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Invest In Your Librarians: An Open Thesis to NYPL President Tony Marx

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INVEST IN YOUR LIBRARIANS:

AN OPEN THESIS TO NYPL PRESIDENT TONY MARX

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ABSTRACT

INVEST IN YOUR LIBRARIANS: AN OPEN THESIS TO NYPL PRESIDENT
TONY MARX

BY

WILFREDO RIVERA-SCOTTI

An exploration of the resources required to address the issues New York City public libraries – particularly those in underserved, low-income communities – face in dealing with patrons afflicted by homelessness, mental illness and addictions.

Using a New York Public Library branch in the Bronx as a case study, there will be ample evidence indicating a lack of resources for both employees and patrons alike.

KEYWORDS

Public Libraries, Labor, New York City, Burnout, Social Work

INTRODUCTION.

Recently, I was employed as a Librarian at Queens Library's central branch, in Jamaica, Queens. I was there for a mere two months, but in that short amount of time, it became clear to me that many of my colleagues were suffering from burnout.¹ As I conducted informal interviews, I noted a pattern: many of them compared current work environments to "how things used to be." From patrons to fellow librarians to supervisors, there was a consistent reference and comparison to a more congenial past. Patrons and workers alike were on parallel missions – one was seeking information and the other was finding that information and together they bonded over their symbiotic relationship.

Most of my colleagues seemed depressed and unmotivated when it came to carrying out their respective duties. There was an absence of curiosity and eagerness in finding whatever information someone was looking for – these attributes, mind you, are common amongst librarians, I have found.

In the interviewing process that included supervisors and other middle managers, I learned I was the first new hire at the Central branch in over six years. That was very telling and helped explain why my colleagues were suffering from burnout. I must admit that I, too, was starting to get burnt-out after several weeks. Witnessing my colleagues lacking zeal and emanating a sense of lethargy during their reference desk shifts, started to weigh on me, but it was also the patrons that came to the branch.

Queens Library's central branch is in Jamaica, Queens, across the street from the borough's main bus depot. There was a homeless population that stayed during the entirety of its [the branch's] operating hours. The library provided a warm place to stay during winter months and a cool, air-conditioned environment during the hot summer months. Public libraries often serve as safe daytime homes for the homeless and other disenfranchised groups.

After a few weeks at the branch and bearing the everyday emotional weight of the job, it was a pleasant surprise when I received an offer from the New York Public Library for a Young Adult Librarian position in the Bronx, which was my dream job even prior to attending library school.

I went into New York Public Library's headquarters on 39th Street and 5th Avenue in Manhattan for their three-day orientation and was exuberant over their startup-like, Google-esque style of imploring us to change lives and communicate, at all

¹ The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines burnout as "exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation usually as a result of prolonged stress or frustration"

levels, with management so *our* amazing ideas come to fruition. It was a transcendent experience where we all, newly hired librarians, were asked to become information soldiers and innovators.

Within two weeks of starting at the branch, I began to feel the negative emotional weight dragging me down. The kids were just not listening to me and the times they did, it was only after screaming at them or “losing it” somehow. They cursed at me, they rolled their eyes and huffed and puffed whenever I was the disciplinarian. Cops had to be called several times because kids would not leave the premises even though I, and the security guard, told them they had to leave because they were suspended from the library for a week or whatever period we had deemed appropriate. These suspensions were usually due to fighting, drug paraphernalia, or flat out drug dealing in the room – an example of a typical work day involving an ex-girlfriend coming into the Teen Room to confront her ‘baby daddy,’ which then led to said baby daddy physically assaulting the ex-girlfriend and breaking her elbow. (And yes, libraries *can* suspend difficult patrons although there technically is no such policy on the books. We use it as a behavioral check, but if patrons were driven enough to investigate their legal rights in a public library, they’d quickly realize that a suspension is pure poppycock; it’s not a legal authority New York City public libraries have.)

After several weeks of losing hair that I didn’t have, mid-level managers in charge of the system-wide teen department began visiting branches to see how the new teen librarians were fairing. They were not at all surprised with my complaints and difficulties, and better yet, they offered condolences and sympathies because they, too, were feeling unsupported and bitter about “the system.” They told me about the wealthy, mostly-white board members who did not understand the real strife branches were facing, especially those in underserved, low-income neighborhoods where public libraries serve as fundamental and oft-used homes for the indigent, the addicts and the mentally unstable. The executives had not put in place any resources that would provide support and/or training for employees on how to deal with these segments of the population. There was nothing these two mid-level managers could offer to their 30-odd army of new teen librarians. Furthermore, library schools do not teach the intricacies of being a social worker as a librarian since not all branches exist in these chaotic urban environments.

For more than a decade, public libraries in New York City have faced severe budgetary issues that have impacted worker morale and the resources they require in dealing with the daily population that utilize their services – from the homeless and destitute, to the mentally ill, to those suffering from addictions. The author of this paper, a former public librarian, will use their library branch in the Bronx as a case study, interviewing colleagues who have been employed in the New York Public Library system anywhere from seven months to more than twenty-five years.

Questions concerning resources and what role(s) the union, in this case, District Council 37, can play will be addressed.

NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THEIR BUDGETS.

On June 26, 2015, Mayor DeBlasio and New York City's City Council approved a \$43 million-dollar budget increase for public libraries.² It was a major victory following a months-long campaign – called *Invest In Libraries* – by the three library systems in the city: the Brooklyn Public Library, the New York Public Library and the Queens Library. The funds enabled public libraries to offer six-day service, which meant more open hours and the ability to hire more staff. Each respective library system was able to hire more than 100 new staff members! It was a great feeling for many employees who worked for the systems especially considering the historic budgetary crises libraries have faced in this ever-growing city.

In the early 20th century, Andrew Carnegie's *Carnegie Corporation* provided most of the funds necessary to build 100 branches across New York City's five boroughs. These libraries were built with the intention that the city would commit, both in spirit and fiscally, to keeping the branches open from nine in the morning to nine at night. Today, the three systems are tax-exempt, non-profit entities – called 501(c)(3)'s – with boards that are chosen by the mayor, city council speaker and borough presidents.³ The budgets public libraries have every fiscal year is largely determined by New York City and whenever cuts are introduced, a reduction in hours and/or staff is required.

From 2002 through 2011, the three library systems in New York City had a 59% increase in circulation (materials borrowed), a 40% increase in program attendance and a 27% increase in the number of program sessions. These significant increases were coupled, however, with only a 2% increase in average open hours per week and a decrease of 8% in city funding, which resulted in a combined 24% reduction in full-time equivalent employment across all three systems. Furthermore, since 2008, and before the \$43 million-dollar increase approved in 2015, New York Public Library endured a \$28.2 million-dollar reduction in city funding while Brooklyn Public Library's funding decreased by \$18.1 million, and Queens Library's budget reduction was \$17.5 million.⁴

² New York Public Library (2015). *Historic Investment by New York City Allows Public Libraries To Offer Citywide Six-Day Service*. Retrieved from <http://www.nypl.org/press/press-release/june-26-2015/historic-investment-new-york-city-allows-public-libraries-offer>

³ Giles, D. (2013). *Branches of Opportunity*. Center for an Urban Future, January 2013. Retrieved from <https://nycfuture.org/research/publications/branches-of-opportunity>

⁴ *ibid*

Although a \$43 million-dollar budget increase was granted by the City Council last year, there is a net \$22 million-dollar shortage from 2008 [pre-recession] levels. In addition to this current shortfall, there is a “maintenance crisis” affecting branches in all boroughs. Experts have estimated the total cost of fixing existing maintenance issues in New York City’s public libraries to be \$300 million dollars.⁵ Among these maintenance issues are unused space, cooling and heating problems, overcrowding, chronic water damage, ADA inaccessibility, branches being too small to serve their respective populations, out-of-order bathrooms, malfunctioning windows, broken elevators and inadequate outlets.⁶

The average age of a New York City branch library is 61 years-old and a “significant share of the branches suffer from major physical defects such as lack of light and ventilation, water leaks and over-heating due to malfunctioning cooling systems.”⁷ Not only that, more than half of the 207 branches in New York City are over 50 years-old. David Giles and his research team found that the three library systems have at least \$1.1 billion dollars in capital needs – \$812 million to have branches in a state of “good repair” and \$278 million for acquiring property for new construction.⁸

⁵ New York Public Library (2016). *Tell City Hall: we need more investments in libraries*. Retrieved from <http://www.nypl.org/speakout>

⁶ Invest In Libraries. 2015 Report: City Libraries Facing \$1.1 Billion Crisis. *#InvestInLibraries, 2015*.

Retrieved from <http://www.investinlibraries.org/updates/2016/3/4/report-city-libraries-facing-11-billion-crisis>

⁷ Estima, J., Francois, N., Giles, D. (2014). Re-envisioning New York’s Branch Libraries. *Center for an Urban Future, September 2014*. Retrieved from <https://nycfuture.org/research/publications/re-envisioning-new-yorks-branch-libraries>

⁸ *ibid*

WHAT DO PUBLIC LIBRARIES DO?

New York City's public libraries serve a multitude of purposes for all age groups. As the independent research group, *Center for an Urban Future*, points out in their report (2013), "New York's public libraries play a critical role in helping adults upgrade their skills and find jobs, assisting immigrants assimilate, fostering reading skills in young people and providing technology access for those who don't have a computer or an Internet connection at home."⁹

With the advent of 21st century technology, i.e. smartphones and tablets, many are quick to conclude that the role of public libraries is minimal to obsolete. However, if we dig deeper, we will find that their role, as Mitchell Moss – a professor of urban policy and planning at New York University – states, is "much more important today than ever."¹⁰ As social and income inequality become the topics of popular debate and discussion, from politics to education to housing, public libraries have served as one of the vital mechanisms to balance such inequalities. By providing access to books, technology, programs, job training, test preparation and other services for free, individuals who otherwise would not be able to attain such services now have opportunities to progress in their respective lives.

In 2011, public libraries in New York City had over 40.5 million visitors, more than "all of the city's professional sports teams and major cultural institutions combined."¹¹ They also offered 117,000 public programs, which had 2.3 million attendees. Libraries answered 14.5 million queries, there were 9.3 million sessions logged on library computers and 2.2 million sessions on personal computers using the library's free Wi-Fi networks.¹²

That same year, 37% of New York City's population was foreign-born, roughly 60% of its residents were either immigrants or children of immigrants, and almost 25% of the population was less than fluent in English.¹³ Public libraries "are an indispensable resource for immigrants," states Madhulika Khandelwal, the director of the Asian/American Center at Queens College.¹⁴

Senior citizens are also a major segment of the city's population that greatly benefits and utilizes the services provided by public libraries. New York City's population of elderly residents is expected to grow by 45% in the next 20 years.

⁹ Giles. *Branches...*

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

Public libraries provide senior citizens with a safe and convenient environment to socialize, read newspapers, send emails and, of course, stay connected with family members on social media. They also help them file their taxes, for free. These services are vital in today's digital divide and especially in low-income communities.

In a city where almost 30% of the working age population, or 1.6 million people, does not possess a high school diploma and has "one of the lowest GED attainment rates in the country," New York's public libraries are providing literacy workshops and GED courses so that job seekers have a better chance at improving their lives.¹⁵ Both children and teens benefit greatly from the after-school programs and space offered by public libraries. As an alternative to the streets, libraries provide kids and teens with reading sessions, music lessons and one-on-one homework help.¹⁶

In addition to helping those seeking a better quality of life, public libraries also serve as safe quarters for the homeless and indigent, the mentally ill and those afflicted with drug addictions. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 610,000 people are homeless on any given night in the United States.¹⁷ As of January 2016, there were 60,296 homeless people in New York City, with a large majority suffering from "serious mental illness, addiction disorders and other severe health problems."¹⁸ As one homeless person, Jane, put it when describing herself and her homeless community, "first in, last to leave the library."¹⁹ On the street, most homeless people don't sleep alone, they sleep in communal spaces, whether it's banding together on the steps of a church or in parks. In a library, however, "there are boundaries," she says. "Those people have their own section of that table. That's their own space. That's gold."²⁰

Seeing as public libraries often serve as day-time shelters for the homeless and other groups with limited resources, and considering that many of these patrons suffer from mental illness, what toll can the daily interactions between library staff and these populations have on employees?

¹⁵ Giles. *Branches...*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ Ruhlmann, E. (2014). A Home to the Homeless. *American Libraries*, 45(11/12), 40-44

¹⁸ Coalition for the Homeless (2016). Basic Facts About Homelessness: New York City. Retrieved from <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/basic-facts-about-homelessness-new-york-city/>

¹⁹ Ruhlmann, E.

²⁰ *ibid*

BURNOUT AND EMOTIONAL LABOR IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES.

Burnout is defined as a “psychological syndrome that involves a prolonged response to stressors in the workplace. Specifically, it involves the chronic strain that results from an incongruence, or misfit, between the worker and the job.”²¹ These misfits may include a “lack of control of key processes, resources, or choices needed for success,” “the work community may be unsupportive...organizations in which there is chronic, unresolved conflict, isolation, frustration, or hostility are not supportive,” and “fairness” when it comes to respect and self-worth.

In terms of evaluating the emotional output in public libraries, Miriam L. Matteson and Shelly S. Miller state it best in their findings, “Library work is full of emotion...Workplace training frequently focuses on the technical tasks associated with library work, with little attention paid to emotional management.”²² They go on to assert that librarians “experience a range of emotions” and “professional norms suggest librarians should work to express positive emotions and suppress negative emotions.” That is a phenomenon I can attest to in my findings as the employees, myself included, at the Grand Concourse branch constantly worked deliberately, consciously to maintain one’s emotional composure when dealing with difficult patrons.

The researchers found that “emotional display rules” – rules in how workers *show*, or should show, their emotions during interactions with patrons – and the “organizational requirements to express positive emotions and suppress negative emotions – in the face of dealing with difficult library patrons, insufficient staffing, decreased monetary resources, performing repetitive tasks, and staying abreast of an ever-changing technology landscape – may indeed account for the sense of burnout that may exist.” Though there isn’t “overwhelming empirical evidence [that] demonstrates burnout, the idea of job burnout resonates with many librarians through their own personal experiences.”²³

²¹ Harwell, K. (2008). Burnout Strategies for Librarians. *Journal Of Business & Finance Librarianship*, 13(3), 379-390. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=15&sid=eb9cd3a2-93f3-4f94-befe-7378e9462858%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4201>

²² Matteson, Miriam L. and Shelly S. Miller (2013). A Study of emotional labor in librarianship. *Library & Information Science Research*, 35, 54-62. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/ehost/command/detail?sid=eb9cd3a2-93f3-4f94-befe-7378e9462858%40sessionmgr4001&vid=10&hid=4201>

²³ It is worth noting here that the author of this paper spearheaded a project on burnout and work motivation in New York City public libraries in the fall of 2015. However, the project was abruptly terminated by the New York Public Library’s Director of Human Resources. The author was instructed to “immediately cease collecting data” as further research would compromise their employment with NYPL.

As the author of this paper and their colleagues can attest to, life and work at a public library branch in an underserved, low-income community in the Bronx requires resources – mental, spiritual and tangible – that often are non-existent; these resources being necessary to sustain a respectable and acceptable quality of life and work. What these resources are, where they can be obtained and who can or should provide them will be explored in the following interviews.

Because of time restraints and logistics, the questions for the interviews were e-mailed to all staff members of the New York Public Library's Grand Concourse branch – ten in total, with seven responses received. Here are the questions included in the message:

HOW LONG HAVE YOU WORKED IN THE NYPL SYSTEM?

The range for the length of time employed within the New York Public Library was anywhere between seven months and more than twenty-five years. The breakdown was as follows:

Employee A²⁴: 7 years

Employee B: 1 year

Employee C: 6 years

Employee D: 25 years

Employee E: 2 years

Employee F: 7 months

Employee G: 7 months

²⁴ In terms of nomenclature, each interviewee is referred to by a spontaneously chosen letter of the alphabet – for the sake of anonymity.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO WORK AS A PUBLIC EMPLOYEE?

All employees expressed various levels of negative outlooks to this question except for Employee G, who previously had never worked as a public employee and described their position as “non-essential because I am part of such an enormous system.” Two employees – E and G – noted that “job security” and “protection” were positive aspects.

Like I mentioned, most employees expressed dissatisfaction with their work as public employees. “Stressful and rewarding at the same damn time.” “Difficult.” “Challenging.” “Working as a public employee is no fun for me personally.” Employee D, who has been in the NYPL system for more than twenty-five years – stated, “Whether it’s employees or patrons, it’s just crazy. I’ve had to call the cops way, way, way too many times. It’s been a very tough 25+ years and I look forward to leaving the system sometime soon.”

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO WORK AT YOUR PARTICULAR BRANCH?

The responses to this question were balanced – most employees stated both negative and positive aspects of the Grand Concourse branch. I will say that the critical answers seemed to hold more weight than the positive ones.

For instance, Employee A begins their response with, “Just like any branch, we have some patrons that are awesome...then you have some that seem to be perpetually unwilling to learn or ill-tempered, or those just having a bad day. Our neighborhood can be a bit rough around the edges...it can be stressful and tiring to deal with attitude or hand-holding for simple tasks.”

Employee D states, “I can’t answer this question without laughing, in a pity, sad kind of way...I can’t help but think of the people I’ve managed in the past six years – like, what would they say and all the complaints and issues I’ve had to deal with EVERY SINGLE DAY. It’s mentally and emotionally exhausting.” Employee E iterates a similar tone, “rewarding sometimes, other times one thinks, time for a new location!”

Employee F did not hold back and described working at the Grand Concourse branch in the following way, “it sucks, honestly.” Another description, in regards to patrons, characterized them as “feel[ing] entitled to services.”

It is important to note that several employees mentioned the area or neighborhood that the library is in – “our neighborhood can be a bit rough around the edges,”

“time for a new location!” The New York Public Library’s Grand Concourse branch is in the area patrolled by the 44th police precinct. In April of 2013, an article appeared in *DNAinfo* recognizing the fact that the precinct had not had a homicide in eight weeks – serving as “the longest non-shooting spree in recent memory,” the precinct’s commanding officer stated.²⁵ Additionally, the surrounding area by the branch has a median household income of less than forty-thousand dollars.²⁶ As we often come across in the United States and in the world, when communities are comprised of low-income households, they often have limited resources, which are inextricably linked to higher rates of crime.

²⁵ Wall, P. (2013). 44th Precinct Avoids Shootings for Nearly 8 Weeks, Longest in Recent Memory. *DNAinfo: South Bronx*. Retrieved from <https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20130412/concourse/44th-precinct-avoids-shootings-for-nearly-8-weeks-longest-recent-memory>

²⁶ Rich Blocks, Poor Blocks. 2008-12 American Community Survey. Retrieved from <http://www.richblockspoorblocks.com>

WHAT ASPECTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU ENJOY MOST?

The responses for this query were in line with the earlier section on ‘What Libraries Do.’ Employee A concentrates on providing great customer service and making sure patrons “walk away with a little more than what they walked in with.” Doing programs, promoting literacy, working with children and seeing their smiles, “hearing authentic thank you[’s] from patrons,” “encouraging patrons young and old to love books,” and, “seeing the daily impact our branch has on members of the community...is immensely rewarding. Knowing that we’re able to fulfill a need – resume, computer, homework help, and being constant supportive adult figures in the children’s lives.”

WHAT ASPECTS OF YOUR JOB DO YOU LIKE LEAST?

After reading the employees’ seemingly altruistic aspects of their job that they enjoyed most, it was tough to then read what they liked least. “When it feels like babysitting,” “dealing with rude, obnoxious, aggressive, mentally unstable, unkempt people,” “interacting with patrons who are rude,” “dealing with aggressive parents,” “dealing with nonsense from patrons and feeling unsafe on occasion,” and, “it’s tedious to spend a good chunk of your day dealing with problematic patrons.”

When expressing their dislikes about the job, all the employees discussed patrons and the daily disrespect given to staff members. However, Employee D, did not discuss the patrons at all in this question – their dismay was targeted towards the employer, the New York Public Library. Employee D repeatedly stated they did not feel appreciated because they, essentially, have two jobs – managing two branches. D is the interim manager at the Grand Concourse branch because their home branch is closed due to renovations. Though their home branch is closed, D still must complete the timesheets and paperwork for staff members at *both* branches and keep track of the renovations at their home branch. “And I don’t get paid for managing two branches! I just don’t feel appreciated.”

WHAT IMPROVEMENTS OR RESOURCES DO YOU THINK WOULD BE HELPFUL TO HAVE IN DEALING WITH PATRONS WHO ARE HOMELESS, MENTALLY ILL AND/OR SUFFERING FROM ADDICTIONS?

“SOCIAL WORKERS!” “Training!” Employees were adamant about the resources branches needed to better deal with those who are on the fringes of society. Employee B stated, “more training for all staff and clear protocol,” which indicates there is no system-wide, or even within the local branch, protocol or training on what actions to take with this segment of the population.²⁷

Other employees were upfront about the lack of initiative stemming from their employer in regards to this issue. Employee D – who, technically, manages two branches – says, “honestly, our organization doesn’t give us anything to help the homeless or mentally ill. If NYPL wanted to, they could easily set up a permanent program that would provide resources to such patrons. Most of our patrons are homeless or mentally ill or addicts. It’s the Bronx!”

Two employees stated the need for licensed social workers, going as far as to say, “we have absolutely no resources in place to deal with enormous amounts of children who are suffering from years of parental neglect. We need on-site food service programs, more adult education, clothing and food donation bins. Regular visits from DOE officials to help parents navigate typical and special education services.”

Employee A affirmed, “for larger library systems, there should be a direct department that can forward patrons to the specific resource they need.” Something to consider is that the New York Public Library system is the second largest public library system in the United States, per the American Library Association’s 2012 fact sheet. In that fiscal year, NYPL served a population of 3,439,711 and had the highest collection expenditures of any public library system in the United States – at more than \$24 million, double the expenditures of the second-highest system (King County Library System in Washington state). Additionally, NYPL led the country in most library visits, total circulation and total holdings or materials (it had more than double the number of materials the second-place system had – Boston Public Library had 9.1 million versus NYPL’s 23.2 million).²⁸

²⁷ As of this writing.

²⁸ American Library Association (2014). The Nation’s Largest Public Libraries: Top 25 Rankings. *American Library Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet13>

Let's go back to Employee A's assertion: larger library systems should have "direct department[s]" that "can forward patrons to the specific resource they need." There is no such department in the New York Public Library system.

WHO DO YOU THINK COULD/SHOULD PROVIDE THESE RESOURCES? (I.E. THE UNION, YOUR EMPLOYER, ETC.)

All employees at the Grand Concourse branch stated the employer was responsible for providing the resources – whether it's a system-wide department or the employer bringing in "outside specialists" to conduct trainings. In addition to the employer, Employee G mentioned the participation of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the city's Department of Education.

You might ask, *since these are public employees, what about the union's role in all this? Why isn't the union seen as a conduit for employee advocacy?* From those who, in some way or another, bring up the union's role (Employees D and F), their thoughts are: "well, I don't think it's the union's job to provide these resources. They exist just to fight the yearly contract negotiations," and, "I don't see the unions doing much – they barely are able to get contracts in place." One cannot help but notice that employees are not viewing the union as a source of aid in this case. I argue that employees, at least at this particular branch, do not see the union, District Council 37, as anything but a contract negotiator, a Gompers' style bread-and-butter union. The union's role is a wages and benefits-only entity while the employer, on the other hand, is responsible for all other employee issues.

SOLUTIONS.

As several employees at the Grand Concourse branch stated, hiring social workers could provide a simple, logical solution for the New York Public Library to take, especially if you consider the fact that NYPL has almost 35 branches in the Bronx borough alone – almost all in low-income communities.

In 2009, San Francisco became the first public library system in the United States to hire a full-time social worker, Leah Esguerra. In a January 2015 interview with PBS, Ms. Esguerra noted that the program she is a part of resulted in "150 formerly homeless patrons [having] received permanent housing."²⁹

²⁹ Fox, S. (2015). *From nurses to social workers, see how public libraries are serving the homeless*. PBS NewsHour. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/see-libraries-across-country-serving-homeless/>

Through their Homeless Engagement Initiative, the Dallas Public Library set up a program called “Coffee and Conversation.” During these get-togethers with the homeless patrons that come to their branches, the library staff gets to know their stories and, more importantly, their names. “We had no idea what any of their names were or their life stories or anything about them to really humanize them,” said Jasmine Africawala, the library’s Community Engagement Administrator. She continues in saying, “Coffee and Conversation is the type of initiative that any library system could start with the staff they have on hand.”³⁰

The Washington D.C. public library system, Philadelphia’s Free Library and, recently, Portland’s Central Library all employ full-time social workers.³¹ Even though the New York Public Library is, in most categories, the largest public library system in the United States with an endowment worth well over \$1 billion, there is no homeless initiative or program nor are social workers employed within the system.³² This possible solution has clearly worked in other library systems to not only benefit patrons, but also assuage the emotional labor library employees endure and are not trained for.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ Swindler, S. (2016). *Central Library brings a social worker on board*. The Oregonian/OregonLive. Retrieved from

http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2016/05/central_library_brings_a_socia.html

³² Chief Investment Officer (2013). *New York Public Library Endowment Reaches \$1B Milestone*. Retrieved from [http://www.ai-cio.com/channel/NEWSMAKERS/New-York-Public-Library-Endowment-Reaches-\\$1B-Milestone/](http://www.ai-cio.com/channel/NEWSMAKERS/New-York-Public-Library-Endowment-Reaches-$1B-Milestone/)

CONCLUSION.

What I, and hopefully the reader, learned from this research is that there exists a disconnection between employees at a library branch in an under-served, low-income community and their employer – the New York Public Library. The lack of resources in assuring the safety and professional work environment of employees at the Grand Concourse branch shows that the existing framework is not sustainable, is inducing symptoms of burnout and is impeding the library’s ultimate objective, which is to help members of the community.

Library branches, particularly those in low-income communities, have a daily populace that is on the fringes of society and they suffer from homelessness, mental illness and drug addictions. Resources are urgently needed to better serve not only the constituents of these communities, but to enable library employees to work safely and productively without fear. As one employee said, “our safety is constantly compromised. I think it’s pure negligence on their [NYPL’s] part.”

If library systems with vastly smaller endowments and minimal resources at their disposal can produce measures and take actions to improve the environments for both employees and patrons alike, then it is incomprehensible as to why the New York Public Library has not followed in step. Hiring social workers and implementing system-wide initiatives and programs aimed at helping those who are homeless, mentally ill and/or suffering from addictions are viable options the New York Public Library has the resources to provide – in the end, benefitting employees, employers, local communities and New York City as a whole.

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