

Wendy Hysko, Director

Brownell Library, Essex Junction

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Dear Working Group-

As a Library Director at a large library in Vermont, I've seen a change in what types of visitors we have over the years, and how many more people are coming to public libraries because they have no other place to go as these visitors don't have the funds visit establishments that expect you to pay for food or drink to hang out in their spaces.

I started working at Brownell when the recession was happening in 2009, coming from out of state. I was used to having more struggling people visit the library I came from outside of Portland, Maine, but this change was new to Brownell. One staff who has since retired said she that staff rarely had to manage people visiting Brownell before the recession, and that changed drastically during the recession.

At Brownell, we aim to be as welcoming as possible. Unless actions include breaking the law, we try to educate people about our behavior guidelines. We have experienced theft and vandalism and occasional pedophiles and other adults who have assaulted staff, or exposed themselves to children. Sometimes they are recognized by news coverage, other times it's because of some sort of line crossed that makes staff uncomfortable and quick searches reveal a legal history that indicates we might want to proceed with caution.

The use of the Library has changed over the pandemic and we've seen an increase of adults struggling and looking for help at Brownell, with computers, wifi, taxes, government assistance applications, job hunts, phone use and other essential services people who have reliable housing take for granted. Prior to the pandemic we also had a handful of men who would spend their days drinking in different spaces in the library, sometimes it was obvious, other times we found the bottles left behind. Police can't search people without a warrant, so unless they are disruptive, we have to let them be.

We have a wayward group of kids that don't have the best home lives and find a warm place at Brownell to hang out after school, but they don't use resources, just our space and these kids need a lot of training on how to share a public space. Sometimes the kids have parents in prison, or solo parents who can't keep track of them because of work. Some of these kids have also gotten involved in vandalism, theft, fights (including fists and knives to date), substance abuse in our buildings and grounds, and running away from home, sometimes to our building. All this type of activity has resulted in a lot of regular staff training from professionals so we are able to deescalate when we can, connect visitors to services, and try to keep the library a safe, welcoming place. Many days it feels like an uphill battle.

We've had patrons who have been no trespassed everywhere else in the City, and we try to educate instead, and when that isn't successful, we do have to no trespass people, and it never feels good to do that.

I could go on forever about the many challenges we face with difficult patrons. The cuts to social services in our country make public libraries a front line of where people go to seek social interactions, or a warm safe space, on top of computers, and help from library staff to seek services. These are not people looking for the next great book to read, they are people really struggling with life and trying to survive. Forever we dreamed of how amazing it would be to have a social worker on staff to help these struggling people so we could focus on sharing resources and lifelong learning opportunities - the services that draw most people to work in libraries. They don't mention in graduate school how well you might get to know your police department that we call when we realize we need outside help. Our police department has long had a reputation for working with the community, and their efforts to not

escalate situations was noticeable, but a lot of people don't respond well to a person in uniform with a badge as someone who's trying to help because of their past experiences.

In 2018, the Essex Police department opted into participating in a pilot program with the Howard Center to embed outreach workers in their department. The plan was to hire an outreach team and 5 communities would share the outreach workers would share the cost, the the outreach workers would use the local police department as their home base. When I heard this news, I couldn't believe it. I knew our Police Chief was also feeling like more of their work was dealing with people in crisis, and they weren't the best people to navigate those situations when they were needed in so many other places to address traffic issues and crime. When the first outreach workers showed up at Brownell to introduce themselves, I resisted the urge to physically embrace them, we had trained mental health workers we could contact! They were thrilled we were happy to see them.

The hours to start weren't great - 8am to 4pm weekdays - that they were available. We are open nights and Saturdays, but there was assurance from the police if the outreach workers were making a difference, they could expand the hours. Within months of the launch of this program, we felt the difference. Not nearly as many people were visiting Brownell in crisis. When we did have people who were more difficult to deal with, we called the outreach team and they would come and talk to people. When people come in any sort of crisis, we can call the outreach workers who can connect them with resources and they decide if they need to be accompanied by the police depending on the person and situation. It's not always a win, some people don't want help, but also don't want to leave our building and continue to be disruptive, and the outreach workers have worked with us to navigate these situations. How many people we've had to no trespass has dropped significantly since the outreach program was launched. This outreach program now covers 9 towns with expanded hours of 8am-8pm week days. It's still not enough, but it has helped us a lot.

Not every library is allowed to take the time to train for difficult interactions, or have the funds to support that training. With libraries becoming one of the last safety nets for people looking to connect, we can never predict who will come in our doors. We have seniors who are looking for social interactions, adults with mental illness and substance abuse issues, and kids who do not have stable family lives that seek out their public library for a safe space, and transient people who know they can find some sort of sanctuary in a public library. Library staff need to be prepared to handle these different generations of people struggling, on top of providing traditional library services. I fear for the solo library staff that don't have anyone to back them up when they have a difficult person visit their library. Libraries mission is to welcome all, with so many people struggling, welcoming all comes at the price of spreading library staff thin. We face security issues most people could never dream of in a public library, while offering service to the rest of the community, doing our best not to miss a beat.

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