

LD1404 in the 132nd Legislature – Joint Committee on Educational & Cultural Affairs
April 9, 2025, Testimony of Benjamin J. Treat

Thank you, Rep. Murphy, Senator Rafferty, and committee members. I'm Ben Treat, a Bangor resident, and I'm the director of the Bangor Public Library. I'm speaking in enthusiastic support of the Working Group proposed by Representative Murphy and sponsored by a bi-partisan group of legislators.

Libraries are magical places – but there are lots of myths and misconceptions that go along with that. Maine's public libraries are community centers that serve many unique purposes and a broad cross-section of Mainers, and as such we are often an early-warning site for challenges and conflicts that occur in the communities we serve.

In response to our own experiences in Bangor and Millinocket, I recently collaborated with Diana Furukawa, director of the Millinocket Memorial Library and Olivia Scott, LMSW-CC, the Community Resource Navigator at my library. In an article published in the December 2024 issue of the *Maine Policy Review*, we uncover the stories of 26 Maine public librarians working in 12 counties in libraries of all sizes – these librarians report an increasing “social work creep” in their jobs. All of them have encountered people visiting the library seeking help with unmet basic needs. Three quarters of them have seen an increase in behavioral issues since 2020. “I feel,” said one participant, “like library staff have to face a lot more than they signed up for. They didn't ask to be crisis workers, and sometimes they end up in that situation.” Another said, “It's that ‘social work creep’ that seems to happen to all of us these days, and some days it's just too much: you have to find a way to turn it off.”

We want to be developing brilliant storytimes for children, engaging lecture series for adults, eye-popping art exhibits, and oh, also, a mind-blowing collection of books and other materials. Increasingly, we put that work aside at a moment's notice to use Narcan to revive someone, to call police because of a shouting patron who will not leave, to sit with a patron for an hour to help them develop and maintain their first email account, to sit with them for another hour so that they can create an online Social Security account and maintain their fixed household income... Libraries are increasingly the “catchall” for numerous social services. As one of our participants said, “We're the town's help desk.”

You already know millions of reasons to form a working group on the status of k-12 and public libraries in Maine, but much of what emerges from that working group will amaze you, will be beyond what you could have expected, and will help to ensure the strength of Maine's communities for generations to come. Thank you again for your time; I am happy to answer any questions you may have.