

Randall Smathers, Director

Rutland Free Library

March 15, 2023

Testimony for the Working Group on Vermont Libraries

Social Services / Emergency Preparedness

When it comes to social services and emergency preparedness, libraries are the department stores of local government. If we were better funded and more ruthless, I would use WalMart as the metaphor, and Dollar General is just too sad. But why department stores in the first place?

We're not specialists in this stuff. The police, fire, ambulance, crisis hotlines, and any number of social service agencies are. It's their day job. To stretch the analogy just a little further, if you need a full set of tools to replace your plumbing, you go to a specialty store. But to fix a leaky faucet, you just need a wrench, and you can get one of those in any department store. So libraries get pressed into service, passing and sometimes wielding the wrench.

Libraries are not equipped as crisis intervention centers, and except possibly for the very largest (i.e. Fletcher Free in Burlington), are unlikely to have the resources to host a crisis response person or the need to have one on hand regularly. But we are also likely to need those resources urgently when we do need them. I adored Mikaela Lefrak's introduction to her Vermont Edition show on Vermont Public on the future of libraries, where after noting all the pleasant things available to her and her child in the library, she mentioned the staff working with the unconscious person in the lobby.

Specifically addressing the experience of Rutland Free Library: Rutland has an intermittently served high-need population, many of whom turn to the library for help with specific tasks:

They need a document printed (bus / Amtrak ticket, court filing, form for assistance, temporary license plate, Amazon return form, map / directions, picture, letter, concert ticket).

They need technical help with their phone (the state provides cheap phones from WalMart, but neither the state nor the country's largest retailer provides help getting them set up), accessing one of our computers, a photocopier, or – rarely – one of the many, many online services the library provides.

Wireless printing is in constant demand.

And while those are "print jobs" or "tech help," they are frequently also social service tasks. The IRS does not have an office in southern Vermont, nor does the VT Department of Taxes – both cost-cutting measures. So people come into RFL looking for forms, and answers. The entire state office building in downtown Rutland was closed during COVID (although Vermont.gov still referred clients there), and users came to the library on the rebound. Amtrak has a station – but no ticket kiosk. The DMV now sends a downloadable file instead of handing over a paper temp plate. The hospital sends people home with a diagnosis and further information on *encrypted* computer files (on a DVD). We've had users rush in because they were due in court – online only – and they can't get a signal at home.

In many of these cases, users are turning to the library to receive services that used to be provided by government-funded agencies that have been eliminated in cost-cutting measures. And that probably seems like a win in Montpelier – cut X service, save Y dollars – and for people of a certain income who have easy access to electronic services, that's fine. But they haven't resolved the need for the services, and people without the education or the money to successfully make the connection, it can be a health / safety / life-threatening problem. This isn't new, it's called the digital

divide. But libraries are one of the basic bridges across that divide, and that's a function that is rarely funded ... or even discussed.

Those are relatively routine social service demands. More concerning are the emergency calls. RFL works diligently to build working relationships with our local emergency service providers. That usually means the police department, just because they usually show up. Sadly, I can count on my thumbs the number of times we've had a mental health crisis specialist show up in a decade-plus at RFL. That's not a knock on Rutland Mental Health; they're overworked. One of the two times they did answer the bell, their staffer showed up on her way home after work to help out. It was a heroic effort, well above and beyond ... but we called at 2 PM and she arrived right around 6. So we skip steps and call the police.

The other occasion – recently – was how the system *should* work. A longtime, emotionally troubled, user arrived wailing loudly, sobbing about how her life was useless -- and hoping to print out a train ticket. Unable to work with her because of the level of her distress, we called the police, who referred us to Rutland Mental Health, who referred us to the crisis intervention team. Their staffer arrived promptly and between us we were able to calm the user down – and print her train ticket!

What worked? Communication, communication, communication:

1) They showed up. Again, twice in just over a decade. They're the right people ... if they're available.

2) The case worker didn't plead HIPAA. Instead, she put me in contact with the person's case worker in Burlington, where the person was first entered into the crisis network. One of the things we try to do in terms of prevention when we have a troubled patron is contact the police to see if the patron is known to be high-risk for violence. Frequently we're told that PD cannot even tell us if they've heard of the person because of privacy concerns. Being told a potentially dangerous, clearly psychotic individual's privacy is more important than the physical well-being of my staff is *hard on morale*.

3) She treated me like a grown-up. Library staff are expected to screen potentially threatening behavior, intervene, call in the experts, de-escalate until they arrive ... and are then routinely excluded from the solution. How do we keep our people and the public safe if we don't know what's going on?

Finally, a note on the most serious threat. Thanks to Bill McSallis, who has done countless active-shooter trainings for only the cost of gas mileage. How sad is it that in an era where the unthinkable is a daily occurrence in this country and Vermont libraries are dependent on the vast, wonderful, selfless charity of one person to train us how to survive a shooting?

As always, thanks for your efforts, and feel free to hit me up with any questions.

Randal Smathers,

Director, Rutland Free Library

03/15/2023