



ilsleypubliclibrary.org

Ilsley Public Library

Main Street, Middlebury VT | 802-388-4095

Sarah Partridge Community Library

East Main Street, East Middlebury VT | 802-388-7588

January 9, 2023

To the Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont:

The subject of inclusive services and access to public programs and services in libraries is broad and deep, and I have no doubt the Working Group will receive a wide range of concerns and approaches on this topic. My own testimony will focus rather narrowly on inclusive internet access.

Ilsley Public Library provides access to free Wi-Fi twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. During non-library hours, Wi-Fi can be accessed from the library garden; from benches by the library's side entrance; or from the parking lot. The Sarah Partridge Library is a branch library in East Middlebury. Every year, the East Middlebury Prudential Committee contracts with the town of Middlebury to administer library services at this branch location. While library services and staffing are provided by Middlebury, the branch library building itself is owned and operated by the East Middlebury Prudential Committee.

Because the Sarah Partridge Library is governed by the same policies and procedures as Ilsley Public Library, the Sarah Partridge Library also offers Wi-Fi access outside the building during non-library hours. However, I have been approached several times over the past few years by members of the East Middlebury Prudential Committee, expressing their concerns about offering Wi-Fi during non-library hours. Their concerns generally center on the fact that if you offer free Wi-Fi at night, you are going to encourage "loitering." Some residents aren't comfortable having people gathered outside the library after dark, and believe it could lead to vandalism. There is particular fear that this gives teens a convenient place to congregate.

Thus far, I have been able to assuage these fears and put off any real confrontations by explaining that many people have legitimate reasons for needing internet access outside of library hours (even after dark!). I talk about the digital divide in Vermont, and the necessity of internet access to submit homework assignments or job applications. I point out that many community members simply can't get to the library during regular business hours because they are working, and that there are far worse places for teenagers to be after dark than accessing the internet on the steps of their public library. While these conversations have been successful, the persistence of the issue over the years is cause for concern.

One of the recurring arguments put forward by Prudential Committee is that East Middlebury is a very small community, and that the kinds of services appropriate for Middlebury aren't necessary, or don't translate well, to East Middlebury. I wonder how many other public libraries in small communities around Vermont have dealt with similar concerns when it comes to offering Wi-Fi service outside of library hours. The truth is that access to reliable, high-speed internet is absolutely essential to Vermonters, and many of them can only access it through their public library. In order to provide inclusive access to the internet, it is critical that public libraries offer the service outside of library hours.

A survey administered by the Dept. of Libraries during the pandemic indicates that of 53 libraries who reported the question, 47 offered Wi-Fi access 24/7, while 5 turned it off for some portion of the day. One thing that would help move Vermont public libraries towards providing equitable and inclusive internet services is enshrining it in an updated Minimum Standards for Vermont Public Libraries. I know it would be helpful to me to be able to point to a standard when justifying the need to provide around-the-clock Wi-Fi access. While I fully appreciate that community needs must be defined locally, it is also true that once a need has been identified it must be met equitably. Consecrating inclusive internet service would be just one of many benefits of updating the standards, and would give librarians much needed support.

Thank you for the work you are doing on behalf of Vermont's public libraries.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dana Hart". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dana Hart
Director