

Testimony: House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs, S.220, An act relating to Vermont's public libraries.

Good day Chairperson McCarthy, Vice Chair Birong, and members of the House Committee on Government Operations and Military Affairs. Thank you for having me here today.

My name is Mary Danko. I am the Vice President / President Elect of the Vermont Library Association and the Library Director at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington, Vermont. I have worked in public libraries for 24 years. I have worked at the Weathersfield Proctor Library, which was quite small at the time at 856 sq. feet, and at the Hartland Public Library in Vermont. Both towns served populations under 4,000 people. Now in Burlington, VT, I serve a population of around 45,000.

Regardless of the size of the towns they serve, all public libraries must support the freedom to read which includes access to library materials and information in a private and confidential way. Yes, public libraries do so much more than providing free access to library materials. It would be too long to enumerate all the wonderful community services they provide in this testimony, but visit any public library website in our state and I guarantee you will be astounded to learn something they do that you did not know. It must be said that the trust that is built in these anchor institutions in our towns and cities is built on the philosophies and tenets of trusting the reader and guaranteeing their freedoms to read and learn.

I would like to add that amendment of **Sec. 3. 22 V.S.A. § 172** (page 2 line 5) will protect the privacy and confidentiality of library records for those 12 years of age and older. Parents and caregivers have the responsibility to manage their child's access to library services and they should advise their children accordingly. It is not the role of the library to monitor this. It is the role of the library to provide confidential access to books and materials that are diverse in interests to everyone in our community. Some of these topics are especially important in regards to sexual abuse, incest, puberty, mental health challenges, addiction, eating disorders, and sexual assault to name a few.

Currently Vermont Statute **18 V.S.A. § 4226** protects the confidentiality of youth that are 12 years of age or older regarding their decisions about their health in regards to addiction treatment and venereal disease treatment. For youth that are in at-risk environments, this assurance of confidentiality can be life saving. It is of similar stakes for their access to confidential information and this update to privacy in library records

will provide that. All efforts to protect our most vulnerable and in-jeopardy Vermont youth should be systematic and consistent.

We do not expect that lowering the age of library privacy is a matter for most youth in our state, but we must think compassionately about the life journey for the Vermont youth who may encounter some big challenges and need support. As the public library we should be statutorily allowed to protect their autonomy to seek out information and support when they need to. Again, this is not going to matter for the majority of most youth in Vermont, but human rights and civil rights for all children include safety and protection from harm.

Librarians are trained professionals. EveryLibrary Institute surveyed parents in November of 2023<sup>1</sup> and among their findings reported that 85% of respondents say they trust librarians and 92% of respondents say libraries are safe spaces for their children. In contrast, getting information from the internet is overwhelming and unchecked for accuracy. Often internet searches on matters of health and safety can be overwhelming, and most often erroneous, and sometimes harmful. Access to accurate and factual information provided in carefully curated collections by librarians are crucial and can even be life-saving.

Ask any librarian in our state and I'm sure they can tell you a story of someone in their community who came up to them and said, "A book in your library saved my life." And for each of these declarations, I'm betting there are ten more like it but we will never hear of it because it is best left as a freedom that should be ensured to them as well as everyone in our state: the freedom to read.

The Vermont Library Association supports the amendment to **Sec. 5. 22 V.S.A. § 105** (page 3 line 10) and **Sec. 6. 22 V.S.A. § 143** (page 4 line 8) These amendments will provide useful clarification. We know there is more that needs to be clarified about our municipal public libraries and we look forward to the opportunity to study this issue further with our colleagues across Vermont.

In conclusion, The Vermont Library Association strongly endorses S.220. We commend the Working Group on the Status of Libraries in Vermont. We sincerely thank Senator Hardy and Senator Gulick for sponsoring this bill and we are deeply appreciative of all those who have supported and advocate for this important legislation. We appreciate the opportunity to testify today and we stand ready to support its implementation. We are Vermont. Freedom and Unity. Thank you so much.

---

<sup>1</sup> EveryLibrary Institute. *Parents' Perceptions of Librarians - Detailed Findings from November 2023 Survey*. [https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/parent\\_perceptions\\_librarians\\_survey\\_2023](https://www.everylibraryinstitute.org/parent_perceptions_librarians_survey_2023)