

The staff at the Newburyport Public Library are disappointed and dismayed that a small contingent of citizens was able to carry on a prolonged campaign of bullying against our Head Librarian, Sara Kelso, which ultimately resulted in her resignation.

Over a period of months, Sara was subject to increasingly personal attacks, all because she attempted to correct a violation of the AFSCME union contract. Article I of the contract states: “[The City of Newburyport] will not aid, promote, or finance any labor group or organization which purports to engage in collective bargaining or make agreement with any group or individual for the purpose of undermining the union or changing any condition contained in this agreement.” By their own admission, Newburyport Public Library Archival Center (NPLAC) volunteers have been undermining the AFSCME union contract for years by engaging in tasks reserved for union employees.

On September 9, 2022, a resident wrote a letter to the editor of the Daily News in which they stated: “Over the years, [NPLAC] volunteers have logged in several thousand hours of documenting our inventory, scanning and organizing hundreds of images and answering inquiries from around the U.S., Canada, and overseas.” Not one of these tasks should fall to a volunteer. Not only is this an insult to Library staff, it is also a major liability for the city. Volunteers should *never* be allowed to handle valuable special collections, accept money on behalf of a city department, or access private patron information. Sara attempted to rectify this situation and was met with vicious retaliation from these volunteers and their friends.

We truly appreciate that community members want to help the Library, but boundaries must be respected and policies enforced. These volunteers may be experts in local history, but their backgrounds are immaterial. They are not employees. Many of them understand neither our profession nor the intricacies of running a public library. We are subject to rigid state and federal standards in order to receive funding and to be an accredited member of the Merrimack Valley Library Consortium. Moreover, despite what was recently published in the Daily News, we are not just “regular librarians.” Every one of our professional librarians holds or is pursuing a Master’s degree and has experience and education in multiple fields, from children’s literature to preserving special collections. Our paraprofessional staff, those employees who have not completed graduate school, earn credentials via professional development coursework and continuing education. How can our extensive education and experience be written off in favor of volunteers, many of whom would not qualify to be employed as professional librarians themselves?

NPL staff has always enjoyed a friendly and collegial work environment, but this situation has created serious discomfort among staff and negatively impacted our culture. Staff members have reported being reprimanded by volunteers, who seem to consider the Archival Center their own private social club. Most egregiously, the archival volunteers have succeeded in forcing out a true leader, less than a year into her tenure as Head Librarian. We are deeply concerned about the message this outcome conveys: that an individual or group can harass city employees with impunity.

Sara was a fantastic Head Librarian who brought a new level of efficiency to the Library and had wide-ranging plans to improve our beloved Library for years to come. Instead of realizing these plans, she spent the majority of her time as Head Librarian addressing the NPLAC volunteer challenge. She handled this challenge with grace and discretion. What could she have accomplished, if not for the actions of this group? Losing her as our leader was devastating and we fear the wider implications of her departure. Will similar harassment campaigns target staff who are simply attempting to protect their jobs? Will Sara's successor have a chance to make lasting changes, or will they be harassed and intimidated into allowing direct violations of our union contract to continue?

Taxpayers have a right to give feedback to city institutions, but they cannot demand significant policy, procedural, or staffing changes, as this group is trying to do. These decisions fall to the Library Board of Trustees, the AFSCME union, and Library leadership. We stand fully with our interim Head Librarian, Jessica Atherton. We know she will do what is best for the Library and the community as a whole. Our fervent hope is that the new Head Librarian will be dedicated to the same cause.

Our goal as public servants has been and always will be to support the community. We are immensely grateful to the Newburyport community for giving us their support in turn. In today's climate, librarians across the country are being threatened and attacked for attempting to serve an increasingly diverse population. We all know to expect those kinds of attacks. We did not expect attacks from volunteers who are angry that staff have the temerity to want our union contract honored. The loud voices of a select few, those who are using their influence and connections to their advantage, should not drown out the needs of the greater Newburyport community.

Provoking a group of librarians to anger is no small feat. None of us wanted to get involved with any of this— we just want to do our jobs. This ordeal has been an enormous waste of taxpayer dollars and staff resources. These attacks have all been in the interest of one small part of the library—a part that comprises less than ten percent of all patron interactions. We are not a Historical Society. We do not serve only the Newburyport Public Library Archival Center and the population that uses the Archival Center. We serve the greater Newburyport area and beyond. The past is important, but we must not preserve it to the detriment of the present and the future.

Sincerely,

Fourteen Newburyport Public Library staff members