

# Memo

**To:** Montana State Library Commission

**From:** Tracy Cook, Lead Consulting & Learning Librarian

**Date:** July 18, 2022

**Re: Challenges and Follow-up from Director's Institute**

We reported on the Director's Institute at the June Commission meeting. We want to follow-up with a more in-depth report about the specific challenges public library directors are facing in their communities as identified by Institute attendees. Though these challenges are not faced by every library, the challenges identified by some attendees of the Institute mirror concerns also voiced to the statewide consulting librarians by libraries who did not attend the event. Given the significant and wide-spread nature of the challenges, and the request for support from MSL, MSL staff have begun working with public libraries to address these challenges.

## **Challenges faced by public libraries**

- Lack of a relationship or a poor relationship with local government officials. This looks like:
  - Tension between the library board and local government officials due to different interpretations of the powers and duties of boards as outlined by Montana Code Annotated
  - Micromanagement of the library director
  - Lack of funding for libraries
  - Hostile/tense work environments
  - Librarians afraid to interact with local government officials for fear of retaliation and loss of support for library services
- Low wages that are not keeping up with inflation and the cost of living. This results in:
  - Difficulty retaining and recruiting library staff
  - Loss of services for members of the public
  - Demoralization of library staff as they struggle to make ends meet with increased housing and living costs
- Censorship and criminalization of librarians. This looks like:

- An increase in the number of requests for reconsideration of library materials
- Proposed legislation in neighboring states that threatens to fine or imprison librarians for adding items to the collection that may offend some members of the community and that has a chilling effect on library services and collection development
- Librarians who feel afraid to do their jobs
- Lack of understanding or knowledge about the services libraries provide. Some of the problems listed stem from community members and local government officials who may rely on outdated stereotypes about library services.
- Need for new library directors to connect with each other and experienced library directors who can mentor the new directors.

### **Actions taken by MSL staff with the assistance of public library directors**

- Reported to the Montana Library Association board on the challenges that were identified. This led to a discussion about ways the association can help support libraries.
- Connected library directors and board members to relevant workshops offered by the Montana Association of Counties' general counsel.
- Created a web page with information and resources about responding to requests for reconsideration of library materials.
- Creating fall workshops that will educate library directors, board members, and local government officials on each other's roles and responsibilities with a focus on local government budgets.
- Establishing ways to help new library directors connect with one another and with more experienced library directors.

