



Submission to the
Poverty Reduction Task Force

Canadian Union of Public Employees
BC Division Library Employees

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The Canadian Union of Public Employees British Columbia (CUPE BC) Library Workers appreciate the opportunity to submit their views on the provincial poverty reduction strategy.

CUPE BC represents more than 3,500 workers in public libraries around the province. As frontline workers in public libraries, our members bring unique perspectives and experiences about the impact of poverty in their communities. In addition to providing service to those who experience poverty, many library workers experience poverty themselves. Many of our members are working in precarious and low paid positions. On average, CUPE library workers are over 50% part-time or casual with little job security, few benefits, and limited access to work.

This submission was written to broaden the conversation about poverty, provide insight and testimony from library workers and highlight some of the impacts precarious work has on the delivery of library service. The issue of poverty matters to our members and the opportunity to advocate through this process has enabled our members to speak to the crucial role libraries play in our communities. Throughout this submission italicized content is taken directly from the voices of library workers.

The library has to be part of the community engagement and conversation around poverty reduction plans and strategies – not only for the public it serves but also for its workers. The library as a physical centre/space should be able to provide the spaces for people to gather and talk about these issues AND be out in the community as well.

Role of Libraries in Reducing the Impacts of Poverty

Libraries are one of the last places where there is free public access to programs and services and collections and a place where issues are freely discussed -- but I believe that the library should also be conscious of its role in social justice and human rights, conscious and deliberate in opening its doors wider and its programs to be more inclusive in reaching out to those communities hard hit by poverty and the cost of poverty.

The diverse functions of the public library and its staff make libraries one of the most underfunded yet valuable resources available in a community. Library users living in poverty experience libraries and library workers as the providers of safe spaces and as integral conduits to a myriad of social programs. Public libraries provide a starting point on the journey out of poverty for marginalized populations. For many marginalized people in communities across the province, library workers are the only accessible help and libraries are the only accessible public spaces. Public libraries and public library workers

value their role in fulfilling these expectations which are due in great part to the impacts of technology and defunding of many of our social services.

We don't have the training to assist patrons with accessing social services and our mental health training is inadequate for real-life scenarios.

A woman who I first met at the Carnegie branch in 2015 I originally thought was much younger because she was thin and small in stature. She had just started a recovery program and we met because she was looking for books in the library to borrow about spirituality and healing. As time went on and I learned more about her I found out that she has two young boys who had been taken from her while she struggled with addiction. Now in 2018, she uses the néca?mat ct Strathcona branch on a regular basis. She has regained custody of her two boys and has just recently given birth to her third. She tells me often that the 'library saved my life' and the emotion with which she tells me this is genuine and from her heart. When she went into premature labour for her third child and was hospitalized for a length of time, we were able to help sort out the fines on her account and her kid's accounts at the same time we met her newborn baby. I know that poverty is not solved with a single quick fix or an isolated event. People experience good times and bad times. Libraries and their services are always there regardless.

We recognize that poverty exists in all of our communities and neighbourhoods, no matter what the socioeconomic environment. Our members witness and help address poverty in a myriad of ways.

When we talk about extreme poverty, many library workers describe the library as a day shelter. Homeless people will come in to use the bathroom or simply sit and rest to take shelter from the elements. Library workers see the conditions of their regular patrons decline over time, as they become thinner, and struggle with hygiene and poor health. But often, poverty isn't so visible.

I referred a patron to use the food banks in the context of the patron's reference/information request. There is the sense of embarrassment, of being poor and using this service for the first time--- so there is the extra step of referring that keeps in mind the dignity of the patron, that it is alright to use what is there and to see this as a lifeline at this time in their lives. She was emotional but thankful. I do hope that she was able to go.

Libraries are a place where free wi-fi and computers are available, desks, tables, and chairs could be used, there is adequate lighting, free washrooms (and at Central

Library, a separate eating space is planned), entertainment via books, events, A/V material etc., and where there are other people around. Besides being a "day shelter" for the homeless and marginalized, it is also a place that helps with the lives of the low-income working class and lower-middle class. People can save money by studying and doing work at the library as opposed to spending money to stay at coffee shops or staying at home (where utilities such as lighting, heating, and internet need to be used). People can also go to the library's free lectures, movie screenings, workshops, in addition to reading books and watching DVDs as a source of free entertainment.

Over the past 16 years library workers have seen an increase in the number of people needing help to fill out government forms as the province has moved away from in-person service to phone or online platforms. Libraries and library workers are able to help people in a wide variety of ways, from filling out forms to search for childcare or housing, access basic welfare or disability services, to name a few. Many low-income people don't have access to phones or internet at home. The library provides these tools as well as the staff to help patrons use them.

A library program on social benefits resulted in seniors coming up to the desk to ask help in applying for a discounted bus pass for seniors – which they could not easily find online. Were it not for the library, they would not have been able to get this benefit which breaks down their isolation – now they can go places knowing that they have discounted bus passes.

One library worker described some of her interactions with people facing poverty related challenges over the course of the week to include; helping women patrons from the nearby recovery houses to use the internet public workstations; helping an older adult to write their resume on the public workstations because they found themselves suddenly unemployed after 20 years in the workforce; helping multiple people looking for aid finding affordable housing; helping seniors to access discounted bus passes; supporting people needing help filling out forms for EI, disability and welfare; directing low-income patrons where to go for free income tax clinics; helping mothers find affordable childcare; and supporting job seekers from all different backgrounds in everything from printing resumes, filling out web based applications and searching online job boards.

Maybe libraries should have (more) programs in partnership with groups who support low income residents. Do the programs in-house or offsite. Maybe libraries should talk with groups affected by poverty or organizations working on this issue and take their lead. What do they want to see in their libraries? Maybe our library does this, but we as library staff do not know if they do (or not).

While people living in poverty may have limited resources, they still seek to participate in and contribute to our communities. Community engagement is essential in mitigating the isolating effects of poverty. Our frontline workers have the authority to waive fines and charges which can re-establish access to the public library. However, these workers also understand that sometimes this can have a negative impact on someone's self esteem. For example, one library worker shared the uneasiness she felt in accepting \$5 from someone to pay their fines she knew could have used the money for food, but who felt they needed to pay off the debt they owed.

Barriers to Accessing Libraries

Libraries are free spaces but barriers do still exist to people needing to access services and programs offered in BC's public libraries.

Waive fines!!!! Fines are not revenue!!

Fines are often a financial and psychological barrier. When a person has outstanding fines, despite the fact that they may find relief from these upon request, they tend to avoid the whole library not just in terms of borrowing materials but also the services and programs that are available for free. Unfortunately, many libraries rely on fines to fill in the gaps in funding, even going so far as including fines revenue on a budget line.

Because of my own precarious employment, I worry when I waive fines for patrons, what if I waive too many? Will there be consequences?

Requirements for access. Library space and many services are free, however you need a library card to access many of the resources like wifi, borrowing, and access to digital materials. Most public libraries require some form of government issued ID to be able to get a library card. Getting ID and keeping that ID is sometimes challenging for people living in poverty or experiencing homelessness. Some libraries have policies that allow for people to obtain a library card that has limited access to borrow materials for shorter periods and for which the ID requirement is waived.

Newcomers or immigrants often do not know what the library offers and that library cards are free because in their countries of origin, public libraries like we have here do not exist or are sorely lacking. So people do not naturally gravitate towards the library.

Language. For most libraries it would be very challenging to recruit staff that meet every language need in a community. Even offering programming in other languages, even just

offering programming in French, challenges cash-strapped library budgets. We know that more could be done to mitigate the effects of poverty and reduce barriers for those who come from immigrant populations. More library outreach and community partnerships would go a long way to bridging this gap.

Lack or absence of library staff who look like them, speak like them. If the public do not see their faces, do not hear their home languages sometimes spoken in the library, the library can seem unwelcoming.

A welcoming space. As one of the last truly public spaces in our communities keeping the library a safe and clean space for everyone can be a challenge. Libraries serve all populations and work to meet the daily needs of all of their patrons regardless of the reasons they come to use the library. This can create barriers. For example, some people may feel uncomfortable using a computer beside someone who uses the library as their home.

With reduction in staff and staffing hours for front-line library workers who maintain the library space, as well as cleaning staff, library materials and furniture, for example, are not as clean as they could be. Uncleanliness is something that stops people from utilizing the library and its resources.

It is often critical in the creation of a safe space to have a security presence. However, the introduction of security personnel may make some groups of users feel safer but may also introduce significant barriers for others. Ensuring that everyone is able to reap the benefits the library has to offer, training and support for staff on how to handle difficult, intense and sometimes violent situations should be prioritized in all library systems.

Library staff are always managing a level of frustration and violence, feel it all day long and we have to be hypervigilant all the time.

Location of libraries can be a barrier to use. There are urban centres like Vancouver where there are community branches located in neighbourhoods and easily accessible through a comprehensive transit system, or by walking. In comparison, many suburban areas have large libraries that are beautiful with amazing community spaces but are only in one central location and not easily accessible by public transit. Suburban poverty is no less prevalent it just looks different than that of the urban environment.

Impacts of Working Poverty and Precarity of Library Workers

Our members (me included) support family members who are making very little money. Increasing union density so that someone like my mother can belong to a union would greatly help. And then we have CUPE members, working in auxiliary positions, who fear participating in union activities due to potential reprisals from their supervisors. We have to ensure that workers, both inside and outside unions are protected from such reprisals. Vulnerable/precarious work should not translate into workers' political disenfranchisement or inability to exercise their constitutional right of assembly. Poverty squared.

Library workers experience working poverty. As has been previously mentioned, so many library workers are precarious and without access to benefits and job security. Here are some of the impacts in their own words:

I have deep anxiety and emotional distress around getting enough work

I can't afford to call-in sick

Myself and other coworkers have experienced periodic homelessness

I sometimes cry at work when I don't get enough shifts to make ends meet

I hate feeling like my colleagues are going to displace me

I work two other jobs

I sometimes can't afford food

These experiences indicate a complex relationship between the workers and patrons. Precarity and the uncertainty our members face inhibits their ability to build relationships and trust in communities and with library users. This mitigates against the breaking down of barriers to the services that are so critical to these communities.

How can we build relationships with patrons when we move around branches, picking up enough shifts to survive? And when we are stretched so thin how do we provide the services that people need without suffering from compassion fatigue?

Making a Difference

Community librarians go out and meet people where they are. For example, Oppenheimer Park, Food bank; go once a month – get to know people; give out donated books that aren't needed by the library.

Along with traditional services like storytime/babytime and other literacy programs, library services have evolved and innovative partnerships with community organizations have been cultivated and are finding a home in libraries.

A branch Cook and Tell Club with one of the community partners that provides support to those who need it (like people from the justice system, etc) teaches one of the more important life skills, which is cooking and cooking well enough to feed one's self.

From tax filing to cooking and everything in between, BC's library workers are building coalitions and partnerships that make living in poverty more bearable.

But there is so much more we can do so that libraries continue to be a critical component of BC's poverty reduction strategy. This includes increasing funding, recognizing the importance of the relationship between the staff and the community, ensuring that our public services aren't subsidized off the backs of precarious workers, which contributes to BC's poverty problem. This can be done by recognizing the significant role libraries and library workers play in the reduction of poverty in BC and the power of connecting communities and services together.

We need a comprehensive provincial strategy and strong policy to address poverty with a harm reduction in BC.

It is clear, that any poverty reduction plan needs to include public libraries. This is demonstrated every day in the "living rooms of our communities", and with the appropriate acknowledgement and support of their value, our relationship with the public and the positive impacts of our services can be felt even beyond the physical spaces that make up our public libraries.

By investing in public libraries, we help lift people out of poverty which will create a more inclusive society.

