

Director Response to Brooke Kruckenberg Statement

April 7, 2022

At the March 9, 2022 library board meeting, Brooke Kruckenberg, on behalf of a small group, gave a statement that expressed several concerns regarding library staff, programs, and materials. I will address each of these concerns in this response.

First, I will address Ms. Kruckenberg's complaints about the staff. Ms. Kruckenberg stated that the library doesn't represent the town well due to the "majority of staff who are openly a part of the LGBTQ community". She also went on to complain about the "cross dressing of employees". Though Ms. Kruckenberg stated that she does not ask for staff to be removed, this veiled statement demonstrates otherwise. The words in this statement are discriminatory, hurtful, and serve to undermine the integrity of my staff, which is completely unacceptable. Due to this statement, I have instructed my staff to immediately let me know if they feel unsafe, threatened, harassed, or discriminated against by a library patron so I can handle the situation as effectively as possible.

The City of Vinton is an Equal Opportunity Employer which means that we hire regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious background, and more. It is illegal for an employer to ask about or discriminate based on these qualities. The staff at the library were hired due to their abilities to work effectively within their roles, and they prove their abilities to me everyday in the ways they work with our patrons and with each other.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 clearly explains protections against employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The U.S. Equal Opportunity Employment Commission states, "It is unlawful for an employer to create or tolerate such harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Further, if an employee reports such harassment by a customer or client, the employer must take steps to stop the harassment and prevent it from happening again." Therefore, it is my job to make sure discriminatory comments, such as those in Ms. Kruckenberg's statement, don't happen again.

Title VII protects employees from other discrimination regarding sexual orientation and gender identity as well. Employees have the right to dress consistently with their gender identity without discrimination. Additionally, employers are “not allowed to fire, refuse to hire, or take assignments away from someone (or discriminate in any other way) because customers or clients would prefer to work with people who have a different sexual orientation or gender identity. Employers also are not allowed to segregate employees based on actual or perceived customer preferences. (For example, it would be discriminatory to keep LGBTQ+ employees out of public-facing positions, or to direct these employees toward certain...geographic areas.)” Based on these federal protections against employee sex and gender discrimination, I hope this will be a non-issue moving forward to avoid legal actions for anyone involved.

Next, I will address the part of the statement that accuses the library of having an LGBTQ agenda and a liberal agenda based on our staff and the books we carry and display. The truth is that public libraries, including Vinton Public Library, do not have agendas. Rather, they serve a purpose. Our library recently created a Mission Statement that summarizes what our purpose is in the community. “Vinton Public Library is a bridge to our community, providing a safe, welcoming space for all community members, access to free informational resources, and connections to help our residents thrive.” Let’s consider the first part of that statement. Our library provides a safe, welcoming space for all community members. The statement does not say some community members, but all, including our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color residents, our homeless residents, our low-income residents, our Jewish, Muslim, and Atheist residents, and our LGBTQ+ residents. All are welcome at the library and deserve a place to feel safe.

Now, let’s think about the second part regarding access to free informational resources. This is a significant part of the library’s mission and includes access to information that serves all members of the community. A public library does not have an obligation to provide a ratio of materials based on the percentages of groups in the community, nor should it because that would result in a biased collection. Rather, a public library provides a wide variety of materials that reflect the backgrounds and interests of everyone not only in the community, but in the broader world as well.

Public libraries across America, including Vinton Public Library, endorse the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read Statement. The Library Bill of Rights states that:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

III. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

IV. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

The Freedom to Read statement begins with these words:

"The freedom to read is essential to our democracy. It is continuously under attack. Private groups and public authorities in various parts of the country are working to remove or limit access to reading materials, to censor content in schools, to label "controversial" views, to distribute lists of "objectionable" books or authors, and to purge libraries. These actions apparently arise from a view that our national tradition of free expression is no longer valid; that censorship and suppression are needed to counter threats to safety or national security, as well as to avoid the subversion of politics and the corruption of morals. We, as individuals devoted to reading and as librarians and publishers responsible for disseminating ideas, wish to assert the public interest in the preservation of the freedom to read."

For our library to be accredited by the State Library of Iowa, one of the required public library standards is to have a Collection Development Policy that is "consistent with principles of intellectual freedom as found in such documents as the U.S. Constitution, the American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Manual, and the Iowa Library Association Intellectual Freedom Resource Guide." This accreditation standard is just one of the important reasons our library develops our collection applying the Library Bill of Rights and Freedom to Read values.

In Ms. Kruckenberg's statement, she mentioned concerns about the children's collection at the library, particularly with "liberal books", LGBTQ books,

“propaganda”, and books with a topic of “becoming a transgender”. Ms. Kruckenberg requested that “for every book on display with a topic of becoming a transgender, I would ask that there is a book on display that discusses how God created and designed people as either male or female from birth, for life”.

I recently conducted a diversity audit of the children’s collection including picture books, early readers, board books, juvenile fiction, and juvenile nonfiction. When books are cataloged, the records include Library of Congress Subject Headings that assist searchers in finding books of interest. A diversity audit is an inventory of a library’s collection that helps determine representation of underserved groups. This diversity audit used subject headings that Ms. Kruckenberg called into question. Of the 5,779 children’s materials our library holds, 3 books had a subject heading of “LGBT”, 2 books had a subject heading of “gay”, 0 books had “lesbian”, 0 books had “bisexual”, 2 had “transgender”, and 0 had “nonbinary”. In our children’s collection, 9 books had a subject heading of “Christianity”, 12 had the subject heading of “Christian”, 6 had “God” (in the Christian sense), 3 had “Jesus”, and 1 had “Church”. These numbers were adjusted for books that may have more than one subject heading so that they were not counted twice. There were also 142 children’s books that had a subject heading about a Christian holiday. Altogether, our collection has 173 children’s books based on Christian life.

If the library were to do as Ms. Kruckenberg asked regarding the 1:1 display of books about transgender people to God-approved cisgender people, this would result in biased displays. To be equitable, we would also need to display books with multiple religious and non-religious views of gender, including Christian denominations and other religions that are inclusive of transgender people. And if we continue down this rabbit hole, we would also need to significantly increase our holdings of children’s books about different religions in general since we only have 5 about Muslim life, 16 about Jewish life, 0 about Buddhist life, 0 about Hindu life, and 0 about Atheist life. The purpose of library displays is not to provide a 1:1 ratio of Christian books versus non-Christian books. Rather, our library displays offer books on a wide variety of topics and a multitude of life experiences to meet the informational and entertainment needs and wants of the diverse community that exists in Vinton.

Ms. Kruckenberg also stated that “one solution I see to keeping the children’s programming **in check** is to have a list of books provided each month that will be read during the upcoming weeks in storytime”. The responsibility for all programming in this library lies with me as the director, and I have witnessed nothing that indicates our children’s storytimes need to be kept in check.

Public librarians are trained to assess, seek out, and provide access to a diverse selection of quality literature. We regularly use a wide variety of professional reviews and journals to aid in our selection process, and are careful to select books that are highly recommended for their literary, informational, and entertainment qualities. Librarians use the same training to select books for storytime. Our children’s librarian, Colton, is certified as a Youth Services librarian by the State Library of Iowa, and he has attended youth-specific conferences and trainings that have developed his skills with children’s programming. When Colton chooses storytime books, they have engaging stories, eye-catching illustrations, and reflect different life experiences, languages, and characters. The American Library Association states that “Socially excluded, marginalized, and underrepresented people, not just the mainstream majority, should be able to see themselves reflected in the resources and programs that libraries offer.”

In our library, storytime materials are planned out with a very short lead time. We do not plan out a month ahead and often choose a selection of books the week before. Librarians tend to choose 3-5 books that they **might** read at each storytime and adjust what they **actually** read based on age of attendees, participant engagement, program flow, and time constraints. Due to these circumstances, the 2 or 3 books a librarian intends to read may switch to 1 or 2 different books to accommodate the rapidly changing environment of a storytime. Storytime is an art, and it would go against best practice for a librarian to commit to reading a particular set of books without the possibility of backup books.

Based on the underlying context of Ms. Kruckenberg’s statement, a preview storytime list may result in censorship actions, possibly leading community members to think there are “bad” or “immoral” books at storytime. Publishing preview lists on social media could potentially lead to negative commentary that might inhibit the intellectual freedom of others to make their own judgments if they attended that storytime. Therefore, posting or publishing preview lists would not

be an acceptable occurrence at a public library. When benchmarking with other Iowa libraries, I found no other libraries that post preview storytime lists, either.

If Ms. Kruckenberg would like to email me the Friday before storytime to personally request the list of **possible** books to be read the following Tuesday, I would be willing to respond to the request. Again, the understanding needs to remain that those books could change due to staffing or other programming circumstances. Otherwise, another option would be to attend storytime and listen to only the books she approves of for her children.

Finally, the question of a community survey was brought up. Public libraries regularly distribute surveys to their communities. These questions usually focus on frequency of attendance at the library, accessibility issues, underserved populations and their needs, library services, reasons why people use the library and potential barriers to using the library, programming opportunities, and library-specific questions. These questions do not address content of materials at the library, they do not address library staff, and they do not address views on appropriateness of programs. Questions must be non-leading and surveys must be relatively short or people will not take the time to respond.

Knowing these basic properties of a library survey, I believe the discussion about survey content needs to begin with library staff who, based on what we observe on a daily basis, come up with questions that would be beneficial to ask. I will also reach out to other library directors to benchmark possible questions with ones that have produced helpful results in their surveys. At that point, I could bring the survey to the board for feedback and other suggestions until the survey is ready to be distributed. The planning, implementation, and coding processes will take some time, so I would like to begin work on a survey in August since the Summer Reading Program will be my top priority in the coming months.

I will conclude this response with this thought. When I say that everyone is welcome at the library, I mean it, as long as each employee and patron is respected. I very much wish that every community member could be happy with all aspects of the library, but I have been in libraries long enough to know that is not realistic. Anecdotally, there have been many patron comments that have been positive about materials, programming, the library being a welcoming place, and more. While I

hope Ms. Kruckenberg and others in the group will continue to use the library, I understand if they do not feel comfortable to do so. I will continue to run the library in a way that is inclusive of every community member regardless of their background, always using American Library Association values as my guide.