

Interview with Marijke Visser

by Linda Silka

We are fortunate in the state of Maine to have Marijke Visser as the Maine State Library director of library development. Visser is the winner of *Library Journal's* 2024 Movers and Shakers Advocates Award recognizing her outstanding work in changing libraries in Maine. She has implemented collaborations and partnerships including, for example, with the Maine Connectivity Authority and the Governor's Climate Council Equity Subcommittee. In the announcement of the 2024 Movers and Shakers Advocates Award, State Librarian Lori Fisher noted that Marijke Visser "truly illustrates the ability to leverage state and national resources to increase local capacity." Recognition at the national level of her skills, in 2023 Visser was named an ALA policy fellow, focusing on broadband and digital equity. "There is an amazing library ecosystem in Maine," says Visser, "and I know there are opportunities to leverage it to advocate for libraries at the state and federal level."

Marijke Visser is one of the leaders of a highly innovative program in Maine in which 39 libraries, both small and large and rural and urban, have received funding through a grant from the Maine State Library made possible through the Maine Jobs & Recovery Plan and in partnership with the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development. The initiative aims to increase libraries' resources and opportunities for supporting remote work that can take place at libraries. This program is achieving national recognition and is yet one more example—and a significant one—of the importance of libraries to

our future and of the ways that Marijke Visser is helping guide us into that future.

Visser was kind enough to answer several questions about libraries and their futures.

People sometimes say libraries are disappearing. Are they disappearing?

Marijke: If people say that, they probably have not had the opportunity to be in libraries recently. In so many ways, libraries are front and center of information usage. It is just that they may be doing things in different ways than libraries in the past. Libraries have always been a place to connect people with information opportunities and that is still the case. Consider Queens Public Library in New York; the library has resources in over 200 different languages available to the users. Libraries serve as connectors: libraries connect people with information; libraries connect people with training; libraries connect people with opportunities. There are social connections that happen in libraries. These kinds of services continue to grow alongside what you might think of as traditional library services. Similar comments that libraries were probably going to disappear were made when e-books first came out. But libraries are responsive to change and are also responsive to changing community needs. It is also true, though, that libraries are pulled in different directions, and it can be hard for libraries to prioritize limited resources because the default is to want to say yes to new programming and services. One area that communities can help with is to

understand the frequent need for more staff in their libraries. Many libraries in Maine operate with just 1 or 2 paid staff. With additional community support, such libraries might be able to strengthen or expand services and programming.

People sometimes describe libraries as a luxury. How do you respond to that?

Marijke: Libraries are far from a luxury. There are data on school libraries, for example, and the significant impact on student success that they are demonstrated to have (see article by Otero Martinez this issue). And in our state of Maine there are amazing programs that point to how important libraries are to our demographically changing state. Lewiston and Portland have developed programs, for example, to welcome New Mainers and assist them in connecting to community services (see Houston this issue). Libraries are helping jobseekers hone skills and search for employment. Some are partnering with other community organizations to tackle tough social issues like addiction and lack of affordable housing. Others are exploring ways they can help their communities be more resilient in response to the increase in severe weather events.

How do libraries in Maine differ from each other?

Marijke: Maine libraries vary greatly in size and in situation. The greatest difference might be that about half of Maine public libraries are part of city government and the other half are nonprofits. This determines who libraries report to and decision-making approaches that are followed as well as how a library is funded. And, of course, libraries differ in whether they are in urban areas or rural areas. This difference is important for all kinds of reasons, but especially

because rural areas typically have fewer resources and services so the library often fills those gaps. One way to illustrate this is to think about communities that have seen a decrease in workplaces with the result that people are becoming increasingly dependent on being able to access remote work opportunities. In many rural communities, where home broadband may not be affordable or available, libraries are one of the few locations where residents can access the internet for remote work.

And what about tribal libraries? Are there differences?

Marijke: One thing to keep in mind when talking about tribal libraries is that they are part of their respective sovereign nations and the relationship, or lack of one, with state libraries varies greatly depending on the relationship of a given tribe with the state in which it is situated. In some cases, a state library may recognize tribal libraries as public libraries and in other cases, it may not. While this should not make a difference when you consider the libraries are part of a sovereign nation, it does in terms of whether tribal libraries are eligible for support, including access to funding, from the state library. One tangible impact of this is demonstrated at the federal level and access to broadband funding through the FCC's E-Rate program. Eligibility for that program hinges on the definition of a public library by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. When the E-Rate program rules were established in 1998, that definition made many tribal libraries ineligible for funding. While public libraries made significant strides in broadband capacity with the help of E-Rate, tribal libraries did not, and they still lag far behind public libraries. Through years of advocacy by the Association of Tribal Archives Libraries and Museums and the American Library Association, the

E-Rate rules were changed in 2022 so that all tribal libraries as well as tribal college libraries that serve the public are eligible for E-Rate funding.

Are there policy matters that are of concern for librarians in the state?

Marijke: Many policy matters are uppermost in concerns for libraries in Maine and elsewhere. Librarians are affected by homelessness in our communities, by addiction in our communities, by uses of our libraries as cooling centers and similar responsibilities we have for meeting the needs in our communities. These are community-wide challenges, and libraries are ready to help find solutions, but decision-makers must also recognize the role libraries are currently taking on when there are no other support systems available. Because demand for services in these areas is on the rise and is on top of other staff responsibilities, the stress on the staff can be huge, and it is important to recognize and address this stress.

And are partnerships important?

Marijke: Building sustainable partnerships with other groups is very important. We need to understand our partners. It may not matter how good your idea is--you have to find common ground to work successfully on a policy agenda. For example, it is important to learn, read, and understand what politicians are talking about and to whom they are talking to understand how your priorities do and do not align with theirs. From there, you can start to craft your message and identify areas of commonality. We should be building ongoing relationships with local, state, and federal decision-makers. One way to do this is to invite politicians to see all that goes on in libraries. Libraries may not always be considered newsworthy, but we have a good story to tell.