

Written Testimony of

COLLEEN MARTIN

RE: Support of HB 1225

Submitted to the Maryland House Appropriations Committee on March 4, 2022

Honorable Delegates,

My name is Colleen Martin and though my residence is in Pennsylvania and I am thus not a Maryland voter, my ties to the state run deep. I married into a family with roots in Harford County that span generations and I have been an employee of the Harford County Public Library for more than 18 years. Because I'm one of the few people in the system with that kind of tenure, I'm also one of the few who remember what the system was like before the current administration came to power over ten years ago. I can say unequivocally that the changes these administrators have implemented without staff or public input regarding the way the library operates have been detrimental to our standing in the community. I firmly believe that, had staff been afforded the respect they deserve and empowered to participate in the decision-making process throughout the years, we would not find ourselves in such dire straits. That is why I'm writing to you today, to ask that you support House Bill 1225 – Harford County Public Library – Collective Bargaining.

HCPL staff have a deep sense of pride in the high level of service we provide to our patrons in all manner of inquiries, but we are being hamstrung in our ability to do our jobs by our own administration. We once had the autonomy to entice people to our individual branches by offering programs and services catered specifically to that community's needs, but those creative freedoms have been taken from us, the tasks centralized and mandated by a small group of people with no library background or experience in program development. Decades upon decade of collective staff knowledge matter for naught – in fact, nearly a quarter of staff (mostly those that work in branches) were recently demoted and told that they had been "overvalued" by the previous administration.

Because of this stifling atmosphere, the system has been hemorrhaging workers, a crisis that predated the COVID-19 pandemic by several years. And yet those vacancies (34 as of January 2022, a consistent number since 2018, in a system that only employs roughly 250 people) made by fleeing staff members remain open and unfilled, putting the onus of the work on the shoulders of an ever smaller group of increasingly exhausted and disheartened employees. Our buildings are open almost the same hours as prior to the pandemic and yet

there are fewer people manning our service desks, which in turn drives our customers away when they assume that there is no one available to help them, which in turn causes our statistics to drop, which then gives our administrators justification to keep staffing low. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Those of us who remain are finding our situations more and more untenable. We have gone to our Board of Trustees, which ostensibly oversees library operations and the administrators, to ask for help, but those pleas fell on deaf ears. We have no recourse to affect change and instead are told, "If you don't like it here, then leave." But we don't want to leave. We know how vital a public library is to its community; we know what we can accomplish when all branches and departments work in harmony with each other. But the only way to reestablish that equilibrium within Harford County Public Library is to ensure that we employees have a voice. And the only way to ensure that we have a voice is to pass HB1225. Please help us accomplish this.

Sincerely,

Colleen Martin