

Carolyn Brennan, Director

Kellogg-Hubbard Library, Montpelier

March 14, 2023

Dear Working Group,

I am Carolyn Brennan, the Library Director for the Kellogg-Hubbard Library in Montpelier. I'm happy to submit testimony on emergency preparedness in Public Libraries. The KHL participates in emergency preparedness in a variety of ways and operates as a de-facto social services organization. Please see my response for each of your topics below.

Public Health and Safety

Today is a fine example of the Library participating in public safety. Heavy snow led to multiple power outages in our service area as well as downed lines and widespread loss of internet connectivity creating work disruptions, heat disruptions and loss of essential communication. Because of its downtown location and high speed fiber line, the Library maintained power and internet and was far busier than a typical Tuesday. Patrons were camped out in every available space, connecting to Zoom meetings, working, checking on the status of their power at home and staying warm if their heat was out. This is a common occurrence in our area, particularly in our more rural towns where loss of internet and power disruptions are more common; the Library stays open to offer shelter and services.

In Washington County, services for people experience homelessness or with housing insecurity are managed by a confederation of churches and nonprofits. The Library coordinates with other local service providers in a few different ways: first and foremost we are a warming or cooling station during all of our open hours, we keep accurate and up-to-date information about free meals in our area, and we offer one of only a few available local public bathrooms. To better meet the needs of some people who use the library, we rewrote our behavior rules to create a less restrictive environment that support more varied behaviors (as well as allowing inside voices), and we bought chargers for anyone who needs to charge a mobile device. As we are feeling the increasing effects of climate change, the Library is becoming more important as cooling and warming space. Our library is large and difficult to cool (we're working on this issue – but it's a large, complex, expensive project), but we do have one meeting room with air conditioning. Beginning last summer, we booked our meeting room to be used exclusively as a cool space for anyone needing a break from the heat and it proved very popular. We are in the regular winter rotation of daytime warming shelters available in Washington County, when the weather gets cold, we see more and more people using the Library as a space to relax and exist during our open hours.

During the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Library served as a trusted information resource for the general public to ask questions about mask-wearing, current COVID conditions and other health and safety related questions. Now we are a distribution site for free covid rapid antigen tests through the Vermont Department of Health. Since that program began last fall, we have distributed roughly 500 rapid antigen tests per month. We also offer free masks, and have done so for the past three years.

Community Identity and Resiliency

At the KHL I have repeatedly heard versions of the same story: a person (or family) was moving, and before they settled in one of our member towns, they scoped out the public library. Because a busy, vibrant and beautiful public library was the number one indicator that this was the type of community they wanted to join, they moved to the area. The Library reflects, supports and amplifies community identity. For some communities it is the only anchor institution (full stop), or the only anchor institution outside the school or church community. It is that vital third space, where anyone can go and feel

welcome regardless of their background, belief system, age, gender, etc. During the pandemic we received frequent reports that curbside service from the library was the only thing keeping our patrons from climbing the walls. Organizing zoom programming was the only way, for a while, that our community could see each other and share their interests in a public forum. Now with the return of in-person programs we see parents with young kids (who might otherwise suffer from social isolation) meeting other parents and participating in story time; and we see adults with like interests being given the opportunity to meet, to connect with their neighbors and engage in discussions and activities. Free Library programs are a tremendous isolation fighter for rural communities, for senior citizens and for those with economic barriers to continuing education and other resources.

Economic Development

The Library, through the Vermont Department of Libraries, offers access to Learning Express. Learning Express is a place where anyone can go, create an account, and take practice tests or train for certifications. We also offer, through the Department of Libraries, access to Universal Class, a place where our patrons can access free or very low cost educational resources. Both of these programs have impact on economic development of Vermonters. The Library collection keeps up-to-date books on small businesses, legal issues, job and educational training and other resources. Patrons and visitors use our public computers to search for jobs every single day. When they are out of work they use Library public computers to apply for benefits and submit unemployment claims. We offer programs on technology skills and financial literacy. We partner with VABIR and Hire-ability Vermont to offer job training and work experience opportunities to people who are trying to re-enter the workforce. We also partner with the two local high schools in our service area in their community-based learning programs, that offer work experiences and job coaching for students with disabilities.

Access to Public Programs and Services

We log around 750 connections to our public computers each month. Patrons use our computers for all sorts of activities, but we frequently help patrons file unemployment claims, scan and submit paperwork to VERAP (the emergency rental assistance program), Social Security and other benefits providers. In Washington County, mental health services are stretched pretty thin and our librarians frequently help patrons who are receiving services by fielding all kinds of benefits and life skills questions. Yesterday I helped a patron who had recently lost her job apply for 3squares VT.

Currently I'm partnering with Rachel Muse, the director of the Waterbury Public Library and Washington County Mental Health to offer a full-day Mental Health First Aid training for my librarians. This training fits in our budget this year, but this type of support and professional development goes beyond what we can typically offer, yet it's an ongoing request/need. Support for interacting with people in crisis is the number one training request from my librarians. Because we are a free, public space we are often called upon to act as de-facto social workers, and responding to issues with people in crisis, or who may be using controlled substances is becoming an increasing part of what we do.

Please let me know if you have follow-up questions.

Respectfully submitted,
Carolyn Brennan

Carolyn Brennan
Co-Director, Library Director
[Kellogg-Hubbard Library](#)
(802) 223-3338 ext. 210