

Beth Royer

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Testimony for the Working Group on Staffing:

The year I became a library director I attended the Vermont Library Association Conference. I recall a fellow director of a one-person library saying “We need to get paid better.” This was in 2019, before the pandemic, and I agreed while also saying “everyone needs to be paid better.” I believe this fellow director was earning \$15 an hour, and when that position was subsequently re-posted after they left, it was still a library director position paying \$15 an hour.

Previous to being a library director, I served as a substitute librarian in a library in a neighboring county, where the initial pay was \$12 an hour. After an introductory period, they moved this rate up to \$18 an hour and wanted me to take the position as the Adult Librarian BUT it was 30 hours a week and offered no insurance. I loved that library, but not those particular work conditions. At the time, I had no spouse to host my insurance, and the pay was just enough that I couldn’t qualify for Medicaid but not so much that I could effectively save money or pay my rent. Instead, as I tried to stay insured I also tried to stay broke enough so that I would not be uninsured.

As the director of an incorporated library, I’ve struggled with both the challenges of trying to provide a staff that is all part time with a living wage while also paying well enough to retain candidates that offer the skills of modern librarianship. This has become more challenging in a world where a large portion of the female-identifying population is doing the risk-benefit analysis about re-entering the workforce.

How do I sell potential staff on a job that offers a lot of heart but not a lot of cash, and no insurance, in a “post-pandemic” world?

I hired a programming librarian during the pandemic and the job listing drew over 20 candidates. Within a year and a half, the person we hired departed for a full-time position at another library that can offer them insurance. As long as our incorporated library expects me to cobble together a staff without paying them appropriately, we will end up with library services that also feel cobbled together. When we again hired for the same position, advertising for a longer duration and using the same placement ad, essentially, I had a total of four candidates. Meanwhile, the library paraprofessional opening at the local elementary school had something in the area of 30-40 candidates. Also included with that job: health insurance.

The Department of Libraries hasn’t provided a suggested salary range for librarians. The Vermont Library Organization only recently began recommending including salary listings with their job postings. This is overdue. There is nothing more vexing than putting in the time to apply for a job and interview only to find that the position does not pay enough to cover basic living expenses.

Every time the subject comes up at the library conference, Vermont Library Association consistently states that the way we can get paid better is through advocacy. For my incorporated library in Chittenden County, this is a crisis not only for working people who are trying to live in one of the most

expensive housing markets in Vermont, but also for the future of the profession. If I can't provide a living wage for younger people who want to work in libraries, how can I expect to not lose them to a neighboring municipal library that can offer them more money? How can I not expect to lose them to other organizations that can offer them a comprehensive benefits package?

IMLS data generally runs two years behind. It also does not separate salaries out, so the only way to make an accurate comparison is by polling other area libraries about what they are paying. While I appreciate that folks from the Department of Libraries have recently FINALLY conducted a salary survey (since the last guidance on advocating for better salaries that VLA produced came out ten years ago, in 2012), this information is still not available yet. Meanwhile, Vermont Library Association's Advocacy information on their website dates from 2006. As long as there is stagnant progress on actually speaking to the problem and an absence of timely data, it will be time-consuming to offer a pay scale that pays people what the market demands.

When the library board here was hiring for my position, the information provided to them at the time of hiring from the Department of Libraries staff person they contacted was basically "sift this complex mix of factors and figure out what you should pay." Meanwhile, neighboring states with equivalent costs of living (to Chittenden County) offer positions and listings where even non-union positions are paying something closer to a living wage.

This is a crisis for the professionalism of the work, and for the people who I want to keep employed and who I want to pay fairly in a competitive job market.

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