



**Knowledge for Life.
Knowledge for All.**

August 4, 2023

Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont

Dear Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont,

My name is Mary Danko and I am the Library Director for the Fletcher Free Library located in Burlington, Vermont. The Fletcher Free Library was founded in 1873 and moved into a beautiful Carnegie building built in 1904. In 1981, a new addition increased the size of the library to over 46,000 square feet and included a beautiful 3-story glass curtain wall. The library had over 240,000 visits and over 380,000 circulations in 2018. The library has a budget that is over \$2.3M, has 27 employees and is open 7 days a week.

Today, I write to you to share my perspective on the challenges our library staff has been facing over the last year. As a representative of our community's library, I feel it is important for you to understand the reality we confront on a regular basis.

Allow me to provide an overview of a typical week from my point of view, giving you a window into our daily struggles and the impact on our staff and patrons.

Tuesday

Upon returning from my vacation celebrating my 10th wedding anniversary, I encountered a situation at the library's door. Our full-time security had not yet started their shift, so the library staff often has to handle pre-opening incidents. One such incident involved two men smoking and blocking an emergency exit. I politely asked them to move, and one of the men appeared to be under the influence of substances.

Later, the same man's behavior escalated in our restroom, requiring us to call 911 for medical assistance. In another incident that day, a different man exhibited erratic movements and was sweating profusely. He wouldn't communicate with the staff as they were trying to keep him from hurting himself or accidentally hurting others. EMTs had to be called to attend to him. Both gentlemen seemed to have taken the same drug or drugs and their behavior became highly unmanageable.

Wednesday

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I participated in a phone call meeting with a reporter to discuss the censorship challenges libraries are facing nationwide. There were no patron incidents this day.

Thursday

During our Library leadership meeting, we addressed safety and staff morale issues resulting from frequent challenging situations. We also ensured someone attended the Downtown Safety and Security meeting, where we collaborate with partners to address community concerns. During these meetings we learn of many people who have challenges, many with mental health issues as well as those suffering from addiction issues.

Friday

I attended the Sensory Friendly Hour program for youth, aiming to provide a calm and supportive environment for children with sensory processing differences. However, the day took a concerning turn when a person was found sleeping or perhaps under the influence on the lawn with a hatchet next to her, and another individual exhibited extreme behavior, prompting us to call the police.

Saturday

I worked at the library outreach table for Juneteenth and witnessed a person under the influence of substances. Later, I received reports of people injecting drugs on a vacant building's steps near the library, leaving our staff feeling helpless and concerned. I also learned later that day of two other incidents that had happened during the week that involved calls to the EMTs. The incidents were just coming through our online incident reporting form as our Youth Librarian only had found time to do them that night.

In the evenings, we often encounter challenging situations around closing time, impacting staff morale and stress levels. Incident reporting, tracking, and debriefing are crucial to ensure our staff's well-being and enhance safety protocols.

As I share these experiences, I want to emphasize that we are dedicated to providing compassionate and supportive service to our community. However, the impact of these challenging situations on our staff's mental health, morale, and well-being cannot be overlooked.

Our supervisors and managers have dedicated significant time providing support and training to our team. The role of librarians and library staff has undergone a remarkable transformation. In the past,

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libraries were places of calm order, focused on providing information, books, and programming to the community.

However, today's librarians and library staff find themselves dealing with adrenaline-rushing situations that demand nuanced thinking around patron behavior, including mental health and substance abuse issues. Libraries cannot function as day shelters or social service providers, and we can't be constantly worried about potential overdoses or health hazards like needles in the library.

Despite these challenges, libraries remain valuable community resources. They can offer reliable and factual information on essential services, provide computer centers for internet access, faxing, printing, and scanning. Libraries can also host social workers and collaborate with various organizations to connect people with the services they need.

Moreover, libraries play a vital role in addressing societal issues through programming and community engagement. They can foster connections among diverse patrons through book discussions, special speakers, and recreational activities.

However, for libraries to fulfill these roles effectively, funding is crucial. We need the necessary resources to create safe public spaces and provide essential services, such as security guards, social workers, programming, security cameras, specialized training in dealing with escalated situations, trauma-informed assistance and more. We need additional staff to build relationships with other social service organizations.

In conclusion, libraries can continue to make a positive impact on communities, but to do so, we require adequate funding to support our mission and create a safe and beneficial environment for everyone.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Mary Danko
Library Director

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