

Patty Genadio
Jeffersonville, Vermont
July 17, 2022

Written Testimony on the Topic of Staffing:
For the Working Group on the Status of Vermont's Libraries

I was a library clerk at a Vermont public library from 2017 to 2021. When a new library board took over in early 2021, they quickly made a series of problematic decisions and actions that undermined the library staff and volunteers, and they quickly turned our formerly warm, supportive workplace into an extremely toxic work environment. Within less than four months, all eight members of our library team — four staff members and four volunteers — resigned. This presented a loss of nearly seven decades of institutional memory and experience for our library.

We had tried to work with the new library board. We asked them to do the VTLIB trustee trainings, so that they would have a better understanding of their responsibilities and limits, as well as ours, but they kept putting it off. The board told us that our jobs were easy, that they found nothing at the library when they started, and that the library was broken. They told us this after we'd kept the library going during the difficult first year of the pandemic, and after countless patrons had thanked us for continuing to provide library services and for being a lifeline during an extremely challenging time. The board repeatedly dismissed our experience, our training, our expertise, and our concerns about protecting patrons' privacy.

Multiple members of our library team considered seeking legal counsel, both while we were still at the library, and also after we had resigned. The board repeatedly made baseless allegations against us in social media and in the press, some of which led to another library's rescinding of a job offer to one of my colleagues. The board's public attacks only stopped after this colleague engaged legal counsel.

My colleagues and I were in regular communication with librarians at the Vermont Department of Libraries about our situation. The VTLIB librarians were sympathetic and offered advice and guidance, while also acknowledging that there was not much they could do to help us. At one point, they mentioned that the remaining staff could consider seeking legal counsel. We did consider that, but we couldn't afford that option, and we also thought that the board might decide to become more collaborative, in the face of the most recent resignations; but instead, the situation deteriorated even further.

Several times, my colleagues and I considered resigning en masse, but we always decided against that, because we knew that our patrons would have been abruptly and negatively impacted, as much-needed services to our community would have been immediately disrupted.

We reached out to the town selectboard multiple times, but they dismissed our concerns and continued to voice their full support for the library trustees and the rest of the library board. Eighteen months later, the town continues to be deeply divided, with many former patrons no longer feeling comfortable going to their local public library.

Areas for Improvement:

I've learned the hard way that there are very few protections and recourses for public library personnel in Vermont. This needs to change. I appreciate Vermont's tradition of local control of our public libraries, but library personnel should not be subject to the whims of library boards and board members who engage in troubling behavior towards library staff and volunteers under their authority.

Conflicts of interest also present a challenge in small Vermont towns, where there is often much overlap between local government, local boards, and other local organizations. In the case of our library, some of the new board members had close ties to local elected officials, and some had histories of friction with some of the library personnel newly

under their authority. Conflicts of interest need to be recognized and addressed in order to enable successful, transparent, and accountable library governance.

Questions for the Working Group To Consider:

What can VTLIB do to further support library staff and volunteers who find themselves in a toxic library work environment?

What can VTLIB do to further support library staff and volunteers who are dealing with challenging library boards and/or board members?

Is there legislative action that could be introduced to provide more protections for staff and volunteers at Vermont's public libraries?

Successful Strategies and Approaches:

I wish that I could mention strategies and approaches that have proven successful, but, unfortunately, none of the strategies or approaches that my colleagues and I have tried over the past year and a half have been successful.

I have spoken with library personnel from other Vermont libraries who have also dealt with challenging library boards. I also know from past experience what it's like to serve under supportive library boards. I hope that the Working Group, VTLIB, and our state can find and institute strategies and approaches to help protect library personnel and to help library staff, volunteers, and boards to work together respectfully to better serve Vermont communities.