

Testimony in support of LD 1404: Resolve, to Create a Working Group on the Status of School Libraries and on Public Libraries in Maine

Members of the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, my name is Diana Furukawa, and I'm the Director of Millinocket Memorial Library, a public library serving the Katahdin Region.

I'm testifying this morning in support of LD 1404, which would create a working group to study the status and needs of public and school libraries in Maine. The workgroup will examine a variety of challenges facing our libraries, asking key questions like, "What roles are Maine libraries playing in their communities today?", "What is the status of library funding in Maine?", and "How can libraries better meet the needs of all Mainers?". Vermont underwent a similar process recently, which produced a set of usable recommendations for the state, and I think Maine would benefit from this as well.

One of the things I think most needs to be explored by this workgroup is the current role of libraries and how that has changed in recent years. While there's still a widespread perception that libraries are primarily quiet "book places", in reality, Maine's public libraries are taking on expansive roles as community centers, social service hubs, and as partners in public health and community development, in addition to their traditional role supporting literacy. In part, this is because libraries are one of the only remaining public spaces available to people; they are often the place you go when you have nowhere else to go.

For example, at my library, one of the questions we get most often at our Circulation Desk is how to access heating assistance, so we regularly help people apply for LIHEAP and get connected to other essential services. Another example that comes to mind is from this winter; someone came in on a Saturday morning who urgently needed housing. Besides the emergency room, there was nowhere else in our area she felt could go— the Town office was closed, and we don't have a local police station, warming centers, or community centers. I was able to work with her to get in contact with our General Assistance department's emergency number and get her a motel voucher— a pretty convoluted process that would have been challenging to navigate alone and in crisis.

This anecdote represents a statewide trend that I explored with some colleagues in a recent article in Maine Policy Review. Through interviewing library workers across the state, we concluded that Maine's public libraries are increasingly supporting people with unmet basic needs and responding to intensifying behavioral issues. I know I'm zooming in a lot on a particular challenge that Maine public libraries are facing, but I think this is the kind of thing that warrants thoughtful examination in an official capacity.

In addition, these increased demands are occurring at a time when library funding is precarious. Today, over 50% of Maine public libraries are actually private nonprofits, and many do not receive nearly enough funding to support their basic operations, let alone to offer livable wages, especially in rural areas. This puts a lot of strain on library directors and board members to focus on fundraising rather than services, programs, and community needs. These funding challenges have significant implications for the sustainability of libraries, the retention of qualified staff, and the quality of services. If we value libraries as essential public institutions, then we must take a closer look at these issues and pursue systemic, sustainable solutions.

In closing, I urge you to support LD 1404. This bill presents an important opportunity for the state to better understand the evolving role of libraries in Maine and to ensure they have the support they need to continue serving their communities for years to come.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Best,
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