

Testimony Bullets for S.220 Library Omnibus

- My name is Christopher Kaufman Ilstrup and I've been the executive director of Vermont Humanities for almost six years now. This year marks our 50th anniversary. 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.
- 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. Last week's Farmers Night 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.
- Thank you for having me hear 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. 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.
- I know that it's a Friday afternoon so I won't take up too much of your time but would like to offer a few thoughts from the perspective of Vermont Humanities and a life-long library user.
- I understand that you have concerns about the section of the bill that would seek more equity in the pricing and availability of e-Books. I understand your concerns and the concerns of the State Librarian that moving quickly on this regulation could actually result in less access rather than more access to e-Books. I urge you to continue to study this important issue even if you don't feel you can include it in the legislation as proposed. As library patrons become more and more dependent on digital resources, libraries must have the capacity to provide these resources in a way that is fair and comparable to printed books. This is especially important for library patrons who may not be able to read printed books either due to disability or inability to get to the library to pick them up.
- Moving on, 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 libraries to have such policies. Vermont Humanities is also supportive of this requirement and we support this language requiring the Department of Libraries to develop model policies and help Vermont's 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. 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. This language 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, 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.
- I can speak from my own experience that the Bixby Library in Vergennes was a very helpful source of information during my own troubled adolescent years.
- Now, regarding appropriations in the bill. I know that the State Librarian has stated that she supports the Governor's budget recommendation for the Department of Libraries and the Agency of Education. That said, I would like to offer a strong support for the Working Group's recommendations that both State Agencies add staffing capacity to support the significant increased workload that each agency experiencing relative to the needs of the public, municipal, and school libraries. We support the appropriations suggested in the bill to add two staff at VTLib and to restore the Library Specialist position at AOE that was eliminated almost 20 years ago.
- I know that there are many demands on the state budget right now, not least due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic and the devastating impacts of the July floods. That said, VTLib is one of the most understaffed state libraries in the nation and the cost of two additional outreach staff is modest compared to the benefits that will accrue to small libraries around Vermont. The position at AOE is desperately needed to serve public school libraries across the state that are frequently operating on a shoe string with only part-time staff support.
- If the legislature is interested in codifying the training and education (including the certificate program) done by the Department of Libraries, I hope that they will also provide the funding and staffing support to ensure that the additional services can be provided at a high standard.

- Another important point in the bill is consideration of enhanced penalties for criminal threatening in libraries. Vermont Humanities doesn't have a position on the wisdom of this approach, though in general we are strong supporters 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 last week, we continued to hear 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.
- 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 as a whole a much stronger and more welcoming community.
- Thank you. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.