



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

July 14, 2022

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

The Ilsley Public Library's greatest resource is our staff. In order to meet community need, the library employs seven full-time staff and six part-time regular staff (a total of 9.5 FTE). These 9.5 FTE staff positions handle collection development; planning and implementing programs and services; library technologies and technical services; and general administration. In addition, the library relies on a cadre of part-time temporary staff to cover our two service desks (work-study students and substitutes) and to carry out discharge and shelving duties (pages). In a typical week during the academic year, the library utilizes sixty hours of work-study student coverage; ten hours of substitute coverage; and twenty hours of page coverage.

This adds up to about 390 hours of staffing per week, which I would describe as adequate (Ilsley is fortunate to enjoy strong support from the Middlebury community). This might seem like a lot to someone looking in from the outside: even library supporters can be surprised to learn what it takes to run a library that is both operationally sound and programmatically responsive to community needs. "How long could it take to shelve a book?" someone might reasonably wonder. Well, not that long, but when you have to shelve hundreds of books a day it quickly adds up! Checking in books and shelving them takes between twenty and forty hours a week, depending on circulation levels. Desk coverage—having a staff member on a public service desk to check out books, help patrons, and ensure safety in the building—requires 110 hours of staffing per week (Ilsley has two service desks and is open for fifty-five hours per week).

The truth is, it takes a lot because we *do* a lot. Stakeholders need to understand that behind every amazing library service they cherish, there are many hours of staff time. Every library program requires planning, setup, breakdown, and evaluation. Every library book needs to be selected, purchased, unpacked, cataloged, processed, shelved, and checked out before it is read for the first time. Every public access computer needs to be maintained and receives regular software updates. And then there are the innumerable administrative tasks that all organizations must grapple with.

If communities want libraries that offer rich programming, engaging collections, and stellar customer service, then the librarians need adequate admin time away from the public service desk. This allows them to focus fully on engaging with patrons while they are on a service desk, and then carry out their other tasks with focus and care away from the service desk. Doing both at the same time is not optimal, and library directors need to make sure trustees, select boards, and taxpayers understand this. Having off-desk time also allows librarians to meet patrons where they are; because Ilsley has adequate staffing, we are able to ensure a strong presence in and relationship with the local schools, retirement/nursing homes, homeless shelter, and more. By bringing services outside of library walls we are able to connect with community members that do not come into the library.

Stakeholders also must understand that libraries cannot be staffed with volunteers. Volunteers play an important role in supporting their local libraries by offering their expertise on a short-term project, or by pitching in on a one-time effort that requires many hands. But volunteers absolutely cannot replace the work of paid library personnel. Likewise, volunteers should not be used to establish and maintain new library services or hours. This can be a legal issue, if library personnel are union, but it is a bad habit to get into regardless of union status. A good rule of thumb is to ask, "If this volunteer didn't feel like coming in for a week, would we have to arrange coverage for their duties?" If the answer is yes, the library should not be relying on volunteers to carry out those duties. To do so is to misrepresent what it costs to run the library and undermine the long-term stability of library operations.

At Ilsley, regular library staff receive annual cost of living increases. In addition, full-time staff receive annual step increases. It can be difficult to ascertain what a competitive salary for a Vermont librarian is. The Vermont Library Association does have a recommended minimum salary for public library directors, but it is outdated and does not address library directors with MLIS degrees. The VLA salary survey is now ten years old. If these are the measuring sticks we are using to gauge the appropriateness of compensation and benefits, I am not confident we are keeping up with other states.

It is a shame that there is not an MLS or MLIS degree offered in Vermont, and that librarians wishing to pursue a master's degree must do so online. Happily, I do believe Vermont is building a strong culture of continuous professional development through the Department of Libraries' continuing education classes, Certificate of Librarianship, and regular emails with information on additional opportunities. The VLA annual conference is another wonderful opportunity for all library staff to connect with colleagues and find inspiration. Ilsley Public Library is committed to sending any library staff member who is interested to the VLA conference. Many years, this means that we close our doors for the day.

One challenge for Vermont librarians is how to move up without moving on. In higher density states it is easy for librarians to apply for higher level library jobs in their area. In Vermont, if a

librarian wants to transition from a paraprofessional to professional position, or from a professional to administrative position, their options are limited to what is in driving distance of their home. Those options are often scant. Relocating isn't always possible, and I worry that as a result many librarians may come to feel stuck. The need to challenge and engage librarians that have 'outgrown' their current position is real, but it isn't a topic I hear addressed often. Title changes or expansion of responsibilities (along with commensurate salary increases) are two potential ways to recognize librarians that may be in the same role for many years, but whose skills and contributions continue to grow.

Another way might be to encourage a formal mentorship program. A few years ago, an Ilesley library substitute expressed an interest in learning to lead Storytimes. Our Youth Services Librarian, the mentor, identified learning outcomes and designed a curriculum, including visits to Storytimes at several local libraries, as well as one-on-one coaching. Although COVID cut the process a bit short, both mentor and mentee have walked away with positive outcomes. This, of course, required intensive work on the part of our Youth Services Librarian, the mentor. The decision to devote paid staff hours to mentorship is not just appropriate but a smart investment. Our Youth Services Librarian strengthened her instruction skills, revisited best practices in her field, and, most importantly, felt engaged in her work. I hope we can find more opportunities for Vermont librarians to learn from each other, because it really does benefit both parties.

Library staff have a deep and intimate knowledge of their community's needs, and they enjoy a high level of trust relative to other governmental workers or elected officials. As a result, libraries are where people go to find answers and get support. Increasingly, communities have a significant need for social services. Many libraries would benefit from having a dedicated staff person trained in how to help people work through moments of crisis, be it in mental health, substance abuse, poverty or homelessness, or many of the other challenges vulnerable people encounter in their everyday lives. Adding a social worker to the library staff is a departure from traditional library staffing, but we are starting to see libraries in larger cities take this step. The bodies that fund public libraries—trustees, select boards, etc.—should be educated about this trend so that funding can be allocated appropriately.

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