

Testimony of

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Submitted to the House Appropriations Committee March 4, 2022

HB 1225 Education - Harford County Public Library - Collective Bargaining

Thank you Chairwoman McIntosh, Vice Chairman Chang and all of the distinguished members of the Committee. I understand HB1225 will come before you, and I am asking that you vote yes to this bill. I have worked as a Library Associate in Harford County Public Library for almost fifteen years, and am proud of my work and the communities I serve. However, I must admit our system is not the stellar organization it once was.

Over recent years, changes have been made to the system's structure that often leave voids in our services model, lower staff morale, or result in talented staff members seeking employment elsewhere. Many of these issues were present prior to the start of the COVID-19 Pandemic in early 2020.

Since June of 2019, HCPL has operated with at least 35 position vacancies. This alarming number is 17% of our staff, and puts a significant strain on staff across our eleven branches. The system has also made the decision to not utilize substitutes, or to allow part time staff to supplement their weekly hours by subbing in order to fill schedule gaps. They've also made it a common practice to put an employee assigned to a branch on loan to another branch, leaving the original branch short. Employees on loan often have no end date for the assignment, which complicates balancing family routines and responsibilities. This decision contributes to the existing low morale as it breaks up teams, generates undue stress for those needing to take sick leave or emergency time off, and depletes the amount of time allotted for staff to complete projects while they are "off desk," or not working directly with the public.

In addition, it was decided that the system will no longer hire people to fill the Circulation Assistant positions as they become vacant. This position, often known as a Page, is primarily responsible for shelving materials in our buildings. Though an entry level position, this job is invaluable as it keeps all of our materials in accessible order. Libraries are about organization and order; without it, the information we value and disseminate would be lost. The task of shelving has now been placed upon other members of branch staff, expanding *their* workloads, without additional time scheduled to complete their assignments.

There has been a significant decline in program offerings. For more than a year, we offered our teen population very little in the way of activities, social outlets, or volunteer opportunities. In fact, throughout the more stressful times of the pandemic, we only offered Dungeons and Dragons in a virtual setting. This was certainly not enough to reach such an impressionable audience in need of structure and creative outlets.

It wasn't only teens that we neglected. A unique Reader's Advisory tool, which would help connect readers with hand selected books while our doors were still closed to the public; a writing contest for all ages; virtual comic con style events; and more, were proposed, but simply ignored by our administration.

On more than one occasion, multiple employees suggested collaborating with award winning author, Justina Ireland, a Harford County resident. Ms. Ireland has stated that she would not charge HCPL her usual fee, and has also expressed her love of our library branches. Management's disregard of this suggestion and Ms. Ireland's offer means HCPL missed an opportunity to ensure we are offering robust and diverse programs for all of our citizens.

Internally, management actions and policies indicate a failure in competency and communication: they imposed recent changes to how staff access to email is managed; yet policy documentation on the subject is from 2008. Benefit eligible employees were given less than a month to make an irreversible decision related to their retirement health care benefits this past November. When the library was designated a distribution outlet for COVID tests, management promoted it to the public and invited the press, but gave little guidance to the staff. Despite knowing the limited numbers of tests, management prohibited staff cutting off the lines. Understandably, members of the public were upset when they reached the front of a long line and learned there were no tests available. Staff members were on the receiving end of angry outbursts and called inappropriate

names. These actions are signs of the administration's lack of respect for staff and a blatant disregard for how their decisions impact our ability to make decisions and do our jobs.

If anyone voices an opposing opinion or questions a decision, no matter how respectfully, we are made to feel as if we are being difficult children. Our discouragement has been solidified with the new knowledge that administration has used grant money, secured through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA), to purchase an e-Cornell course for managerial staff entitled "Addressing Workplace Behavior Issues." One of the course's objectives is "Foster a workplace atmosphere that reduces the occurrence of behavior issues." This is an insult to the dedicated, hard-working individuals who value the service and kindness they offer to our customers, despite the fact that HCPL is actually fostering a toxic workplace environment.

In November of 2019, following a sub-par and inaccurate Compensation and Classification study, more than fifty employees attended the Board of Trustees meeting to express their concerns. Employees continued to attend the board meetings until March of 2020, when the meetings moved to Zoom. In order to attend the meetings, we must register in advance, offering an enormous amount of personal information in exchange for the login credentials. In November, I felt as if I had been blocked from attending the meeting, because instead of getting a confirmation of my registration, I got a screen saying my registration was pending approval. I needed approval for an open meeting! Wondering if something was wrong with Zoom, I emailed our Executive Administrator. She responded, and copied our CEO, stating that the approval process was new. I also learned through this email exchange that HCPL keeps a record of Board Meeting attendees. I found this alarming for an organization that prides itself on confidentiality. We do not keep check-out histories for patrons, but we do keep a record of board meeting attendance. In addition to the many steps required to attend a virtual board meeting, staff has also been told that in order to communicate with board members, the proper procedure is to do so through our CEO.

It is not surprising that staff members feel intimidated by senior staff, or are unsure of how to seek assistance when needed. It is clear to us that we no longer have the voice we once had in our workplace, and we cannot properly advocate for ourselves or the members of our communities. In 2010, organizers from the Food & Commercial Workers Union approached HCPL employees in order to garner support for a state-wide collective bargaining law for Maryland's public libraries. At the time, I, like many of my colleagues, opted to ignore their goals, as we were very comfortable with the system's structure and leadership. Little did I know that a decade later, I would regret my ignorance and complacency.

Delegates within Harford County have suggested working directly with the board and administration to rectify the wrongs we've experienced, and to promote change without collective bargaining. This is certainly something we have tried, as evidenced by our board meeting attendance. Some colleagues have tried one-on-one meetings with Senior Staff only to feel targeted for ridicule following the discussion. We are a broken system, and we fear that the trust between non-supervisory staff and management is far too damaged to correct with mediation alone. Staff do not believe that any steps forward will remain once the situation loses the eyes of County Delegates. HCPL staff deserves the chance to decide for ourselves how we want to be represented and best protected from an overwhelming administration – under the present leadership or in the future. That can only be done if we have our own voice.

We understand that the passing of HB1225 does not make us a union, but it gives us a path to create one should we, as a collective group, feel it is in our best interest. I call on you to assist us in gaining that right by voting yes for our collective bargaining bill. As an organization chartered and governed by the state, it is part of your responsibilities to protect public library employees and the citizens that use them, whether the system in question is in your own backyard or not.

I thank you for your time and consideration of 'HB1225: Harford County Public Library Collective Bargaining.' I hope that I have conveyed to you the turmoil we are experiencing as a staff. If you are ever in the Bel Air area, I invite you to stop by the branch for a visit - I am always more than happy to show off the wonderful things we have to offer.

With genuine gratitude,

Mrs. Morgan Michael