

Testimony for the Working Group on the Status of State Libraries: Staffing

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Public librarians in the 21st century are administrators, business managers, IT professionals, social workers. These jobs are in addition to the traditional roles librarians have had: reference librarian, collection development, readers advisory, and cataloger. As our jobs have grown more complex, there has not been a consistent response from libraries regarding compensation.

Some library organizations have acknowledged the changing requirements for library staff by increasing staffing, hours, or compensation. Other libraries have relied on volunteer hours to fill the gap, either with volunteers in the community or by relying on the director to work more hours than they are paid. Still other libraries have remained much the same as they were in the past, and have not kept pace with increased technological, social, and administrative needs in the library and community.

In my 11 years working at the Craftsbury Public Library, I have twice launched an advocacy campaign regarding my own job, and that of my staff. The first time I advocated to have my position increased from 32 hours/week to 40 hours/week, and increased compensation for support staff. The second time I advocated for benefits and a pay rate more in keeping with my professional credentials. In both instances, I was successful, and I feel that my position is now a desirable position that would attract qualified candidates who would serve the library well. Had I not done the work of disrupting the status quo regarding staffing and compensation, the job would have expanded but with me taking up the slack. When the time comes for the library to hire a new director, they would have been unable to find someone with the necessary skills and experience who would accept the compensation they offered.

I think there are several problems that need to be addressed. Libraries traditionally struggle to find proper funding, and funding is highly variable from town to town. State funding would help to provide needed funds, and could also serve to even out the variability in funding. Librarians and board members need better guidance on what proper compensation is. In years past, the Vermont Library Association provided semiannual salary surveys, and VTLIB has recently launched a survey to help gather and disseminate data on salaries which should be helpful.

During both of my advocacy campaigns, a recurring theme was that library patrons were unaware that my position and compensation was not equal to the professionalism they experience at the library. While the library board worried about increasing the budget, the community was strongly supportive of improving conditions so that the library could continue to function with professional staff. This is where clear expectations, in the form of standards, VLA recommendations, or other means would help to ensure that librarian salaries move toward the professional compensation that reflects the education and skills that go into the job.

While some public libraries are able to provide benefits through the municipality, incorporated libraries do not have that option. Finding a way to provide health care coverage and retirement benefits through a group purchasing plan would benefit my library, and I imagine a fair number of other libraries as well.

