

Plain Language Version:

Executive Summary of the Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont

Every Vermonter should have access to the benefits of a library. Libraries have not met the goal of providing equitable access to their services yet. The Working Group took feedback from the community – information from library experts and collected data on library services in Vermont. The one constant theme the Working Group found is that access to library services in the state varies.

Shared Resources & Rising Costs

The Working Group heard that:

- Unequal funding for public libraries around the state yields results in different levels of library services.
- Library staff and trustees want to provide their communities with the best service.
- Many libraries lack the resources to meet community needs.

Shared services across the state are key to Vermonters having access to library resources and information. The Working Group shares its strong support of statewide collections and programs. Shared services:

- Promote resource sharing between libraries. Examples include Interlibrary Loan (ILL) and shared online databases.
- Increase access to books and information.
- Provide a core set of materials people can access through their libraries.
- Provide equal access across communities with different levels of library funding.

The costs of print books, electronic books, and online databases continue to rise. The budgets of many libraries stay the same. As a result, many libraries in Vermont strain to afford resources that meet the reading and learning needs of the public. Print resources are vital to Vermont's libraries. They give people equitable access to information. Readers do not need to have access to the internet, computers, tablets, or phones to use print resources. Print books are also a key tool in learning to read.

Libraries face two challenges:

1. Maintaining print resources for the public.
2. Meeting the growing need for online resources, including eBooks and databases.

At the same time, access to online resources can be short-lived. Libraries used to buy physical copies of books and journals. They could then lend and use the books as long as they wanted if the books stayed in good condition. Now, libraries pay for a license for these resources with a limited period of access. For that reason, the Working Group asks the Legislature to:

- Consider legislation to address the pricing models that impact Vermonters' access to electronic books through their libraries.
- Bear in mind the rising costs of shared databases when assigning funds to support schools and libraries.

Intellectual Freedom and Privacy

Vermont's libraries worry that the books they collect for patrons will be challenged or banned. They also worry that the programs they offer could meet the same fate. Vermont has not yet faced many book bans. However, the Working Group heard from library staff and trustees around the state that:

- A type of "soft censorship" is growing in libraries, especially in smaller communities.
- Library staff are less confident in choosing books that are well-written and relevant. They fear that they will need to field challenges to those books.
- Some library staff and trustees have backed away from inclusive programs. This is due to high-profile challenges to library programs.
- These issues will impact Vermont libraries in the future.

Libraries have long been a place where ideas and information can be shared freely. This changing climate poses a threat to libraries and the role they serve.

Limiting access to books threatens not only Vermont's libraries, but its democracy:

- Libraries serve as a place where one can access facts and data.
- Books are a key to understanding others and valuing other viewpoints.
- Books help us find shared values with others who may seem different from ourselves.
- Books help us to understand our differences in a way that can help us build an inclusive, democratic society together.

When books are removed from libraries, people have fewer chances to build connections with and empathy for others through reading. It can also purge some voices from the discourse completely. Authors are silenced when books are removed from libraries. This means that some readers are not able to find people like them in the books at their library. Authors whose books are removed from libraries are often part of marginalized and underserved groups. Books have been removed due to an author's:

- Ethnicity
- Sexual orientation
- Gender
- Religion
- Political views

The Working Group calls on the Legislature to:

- Consider legislation to protect the intellectual freedom and privacy of Vermonters.
- Expand the privacy offered to youth in using public libraries.

Library Buildings

Many of Vermont's public libraries face concerns about their buildings:

- Many library buildings are more than 100 years of age.
- Many of them need major repairs and improvement.
- Many were built or last updated prior to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- Many do not meet modern minimum standards for public buildings.
- Some have not had the funds to maintain and update their buildings.
- Some federal funds will be given as grants to some libraries to update and maintain their buildings. However, the need is likely to exceed current funding.

The Working Group heard that library staff want to improve the accessibility of their buildings. This would help them serve all Vermonters. When state funds are available, the Working Group calls on the Legislature to consider ongoing funding for capital projects in libraries. These would include ADA-related upgrades.

Safety and Social Services in Libraries

Vermont's libraries are its "palaces for the people":

- They are places where people come to think, to dream, and to learn.
- People visit libraries together or to see friends.
- They visit libraries so they can be alone but near others.
- Libraries are a place to share ideas and a place to connect with others in the local community and around the world.

However, the Working Group heard from many that:

- Some people's actions while at the library impact other users' experience at the library.
- Public library staff face isolation and concerns for personal safety.
- Many library staff work alone in library buildings on nights and weekends.
- They also work in communities without local police to call on for help.

The Working Group noted the varying levels of safety in all types of libraries. The Working Group:

- Calls on the Legislature to amend Act 103 (S.265).

- Suggests including staff of incorporated public libraries who work in library buildings that are not owned by a municipality. These staff do the same work as their peers in municipal libraries. They should be given the same protections under law.

The Working Group also heard that:

- The social service needs in our state impact public library services.
- Public libraries are one of the few indoor spaces that welcome all to use their resources at no cost.
- Public library staff are being asked to fill gaps that have emerged as social service needs have grown.
- Library staff are not trained to provide these social services.
- Staff do not always know the best places to refer people to for help.
- Staff are concerned about the increase in behavior linked with poor mental health and substance use in public libraries.
- Staff voiced empathy and concern for those who need support services. However, they also said that behaviors linked to mental health issues and substance use make it hard for them to provide basic library services.

Internet Access in Libraries

For many, libraries are the only gateway to the digital age. They serve as the only place where some can access the internet. The Working Group heard:

- It is vital to provide high-speed internet access.
- The connectivity now offered in libraries may not meet community needs.
- Many library staff need support to improve their technology skills.
- Staff need support to improve their ability to train others to use technology.
- Library staff also need training to use technology safely as cybercrimes are growing more common.

The Working Group suggests that the State's Digital Equity team help to address these concerns.

Staffing and Pay

Libraries struggle to meet community needs with current staffing levels. The Working Group heard that:

- Libraries need more high-level staff to meet information and programming needs.
- They need budgets large enough to allow staff to be paid livable wages.
- Many public libraries struggle to hire and keep qualified staff.

- Lower pay and the high cost of master's degrees in library science are linked to lower levels of training among librarians and directors in Vermont.
- The Department of Libraries' continuing education and Certificate of Public Librarianship programs are central to ensuring high quality public library services.

The Working Group asks the Legislature:

- To change the statute to require that the Department offer continuing education.
- To authorize the Department in statute to issue the Certificate of Public Librarianship.

The Working Group noted the complexity of the topic of wages. It received many comments and concerns raised by the community. These comments focused on low wages and low staffing levels in Vermont's public libraries. Due to this, the Working Group commissioned an independent study of staffing and salaries at Vermont's public libraries. The Public Library Compensation and Salary Survey Analysis is contained in the Working Group's report (Appendix). The survey analysis found that:

- The pay of many who work in public libraries is below the 2022 Vermont Livable Wage and the 2022 Rural Basic Needs Wage.
- Most public library staff do not receive health insurance, dental benefits, or pensions through their employers.

School Libraries

The Working Group heard that:

- Students in Vermont's schools have less access to librarians.
- Librarians are working with less support staff than they did in the past.
- The state's Educational Quality Standards set ratios of librarians to students. There are no methods in place to make sure those ratios are met.
- Merging school librarian and technical positions had an adverse effect upon students' access to library services.
- Librarians need more support.
- The Legislature should consider restoring a school library consultant position within state government.

Conclusion

The Working Group also heard that staff at all types of libraries in Vermont use limited resources to provide Vermonters with a great deal of service.

Libraries across the state:

- Provide rich collections and programs to the people they serve.

- Provide an access point to online information and resources.
- Find low-cost ways to allow people to gather and share information and ideas.
- Partner with other organizations to create programs and services unique to their communities.
- Make the most of their budgets to provide physical and digital collections.
- Take part in resource-sharing to help people they serve access resources owned by others.
- Bring people together in celebration and provide spaces of comfort and connection.
- Create caring citizens who are prepared to contribute to our democracy.
- Elect to take part in training to gain knowledge and skills to support their communities.

Library staff carry an optimism for the future. They also foster a hope to improve accessibility and inclusivity of their collections and the services they provide.