

Library Services

ONE LOOK AT the Winnipeg Public Library’s (WPL) website shows that libraries are much more than places to find books. They offer services and programming for newcomers, share extensive Indigenous Resource collections, and

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they offer a space for people to use computers and access the internet, to name just a few services. Library branches serve as vital community hubs, making contributions to the leisure, literacy needs, and well-being of Winnipeg communities.

The context for this year’s public library services budget contains realities that are both old and new. Neo-liberal austerity and the false perception of scarcity remain in play. Settler colonialism and structural racism, particularly as they manifest in Winnipeg’s downtown, continue to affect public libraries. High rates of poverty and a reliance on public spaces for things like internet access and community programming continue to show the need for and investment in new types of library services.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to exacerbate existing weaknesses within Winnipeg’s public library services – weakness that are attributable to extremely low staffing levels. And at Winnipeg Public Library, as elsewhere, the pandemic has served to make many workers across different sectors aware of their disposability – both in terms of those workers’ health and safety and in

terms of their job status; most public library service workers in Winnipeg found themselves laid off twice during the pandemic.

About Public Library Services in Winnipeg

The WPL’s mission is “to enrich the lives of all Winnipeg citizens and their communities by providing high quality, responsive and innovative library services.”¹ Public library service in Winnipeg is delivered by the Library Services Division of the City of Winnipeg’s Community Services Department. WPL operates across 20 facilities, including the downtown Millennium Library branch. A limited number of mobile library services are offered via a van delivering “pop-up” library collections to two underserved neighbourhoods.

Employees of WPL perform a range of work at different levels. Shelves — the lifeblood of any public library system — not only maintain the order of items in branches, but they also prepare deliveries of materials to be shipped across all 20 locations. Library services assistants provide front-line services, including for borrowing/returning, account issues, programming, assisting with research questions, creating educational displays, and cataloguing. Librarians are often site supervisors and are also responsible for developing and delivering programming, responding to information and research questions of a more complex nature, curating online content, and developing and delivering staff training. Other librarians purchase collections, oversee cataloguing, manage vendor relationships for online resources, and work on website development.

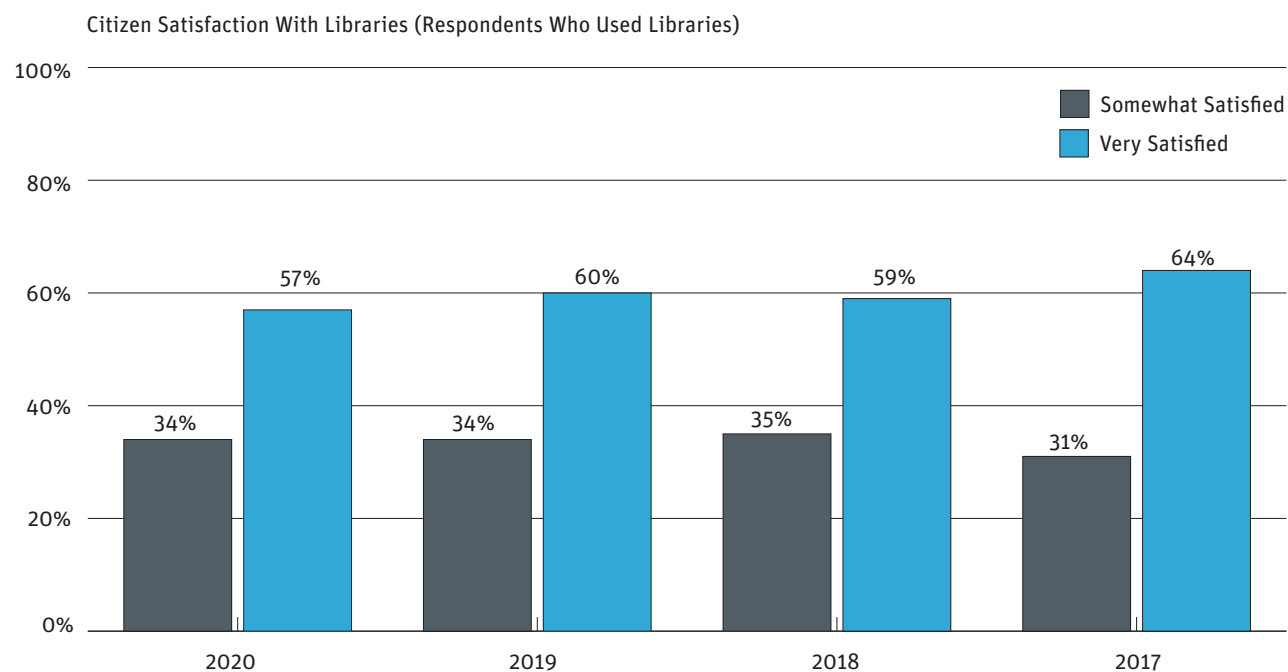
All Canadian Union of Public Employee (CUPE) Local 500 positions at WPL are part of one of two unofficial tiers: there are part-time workers who are classified as “temporary,” and full-time workers who are classified as “permanent.” A large majority of the shelves and library services assistants are part-time. Part-time and full-time workers are subject to different job security language within the current (and past) CUPE 500 collective agreement. The effect of this language is that part-time workers can have their hours of work cut, or they can be laid off, while full-time workers have nearly complete job security. This difference in status was made clear during the pandemic when all part-time staff were laid off twice.²

The City of Winnipeg’s Community Trends Report finds satisfaction with library services is high, but the 2020 Citizen Survey shows a small decline in enthusiastic satisfaction with libraries.³



St. John's Library

FIGURE 1 Effectiveness Measurements



	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total Satisfied	95%	95%	94%	94%	91%

Source City of Winnipeg Annual Citizen Survey

Restoring and Rebuilding

For over a decade WPL has had some of the lowest staffing levels in Canada. In 2019 Winnipeg had 266.7 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions, far below cities of a similar size: Halifax at 345 FTEs, Edmonton at 445 FTEs and Ottawa at 451 FTEs.⁴

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated Winnipeg Public Library’s already low staffing levels. In July 2020, the WPL vacancy rate was nearly 30 per cent. To deliver the full complement of services Winnipeg needs to increase staff by 32 FTEs, spread across a range of positions.⁵

To deliver the full complement of services Winnipeg needs to increase staff.

New Expenditures:

Increase of FTEs (32): \$1,760,000 (total of average annual cost per position)

Expanding Community-Based Services

The capital purchase of a bookmobile – a vehicle that could travel to neighbourhoods considered “library deserts” – would increase WPL’s ability to deliver services to underserved groups of people. Bookmobiles can be equipped with computers and internet, movie screens and other technology, in addition to space for a physical collection. A bookmobile and the additional sites it could visit would build on WPL’s long-standing “Check It Out!” mobile library service which has provided on-going “pop-up” library service to underserved neighbourhoods for over a decade. Bookmobile service could also benefit seniors and other community members for whom mobility is a challenge. The purchase of a bookmobile and additional staff to support its services would be a net new cost. The bookmobile would cost approximately \$350,000 and hiring two librarian positions to staff it would cost approximately \$109,000 per year.

New Expenditures:

- Bookmobile: \$350,000
- Additional staff: \$109,000 per year (cost of 2 entry-level librarian positions)

Another investment to increase WPL’s capacity to provide community-based service and increase access to its collection is through the purchase of additional book bikes. WPL currently has one,⁶ but it needs to be transported from the Millennium Library to other locations. This limits the public’s access to book bike services around the city. The purchase of an additional four book bikes – to be housed at a library branch in each quadrant of the city – would provide increased access to this service.

New Expenditure:

Purchase of book bikes (4): \$24,000

Collections

Contributing to information equity by providing access to a wide range of materials across formats is at the core of public library service. Winnipeg falls behind most other comparable cities for the average amount spent on library holdings both electronic and in print per capita at 1.6 holdings per person; the Canadian average is 2.0 per person.⁷ An increase of 10 per

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New Expenditure:

Increase Library materials spending: \$350,000 per year

An Investment in Harm Reduction

Sharps disposal containers are already found in the washrooms of several WPL branches. Expanding their availability to all branches would be a sound harm reduction practice is a relatively low-cost investment.

New Expenditure:

Additional 34 sharps disposal containers: \$13,600

Supporting Complex Needs

A vital service offered by WPL are Community Crisis Workers. They work out of the Millennium Library – though they travel to other branches as needed – and help people connect with “shelter and housing/benefits, social assistance, employment, counselling, mental health programs and services, health care information, income tax and much more.”⁸ There are currently only two Community Crisis Workers, and they are always in high demand. As with other mental health, housing, and community supports, there need to be more staff available to the public. This is a proactive investment in the community with the potential to lower costs associated with other social services, in addition to police involvement.

New Expenditure:

Additional Community Crisis Workers (3): \$197, 100

Funding the Promise of Community Connections

As part of the City's newly adopted Poverty Reduction Plan, a Community Connections space located in the Millennium Library is slated to open later in 2022. The city earmarked \$236,000 for its creation back in 2020.⁹ It is currently being funded by the federal government for \$177,000 out of the

\$236,000 annually to keep the centre open part time. The City should move to have the centre open full time. The central location of the Millennium Library is a natural fit for this space that is meant for vulnerable Winnipeggers to connect with resources and programming, and it needs to have a staff complement and supplies/programming that will ensure it is a success. On top of the additional Crisis Support Workers, being able to bring in external programmers from diverse communities, including Elders and representatives from newcomer communities, and purchase supplies to support a range of programming options is vital.

New Expenditure:

Community Connections programming: \$20,000 per year

Promoting Libraries to Counter Far-Right Populism

“Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A librarian can bring you back the right one.” — *Neil Gaman*

The occupation of Ottawa and spaces across Canada, including outside of the Manitoba Legislature by those against COVID public health measures, attracted far-right extremists with documented ties to racist, fascist and anti-democratic movements. This small but vocal group sources conspiracy theory information from social media and the internet. It is important to counter fascist and misinformation movements with education and information.

Winnipeg Libraries are perfectly positioned to be part of continued education on the role of democracy, government and providing fact-based information. This can be done by first encouraging Winnipeggers to use the Library resources: physical, e-books or audio books and as a source of information for research. A public advertising campaign informing Winnipeggers of the wealth of resources in public libraries and what they have to offer is an important counter-point to this age of misinformation.

The ad campaign can also remind Winnipeggers on tight budgets that Libraries are free public resources. This is particularly important during the current era of rising inflation, gas prices and high unemployment amongst low-wage workers.

The Alternative Municipal Budget will allocate \$250,000 for the City of Winnipeg to develop a social media and bus advertising campaign aimed at encouraging Winnipeggers to use Libraries as sources of information and no-cost ways to access books, articles and as gathering spaces.

New Expenditures:

- Filling vacancy managed 32 FTEs cut, Librarian, Library Assistants and Shelves: \$1,760,000
- Materials funding to bring library acquisitions to Canadian average: \$350,000
- Bookmobile (\$350,000) and two Library Assistants (\$109,000): \$459,000
- Three additional Bikes: \$24,000
- Sharps containers: \$13,600
- Community Crisis Workers (3 FTE): \$197,000
- Elders and newcomer supports for Community Connections Space: \$20,000
- Marketing campaign for Winnipeg Public Libraries: \$250,000

Total operating expenses Winnipeg Libraries: \$3,073,600

- Community Connections Space at Millennium Library: \$236,000 (Capital expense)

Endnotes

- 1 City of Winnipeg. 2016. Winnipeg Public Library Mission Statement and Strategic Plan. <https://wpl.winnipeg.ca/library/ourlibrary/missionstratplan.asp>
- 2 Persuga, Joyanne. (2020, April 15). "City lays off 674 temporary staff". Winnipeg Free press. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/coronavirus/city-lays-off-674-temporary-staff-569675222.html>
- 3 City of Winnipeg. 2020. Community Trends and Performance Report. p. 199. https://winnipeg.ca/cao/pdfs/CommunityTrendsandPerformanceReportVolume1_2021.pdf
- 4 Canadian Urban Libraries Council. (2019). "2019 Canadian Public Library Statistics" <https://culc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2019-CULC-Public-Library-Statistics.pdf>
- 5 Persuga, Joyanne. 2020. July 29). "Pandemic Wreaks Havoc on Library Staffing" Winnipeg Free Press. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/special/coronavirus/pandemic-wreaks-havoc-on-city-library-staffing-574965572.html>
- 6 City of Winnipeg. (2019). Winnipeg Public Library Book Bike. <https://wpl.winnipeg.ca/library/whats happening/bookbike.asp>
- 7 Canadian Public Library Statistics (2019). <https://culc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2019-CULC-Public-Library-Statistics.pdf>
- 8 City of Winnipeg. 2022. Winnipeg Public Library. Community Crisis Workers. <https://wpl.winnipeg.ca/library/ourservices/communitycrisisworker.asp>
- 9 Persuga, Joyanne. (2021. Jan 21). "Millenium Library Resource centre Gains Momentum". Winnipeg Free Press. <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/millennium-library-community-resource-space-gains-momentum-573668212.html>