

From: Christopher Kaufman-Ilstrup, Executive Director, Vermont Humanities
To: Members of the House Government Operations Committee
Re: S.220 – Libraries
Date: May 1, 2024

- My name is Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup and I am the executive director of Vermont Humanities. We are the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress, also serving as the Vermont Center for the Book.
- I was a proud member of the Legislative Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont, and I believe that I may have been the only member of the working group who was neither a librarian nor a library trustee. Rather, I brought about 30 years as a community organizer and nonprofit leader to the group, including 20 years working in cultural sector philanthropy.
- Thank you for having me here today to speak in support of S.220, the omnibus library bill introduced by Sen. Hardy containing many of the recommendations of the working group's panel on intellectual freedom. We're grateful to Sen. Hardy, the co-sponsors, and the members of this committee for your due diligence and your support of the working group's recommendations.
- Vermont Humanities works for and with libraries and librarians every day, in every county, and in every season. We run life-long learning programs, Summer Humanities Camps with public libraries and schools for teenagers and tweens, professional development programs in early literacy for early educators, and, with support from the Vermont Department of Libraries – the Vermont Early Literacy Initiative, providing convening, technical assistance, and mentoring support to libraries in communities across Vermont.
- We also run a series of young adult author residencies with VTLib and the Vermont School Library Association. Our Farmers Night earlier this year with YA Author Kekla Magoon was part of a residency that visited both Main Street Middle School and Montpelier High School as well as Spaulding High School in Barre. Our visiting authors, including Kekla, have frequently been the targets of book banning efforts across the country. Indeed one of Vermont's most beloved authors (and a frequent Vermont Humanities partner) has been subjected to censorship and banning for over 50 years – Katherine Paterson, one of the most decorated (and banned) children's writers in America.
- I'm delighted that you are supportive of providing more guidance to public, municipal, and school libraries on collection development and retention policies, and that you support a requirement for public and school libraries to have such policies. Vermont Humanities is also supportive of this requirement and we support the language in S.220 requiring the Department of Libraries to develop model policies and help Vermont's volunteer library boards to adopt a policy as soon as possible. As we have seen across the nation, libraries (and often specific librarians) have come under underserved fire for curating a collection that both represents and serves the needs of the entire community, including diverse young people.
- While Vermont libraries have experienced rather less controversy, less is not none. We have seen both challenges and threats of violence related to library programming (including in our own programming) – notably when that programming addresses or includes LGBTQ+ people or people of color. The requirement

to develop clear policies is necessary to protect staff, trustees, and the library and to provide clear guidance to library patrons who may have concerns about collection development or individual book choices.

- Moving on to the topic of primary concern to the previous witness, Vermont Humanities is, of course, strongly in favor of encouraging positive and trusting relationships between parents and children. I am a parent myself, and I work hard to be a trusted adult for my child and their friends. That said, part of creating that relationship must be the understanding that teenagers will have questions and concerns that they are not yet ready to talk with their parents about. Young people must have access to information from trusted sources. A public or school library is one of those resources.
- Vermont Humanities is strongly supportive of lowering the patron confidentiality age in public libraries to 12 years and older in alignment with the age with the age that minor children can make medical decisions autonomously related to mental health, drug abuse, and alcohol abuse treatment. We know from our work with middle and high school students that their public and school libraries are important sources of accurate information on a wide variety of topics that young people are concerned about but may not yet be ready or willing to talk about with adult caretakers or authority figures.
- Lowering the age of patron confidentiality assures young people that the library is a safe environment for research and learning on difficult topics and steers them towards reliable information sources rather than Google, YouTube, or Tik Tok. I can assure you that if younger patrons can't safely and confidentially access library resources they will seek the information they want from sources that may be considerably less accurate or safe. As the writer Neil Gaiman has said, "Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A librarian can bring you back the right one."
- I will note that this bill as proposed does not change the obligations of teachers and public school librarians as mandated reporters. If a child is in danger of hurting themselves or others, school staff are obligated to report that to the proper authorities. School librarians are also obligated to follow federal student privacy laws as laid out in [FERPA](#) and this bill does not change that obligation either. It is worth noting that public libraries, either municipal or nonprofit, are not schools and they are not subject to FERPA under current federal law.
- I will close by saying that it was a true honor to participate in the Legislative Working Group and I'm deeply thankful to have been appointed as a member by the legislature. I grew in my own understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing our libraries and I couldn't be more pleased to see this committee taking our work seriously and moving many of our recommendations forward. It seems clear to me that many of the challenges and opportunities facing Vermont libraries are the same challenges facing Vermont communities as a whole. Your action on S.220 will truly make a difference well beyond the walls of the libraries and will make Vermont a much stronger and more welcoming community.
- Thank you for your kind attention.

- Another important point in the bill is consideration of enhanced penalties for criminal threatening in libraries. Vermont Humanities is a strong supporter of creating safe and welcoming public spaces, including libraries. I will say that the testimony that we heard in the Working Group about public safety in libraries was deeply disturbing and disheartening, especially as it related to the impact of mental health crises and substance use disorder on safety for library patrons and staff. Particularly disheartening was the seemingly widespread challenge of getting consistent support from local law enforcement.
- As I traveled the state with the Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities earlier this year, we heard many stories of public safety challenges in libraries. One library told us that they are attempting to provide harm reduction supports for IV drug users in the library and recently found that their sharps containers had been broken into by users in crisis looking for needles. This problem obviously reaches well beyond libraries, but it is deeply discouraging that our public spaces, including libraries, are increasingly unsafe for patrons and staff alike. Please continue to work with your colleagues to address this public safety crisis affecting our communities.