

Statement to Worcester City Council

[Name Redacted], President, Worcester Public Library Board of Directors

Opening: Public Service Requires Protection

Mayor, Councilors, City Manager,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of the Worcester Public Library's Board of Directors. I speak not just as the elected President of this board, but as a concerned leader advocating for the safety and well-being of our staff, dedicated public servants who provide essential services to our community.

Recently, a library employee was attacked while performing his duties. A patron threw a skateboard at his head, knocking him unconscious. He needed emergency medical care. He is recovering, but the impact of that incident continues to ripple through our staff and patrons.

And unfortunately, **this incident is not isolated.**

According to a 2022 study by Urban Librarians Unite, **68.5% of library workers** nationwide report experiencing violent or aggressive behavior from patrons.

This is our reality, and it is one we can no longer afford to overlook.

Why It Matters: Libraries Are on the Front Lines

Today's public libraries do far more than circulate books. They are:

- Help centers for those seeking housing, employment, or citizenship,
- Safe spaces for children, families, and seniors,
- And often, the last accessible public place for individuals with nowhere else to go.

WPL staff are committed to serving Worcester with empathy and professionalism. But they are not crisis responders, and they cannot continue to shoulder these responsibilities alone.

A Personal Reflection

Imagine if this had happened to someone you love. Your child. Your spouse. A close friend.

Would you feel that enough had been done to protect them?

Would you want them to return to that environment without meaningful change?

This is the situation our staff are facing, and it's our responsibility to act.

Our Obligation as a Board

As the WPL Board of Directors, we are charged with more than oversight. One of our central responsibilities is to **develop and implement a written plan for improving library services**.

To fulfill this mission, we must also ensure that those services can be delivered safely and sustainably. That means asking for targeted support from our city leadership.

What We Need Now

We are requesting three key actions to protect our staff and strengthen our services:

- **Hire a full-time licensed social worker** at the Main Branch.
This role will allow for on-site crisis intervention and post-incident debriefing, reducing the burden placed on library staff to handle complex, high-risk situations alone.
- **Increase security coverage** at all seven WPL branches.
Additional trained personnel during high-traffic hours will deter violence, assist staff, and reassure patrons.
- **Formally recognize Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)** as an occupational concern.
Our staff face many of the same emotional pressures as social workers and nurses, yet often without the same level of recognition or mental health support. We ask the city to implement **trauma-informed care training** and provide **ongoing access to wellness resources**.

This Is About More Than Safety

If we don't act now:

- We risk burnout and turnover among our most experienced staff.
- We risk service disruption to the very communities who depend on our libraries.
- And we risk eroding the public trust our system has worked so hard to build.

These are not abstract consequences, they are very real, and they are already beginning to show.

Looking Ahead: A Stronger Library System

This is not just a crisis, it's an opportunity.

By addressing safety head-on, we can develop a **comprehensive improvement plan** that positions Worcester's library system as a model for resilience, innovation, and community care.

Let us be proactive, not reactive.

Let us lead with empathy, and act with purpose.

Closing: A Call to Lead

I respectfully urge this Council to:

- **Fund critical personnel roles** that address both security and mental health,
- **Invest in training and infrastructure** that reflect the realities our staff face,
- And **partner with the WPL Board** to create a long-term plan for safe, sustainable library operations.

Together, we can ensure our libraries remain welcoming, inclusive, and safe for all, staff and patrons alike.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your continued commitment to public service.