

Union's response to Management Report to the Board, June 22nd, 2017: Branch Staffing Model – Implementation Update

Report to the Vancouver Public Library Board

July 26th, 2017

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Introduction

The implementation of the Branch Staffing Model is an important initiative in our VPL 2020 Strategic Plan under organizational strength. It is important that VPL is positioned to respond to evolving community needs, and that our staff are equipped to respond to the shifting service trends.

Access For All is a primary value for the Vancouver Public library, and it is a primary component of the Strategic Plan. For a significant number of the population, this access is achieved via direct public service at the branches. Our members become the vehicle for access not only to traditional materials but also to technology, digital literacy, and government resources including housing, assistance, and death benefits, amongst many others, as they are almost exclusively available only online. These interactions are time consuming, but critical to creating the resilient communities the Library seeks to support. One half an hour with a patron can result in positive outcomes outside the branch and in a person's life that are immeasurable. These are exactly the services that have won the hearts and mind of our public and result in the constant refrain from frequent and infrequent users alike. "I love the Library". These are the services provided by our members.

The Union has a vested interest in the future success of the Library, not only because the Library employs our members, because the Library and the role it plays in the community and it's equalizing power, and the depth to which our members believe in it's importance in this respect. Community needs do evolve, but these needs consistently include the kind of direct public service our members are providing right now, on the ground. The following comments are intending to highlight the problems we see arising from the model and it's implementation so far on our members and the value of the work they do.

Impacts of the loss of the Compressed Work Week

Both the Union and individual members made it clear to VPL's Management Team and the Board how important the compressed workweek was to them. This wasn't just exclusive to those who directly benefited, but to Part-time and Auxiliary members as well, as they understand the benefit to staff and the organization. The reality is that many of the jobs at VPL, in particular those that are public facing, take a physical and emotional toll. Many of our members work beyond their scheduled hours to ensure the work is completed, that their team is supported, and that public service goals are met. Because of the compressed, our members were able to go the extra mile, and did this with goodwill, with the understanding that the value of their work was recognized through the compressed schedule.

The loss of the compressed has had, and will continue to have, a negative impact on morale. Most significantly, however, is the impact it has had and will have with Employees' relationship with the Employer. This isn't just a presumption, but something has been vocalized across class and status. Finally, there will be an impact on capacity, especially in the context of the new Branch Staffing Model, which promises cuts to staffing levels and increased workload. The possibility of burnout should be recognized and considered.

New and updated positions

The Union sees two main objectives to the creation of the Public Service Associate (PSA) positions.

1. To reduce hand-over
2. To streamline staffing levels

In terms of the first objective, to reduce hand-overs, the Union would like to argue that the new job description for PSA 1 would not achieve this, because the addition of information duties, such as reader's advisory and technical troubleshooting, are still within the LA II Class scope. This means they are very basic, and anything more complex would have to be passed over to the Senior PSA. (Basic, for instance, in terms of reader's advisory, would mean directing users to databases, and would not mean responsive personal service)

The Union has challenged the Employer on the addition of these tasks and how they have been assessed for compensation, as we feel they are inherently more complex than what we've been told they will be expected to do. We were very surprised to see the PSA 1 come back from Compensation and Benefits at the LA II Level, and believe that, for it to function in the way it was envisioned by the consultants, and to achieve the goals and objectives of the model, this position needs to be enabled to work in a higher capacity. We would encourage looking to the current LA III position at Carnegie, and past LA III and IV positions in the former divisions at Central for examples. This could also be achieved without adding educational requirements to the position and with adequate training and support.

The Employer also wants to streamline staffing levels. The Union believes that this is the ultimate goal of the model, as this is where savings would be realized. However, it is the area of greatest concerns for us, and not just in terms of the potential loss of hours for our members, but because of the likely impact it will have on workload, capacity, and the quality of public service. This is true of the PSA 1, but especially true of the Senior PSA. This group, currently the Lib Tech II, is the backbone of the branches. They are responsible for the lion's share of adult programming and information services, and they take charge of the branches when there is no Librarian, which is often the case as the CTS and Community Librarian's are responsible for community outreach and programming for Areas, and are often out of the branch. More reliance on this group for desk work including being the only back up for Circulation duties, will further tax individuals and prevent the realization of the goals for the Senior PSA position to do more community outreach and programming.

The Branch Supervisor

Much like the PSA positions, the intention for the Supervisor is to take on new responsibilities, including broadened oversight of the operations and the numbers of staff. The Union's concerns are the same as with the PSA positions and the intent to find efficiencies in the staffing levels. As it stands now, the Supervisor's offer a lot of support to staff on the desk, providing backup and relief and assisting with complex issues related to patron records and conflict management. Capacity and workload are significant concerns for this group.

The Supervisor will ultimately be the lynchpin in this plan, as they will be the hands on support for staff and patrons during the implementation of the new model, and well being critical to it's sustained success.

Altogether

A clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each role in the branches, from the LSA to the PSAs, to the Librarians and branch heads, and the way they will interplay, is critical to the success of the model, as well as giving insight into how much a cut in staffing levels can be tolerated before there is a negative impact on public service, and ultimately, the realization of the Strategic Plan and the Library's related Goals and Objectives. The Union is not convinced that this understanding yet exists, as job descriptions have not been revised holistically, but one at a time. As well, the LA III role seemed to have been initially forgotten, as evidenced by the renaming of the PSA 2 to Senior PSA, so that the title PSA 2 could be reassigned to the LA III. We would urge the Employer to take a step back to ensure all aspects are carefully considered together before implementation.

Flexible location and scheduling

Constant movement from one branch to another and uncertainty of hours of work can be very taxing, and it makes the work life balance difficult to achieve.

The Union supports any measure that assists in reducing precarity for our members, even if this means the creation of new positions that may include more than one worksite and contain some variety shift. However, we will protect the location and hours of work of our current members as per the Collective agreement. The Union views any changes to hours of work and location to be a transfer or layoff, with the relevant language applying.

Branch staffing Levels

...management is committed to ensuring that our staffing complement in branches is appropriate to address our public service priorities and activity levels, and schedules may be adjusted to address these shifting trends.

The Employer has been clear that they will be using the numbers related to the decline in Circulation and other traditional services to determine appropriate staffing levels. The Union's concerns with this, as alluded to in the Introduction, are that the actual time and value of public interactions isn't being properly assessed.

There are several goals arising from the new model which in and of themselves would exhaust any staff savings, including expanded opening hours, increased community engagement, outreach and programming, and the reallocation of staffing hours to other initiatives. An attempt to achieve them all would severely impact staff's ability to perform all their duties and provide good public service.

How a cut in staffing levels may affect public service, and capacity, can be seen right now at the branches, as Supervisor's are struggling to fill shifts, due to the decision not to fill regular Part-time hours, as the auxiliary pool is exhausted. The effect is especially evident on the staff

themselves, as they are spread thin in order to cover service points. Branch Heads and Supervisors would be well placed to speak to the challenges they are currently facing in this respect.

The implementation of any new model is challenging in and of itself, without adding to it the impact of cuts to staff. The Union believes that an assessment of the feasibility of any cuts be assessed only *after* the model has been fully implemented, and the impacts of changes can be understood.

Implementations of the Library Service Assistant (LSA)

Along side the Branch review came the new LSA position, which give us the opportunity to see how the implementation of a new position would work. The Union was glad to see a well-developed training plan and a timeline, however what was revealed in the process was a failure to anticipate impacts of the new role on the units and the other branch clerical staff, and the LSAs themselves in terms of equal access to hours and OH&S impacts of increased hours in the day. A lack of oversight and consistency amongst the different branches in how LSAs were integrated and utilized has also created problems as well as a failure to stick to the training plan and timeline by some units.

Conclusion (for now)

In previous comments the Union has provided concerning the Branch Staffing Model, we have raised a concern about there being a lack of a clear vision on the part of the Employer for how they see the Branch Staffing Model working. During the process, it has become clear to us that this is still missing, and we have not been presented with an answer to our questions about how each role will work *together*. The Union has also observed a lack of consideration for detail, and a failure to consider all the elements and anticipate the impacts of decisions unit or system wide.

We want our members to succeed. People need to understand what their roles will be in what the expectations are for these roles. This requires a well-developed plan, with an understanding of where we are currently, the steps to get there and the possible pit-falls along the way. It requires a vision that goes beyond to goal of saving money and achieves the balance required to realize new initiatives while ensuring there is not a loss in the quality of our public service and job satisfaction.