



ilsleypubliclibrary.org

Ilsley Public Library

Main Street, Middlebury VT | 802-388-4095

Sarah Partridge Community Library

East Main Street, East Middlebury VT | 802-388-7588

January 4, 2021

Dear Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont,

For better or worse, when people think of libraries they think of collections and, more specifically, they think of books. As a librarian, I spend a lot of time busting two pervasive and diametrically opposed myths: one, that libraries are repositories for books and little else; and two, that the physical book is in decline (if not already dead). The latter myth is the quickest to bust: sales of print materials continue to go up year after year, and this trend is echoed at the Ilsley Public Library, which circulated 81,162 physical materials in FY 2020 and 58,465 in FY 2021. Many people continue to prefer physical books, and the fact that digital natives continue to checkout physical library books in high numbers indicate that this is unlikely to change in the future. Circulation of physical materials by teenagers, for example, who have had access to digital e-books their entire lives, has gone up every year for the past four years at Ilsley Public Library. During the pandemic our community members made excellent use of our curbside pickup service, demonstrating that even during a time when people ventured out of their homes for only the absolute essentials, they still came by the library to get books.

The second myth takes more time to address, because once you start talking about everything libraries do (even if you are just listing out everything libraries have in their collections) you could go on forever! Like many libraries today, Ilsley has a diverse circulating collection, made up of books, DVDs, audio discs, newspapers and magazines, and our ever growing "library of things." When library collections are well maintained and responsive to their community's needs, they ensure equitable access to educational and cultural materials, as well as to treasured community resources. For example, the Middlebury community values the town's natural beauty and access to recreation. In response, the Ilsley Public Library offers snow shoes and ski passes to the local mountain, the Snow Bowl, and Rikert Nordic Center. Snowshoeing and skiing are not affordable activities for everyone in our community; providing access to equipment and passes increases access and allows everyone to take advantage of the best Middlebury has to offer.

Our circulating collection supports another value Middlebury residents hold dear: sustainability. Resource sharing allows many people to use a single copy of a book or item when they need it without everyone having to purchase, store, and ultimately dispose of multiple copies. As climate change becomes a greater imperative people are realizing that

utilizing their local library collection allows them to purchase fewer things, thus reducing their shipping footprint, consumption, and ultimate waste. This works particularly well for items used only rarely, for example moisture meters or a telescope (both of which reside in Ilsley's collection). Libraries are also well positioned to work with local partners to circulate non-traditional library items. For example, last summer Safe Routes Middlebury partnered with Frog Hollow Bikes and Local Motion to pilot an e-bike lending program in Middlebury. The trial was immensely popular, but in order to keep the program running the community needed to take ownership of both the bikes and the reservation management. The library was asked to step in to manage the circulation of these e-bikes; when the snow melts this spring, three e-bikes will be available to check-out through the library.

While they do not replace physical materials, digital e-books and audiobooks are an important component of our collection, and have allowed the library to expand our reach. Patrons who live far away from the library, or who are unable to come into the library for any number of reasons, can now access a significant portion of our collection remotely. The rise in streaming services has also allowed us to augment our collections in a new way: through Kanopy, the library is able to offer patrons access to 25,000 films. These titles should not be viewed as part of the library collection, because we do not own them. But from the user's perspective, it makes little difference if a book or movie is owned outright or paid for per circulation, downloaded or streamed: they have access through their library.

In short, library collections provide community members access to education, cultural enrichment, and recreational opportunities. Ilsley Public Library is fortunate in that our collection development budget is generally adequate and has allowed us to build a robust collection which is treasured by the community, but even still our patrons can't always find what they're looking for. If the book in question is available at another library, patrons can become frustrated that they do not have borrowing privileges there. There are generally ways to connect a patron with a book--for example, through Interlibrary Loan, or with Homecard borrowing privileges. But ILL can be slow and costly, and not all libraries participate in Homecard. It leaves patrons wondering why they can't simply go borrow a book at another Vermont library down the road (especially patrons that have recently moved here from out of state, and are used to state wide lending systems).

Library systems seem to work well on two fronts: first, by increasing a patron's access to collections outside their home library, and second, by consolidating certain collection management costs and efforts. Middlebury is one of very few public library systems in Vermont; we have a main branch, Ilsley Public Library, and a branch in East Middlebury, the Sarah Partridge Library. Patrons have full access to both collections, and materials travel between the two locations. We are able to reduce duplication of work by having all cataloging and book processing take place at Ilsley, and of course there is a savings in having both libraries share one catalog system. This works well for Middlebury, on a micro level.

On a macro level, Ilsley benefits from membership in several consortia: GMLC, VOKAL, Homecard, and CLOVER. VOKAL and GMLC have provided us with a more affordable, shared catalog for accessing our collection. Titles are catalogued by librarians at all 50+ libraries in VOKAL, saving time and effort for our library cataloger. We also benefit from the technical and cataloging expertise of librarians across the VOKAL network when questions arise. By pooling our financial resources through GMLC, we can offer a much larger digital collection than we would be able to afford on our own. Management of the collection (through GMLC selectors) is also shared.

Having said that, GMLC, VOKAL, and Homecard all rely on volunteer services to keep them running, and not all libraries in the state participate. I believe a discussion about a statewide consortium—one which receives funding and administrative support from the state—is a conversation worth having. Perhaps the Department of Libraries would be well positioned to lead this conversation, as they have strong experience managing the interlibrary loan service CLOVER and, more recently, taking over management of the courier service that was initiated by the Green Mountain Library Consortium. My personal experience is that librarians in Vermont are eager to work together, and have found creative ways to share resources. I hope the Working Group will consider ways to provide additional support to existing systems, and explore the possibility of a future in which patrons need only one card to access all of Vermont's public libraries.

With many thanks,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana Hart". The script is cursive and fluid.

Dana Hart
Director