

Loren Polk, Director Aldrich Library in Barre, VT

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Thank you for the opportunity to share the work and stories of Aldrich Public Library with you today.

My name is Loren Polk and I am the director for the library. We serve the City and Town of Barre, a population around 17,000. This is a large library by Vermont standards – in population, collection, and size as our building is fourth largest in the state as of 2021 statistics.

Inclusion is and has been a must for Barre since its beginning. You've perhaps heard the myth of the name Barre being settled in a boxing match in a nearby barn over 120 years ago. I love this story because it is a wonderful reminder that diversity of ideas has always been here, and communication and collaboration are different for everyone. Since that time the granite of Barre brought some of the most diverse populations and peoples to Vermont through the beginning of the 20th century. Our library holds copies of anarchist and socialist newspapers published in that time, as well as Scottish, Lebanese, and Italian family stories that have named our streets, stores, and our library.

Barre today continues to be a granite center for the world, but we have also evolved to encompass some of the largest support systems for Vermonters in the county. Washington County Mental Health and the county's homeless shelter, Good Samaritan Haven, are located here, in addition to many low-income housing organizations such as Capstone, Central Vermont Adult Basic Education and the Learning Together Preschool Center, restorative justice, and the county's court services. This impacts our community, as we are a place to go for "help".

Today we still have a wide variety of people we serve, and our rooms, collections and programs all aim to encompass as much of the community as possible. Strong communities are a product communication, connection, and belonging, and our library aims to reflect and promote these ideals for the greater Barre area.

Because humans look for patterns in behavior in order to process information, we are susceptible to cognitive biases that can get in the way of communication and connection. One of the most successful ways we have found to support belonging in our shared space is to identify the intended use, set expectations of behavior to promote this use, and find ways to communicate and enforce expectations uniformly, trying to recognize those cognitive biases in order to overcome them.

As an example of this strategy, we have witnessed and heard a wide difference of opinion regarding noise permissions and "problems" in the library. Our Vermont room, which is located in the center of the building, is a cozy and somewhat removed space, and perfect for small

groups to gather and catch up. The building staff decided this area is most used for “quiet conversation” and set up this expectation for activity in the room.

Over time, I noticed some patrons received more complaints than others, and some were reprimanded more often as a result. The solution came in the form of a \$15 noise meter indicator. Any noise over a certain threshold and the machine would beep to notify staff and the group that noise was reaching levels that would impact other rooms. With this expectation, those “noisy teens” were given a clear expectation and were happy to use the space accordingly. And if the knitting group set the alarm off during their meeting, the expectation could be universally enforced.

Another example comes in the form of service and support animals visiting the library. The law is clear that we are limited on inquiring about the service an animal might provide, and public spaces have struggled with ways to ensure compliant building use and support equitable access. While other places of business stress the use of a service animal, we have decided to enforce expectation instead. Any animal that “breaks heel”, is aggressive toward others, or is not house broken, can be asked to leave the premises regardless of their support or service animal status. For this reason, we created signage and expectations welcoming animals that comply with this behavior. Again, the expectations are clear, easier to enforce, and easier for our community to understand and agree to.

Finally, we create programs, collections, and uses for our building to support needs recognized in the community. Without a dedicated teen space in Barre, Aldrich was responsive to this need and incorporated a dedicated teen space in the library in 2014. This room is dedicated to middle school and high school kids during after school hours, and the expectations are established to consider this use. And during the COVID pandemic, as churches were unable to open their doors for people experiencing homelessness, we worked with Barre City Council to provide a before hours program in our Milne Community Room. This allowed for anyone seeking a warm space or needing help with applications for services to come in to the library as early as 8 am. Through this program we have connected with dozens of people in our community, and helped many of them to connect with the help that we have created throughout our city.

People experiencing homelessness – or even more broadly, poverty - will always be with us. Luckily, I am not here today asking you to solve poverty or even solve homelessness. Instead, it is important to serve people in these circumstances, and I know there are many people working on this service with you. I want to thank you for your work, and assure you that as an information center for my community, I will spread the word of this resource as best I can.

What I am here today to advocate for goes beyond service. People experiencing homelessness (and poverty) can not only be served by a community, they must be part of a community. They need to feel welcomed and missed, they need to be represented as a part of the whole, and this cannot come with the caveat that their welcome is temporary or unfairly conditional.

This is the great value of libraries – to welcome, represent and include all people within a community. I love and will always advocate for Senior centers, youth centers, and homeless shelters, but a library is where these groups can come together to make a strong community.

In order to help libraries with this work, I would ask three things from the Working group today.

1. Eliminate or reduce the use of and dependence on competitive grants to support our capital, operations, and programs. Help us to focus on providing a quality product to our communities, and eliminate the spent costs associated with grant applications.
2. Help us to recruit and retain qualified librarians for our community classroom.
3. Be a part of your local library's community. The best way to see a community's culture and to become a part of it is to go to the library.

Thank you so much for your time.