Books are not just pleasure reading or an assignment for school, but are a key to understanding others, and understanding other perspectives. Books help us find commonality with others who may seem dissimilar from ourselves—and also help us to understand our differences in a way that can help us build an inclusive, democratic society together.



***“...a novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal.”
—Ralph Ellison***

The current trend toward silencing literary voices and removing materials from libraries threatens to stifle the opportunity Vermonters have to build connections with and empathy for others through reading. It also threatens to expunge some voices from the conversation entirely. Excluded voices often belong to members of traditionally marginalized and underserved groups. The removal of books due to the ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or political views of their authors results in some members of our community not being able to find representations of anyone like them reflected in the books at their library. The Working Group calls on the Legislature to consider legislation to protect the intellectual freedom and privacy of Vermonters, and to expand the privacy afforded to youth in using public libraries.

Another existential challenge faced by many of Vermont's public libraries is far more tangible: many public library buildings across the state are more than 100 years of age and in need of significant repairs and improvement. Public libraries have often not had sufficient funds to maintain and update their buildings. While some federal funds will be available to support some libraries in updating and maintaining their facilities, the overall need is likely to exceed the available funding.

Providing inclusive library spaces is a challenge that faces all types of libraries in Vermont, many of which were constructed or last renovated prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and do not meet modern minimum requirements for public facilities. The Working Group heard from library staff across the state that they have a desire to improve the accessibility of their facilities so that they can truly serve all Vermonters. The Working Group appreciates the efforts of the Department to secure federal grant funding for improvements to public library buildings, and calls on the Legislature, when funds are available, to consider whether ongoing funding for capital improvements in libraries—including ADA-related improvements—would be appropriate.

“The library really is a palace. It bestows nobility on people who otherwise couldn't afford a shred of it. People need to have nobility and dignity in their lives.”—Eric Klinenberg

Vermont's libraries are its “palaces for the people,” places where everyday people come to think, to dream, and to learn. People visit libraries together, or to see friends, but they also visit libraries so they can be alone but near others. They are a place to share ideas



and a place to connect with others in the local community and around the world. However, the Working Group heard from many community members that some behaviors in Vermont's public libraries impact people's experience when visiting public libraries. The Working Group also heard about the isolation and concerns for personal safety faced by public library staff, many of whom work alone in library buildings on evenings and weekends when nearby municipal buildings are closed—or who work in communities without local police to call on for help. The Working Group discussed the disparity in safety in different types of libraries and calls on the Legislature to amend [Act 103 \(S.265\)](#) to include staff of incorporated public libraries working in library buildings not owned by a municipality. The library staff who work in public library buildings owned by non-profit entities perform the same work and function as their counterparts in municipal libraries and should be afforded the same protections under law.

The Working Group also heard that the high social service needs in our state at this time sometimes impact public library services. Public libraries are one of the few indoor locations that welcome all community members to use their facilities at no cost. Public library staff in Vermont increasingly find themselves trying to fill gaps that have emerged as social service needs have grown. This is especially challenging as library staff are not trained to provide counseling and do not have clear paths of referral to meet impacted individuals' needs. The Working Group heard that library staff are increasingly concerned about the prevalence of behaviors linked with poor mental health and substance use in public libraries. While staff voiced empathy and concern for those who need supportive services, they also conveyed that behaviors associated with mental health challenges and substance use make it difficult for them to provide basic library services.

For many community members, libraries provide the only gateway to the digital age and serve as the only place where they can access the internet. The Working Group heard how important it is to provide high-speed internet access to Vermonters and heard that the connectivity currently available in libraries may not meet the needs of the community. It also heard that many library staff need support to improve their technology skills and their ability to train others to use technology—and to use technology safely as cybersecurity crimes are increasingly common. The Working Group encourages the State's Digital Equity team to help to address these concerns.

It is challenging for libraries to meet the needs of their communities with current staffing levels. The Working Group consistently heard from public libraries that they need more high-level staff to meet the information and programming needs of their communities and that they need budgets large enough to enable staff to be compensated with livable wages. The Working Group also heard that many public libraries struggle to recruit and retain qualified staff.

Due to the complexity of this topic and the number of comments and concerns raised to the Working Group by the community about low wages and low staffing levels in Vermont's public libraries, the Working Group commissioned an independent study of staffing and salaries at Vermont's public libraries for inclusion within its report to the



Legislature. The Public Library Compensation and Salary Survey Analysis is included in the Working Group's report (Appendix), and the survey findings are sobering. The survey analysis found that the compensation of many who work in public libraries is below the 2022 Vermont Livable Wage and the 2022 Rural Basic Needs Wage. Additionally, the survey highlighted that most public library staff do not receive health insurance, dental benefits, or pensions through their employers.

The Working Group heard concerns that students in Vermont's schools have less access to librarians, and that librarians are working with far fewer support staff than they did in the past. The Working Group also heard that while the state's Educational Quality Standards prescribe specific ratios of librarians to students, community members also shared that there are no enforcement mechanisms in place to ensure those ratios are met. Members of the community also shared that combining school librarian and technical positions had a negative effect upon student access to library services. They reported a need for additional support and asked the Legislature to consider reinstating a school library consultant position within state government.

The community also shared with the Working Group that limited wages and the high cost of master's degrees in library science from institutions accredited by the American Library Association are linked with lower levels of training among Vermont's librarians and library directors. The Department of Libraries' continuing education and Certificate of Public Librarianship programs emerged as vitally important to ensuring high-quality public library services in Vermont. The Working Group calls on the Legislature to alter the language of statute to require that the Department offer continuing education. The Working Group also requests that the Department be authorized in statute to issue the Certificate of Public Librarianship.

That said, the Working Group also heard that staff at all types of libraries in Vermont use limited resources to provide Vermonters with a great deal of service. Libraries across the state provide rich collections and programming to the communities they serve and provide an access point to online information and resources. Libraries find low-cost ways to provide their communities with opportunities to gather and share information and ideas. Libraries partner with other organizations to develop programs and services unique to their communities—programs that are often more than the sum of their parts. They provide the physical and electronic collections their budgets allow and participate in resource-sharing to help the individuals they serve to access materials owned by others. Vermont's libraries bring community members together in celebration and provide spaces of comfort and connection. Libraries create empathetic citizens who are well-equipped to participate in our democracy. Library staff around the state electively participate in training to increase their knowledge and skills and strive to continue that learning to the benefit of their community. They carry an optimism for the future, and a hope to improve accessibility and inclusivity of their collections and the services they provide to their communities.