

Meeting Minutes

Trustees Attending: Austin Sarat, Lee Edwards, Tamson Ely, Alex Lefebvre, & Robert Pam
Also Present: Lev Ben-Ezra, Judith Roberts, Lynne Weintraub, Penni Stevens, Hank Allan, Sharon Sharry,
and members of the public

1. Call to Order/Attendance at 4:35pm

2. President's Report:

- A. Welcome to our four wonderful guests who are here to talk about the work the Library does in the community in serving the various disadvantaged populations in Town and being a resource for everyone.
- B. After the events that occurred yesterday - events which remind us again of the fragility of our rule of law; and events which vividly displayed how differently populations in this country are treated.
- C. Try to imagine a more humble patriotism; a love of country which is more committed to addressing the injustices that have, for too long, been a part of the American story.
- D. We must celebrate the work that libraries do, as places that welcome everybody on equal terms, if our Democracy is to survive, improve, and become genuinely welcoming for all populations.

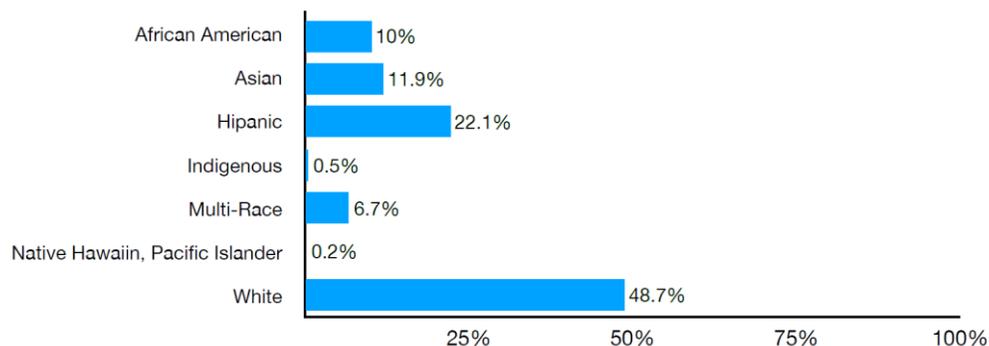
3. Library Chats: Economic & Social Justice (Alex LeFebvre, Lev Ben-Ezra, Judith Roberts, Penni Stevens, Lynne Weintraub)

- A. If you would like to add onto what Austin said about yesterday's events, I encourage you to do that.
- B. Libraries are open to and serve everyone in a community. It is a free place where the color of your skin, or your gender, religion, physical ability, socioeconomic status, education level, or age do not impact your access to relevant and dependable information. Part of the Library's job is to keep our eyes open to the changes in our community and shifts in population and respond by diversifying our materials, services, and staff to assure we continue to provide digital and information equity for all.
- C. Amherst has always prided itself on its progressive values and there have been moments throughout our history where individuals and organizations have recognized these changes in our community and responded with action.
- D. For tonight's Library Chat we are fortunate to have Lev Ben-Ezra (Executive Director of the Amherst Survival Center), Judith Roberts (Executive Director of The Literacy Project), Penni Stevens (a Literacy Project student and a poet), and Lynne Weintraub (Director of the Jones Library ESL Program) here to talk with us.
- E. We've invited each of you here tonight because your programs were created in response to new or changing needs when there have been shifts in our community.
 1. Lev, I would like to start with you. I think most people in our Town know about the Amherst Survival Center but I think it is important to know a little bit about who created it and why. That

seems especially important in this moment with the impacts of the pandemic being felt by so many in the community.

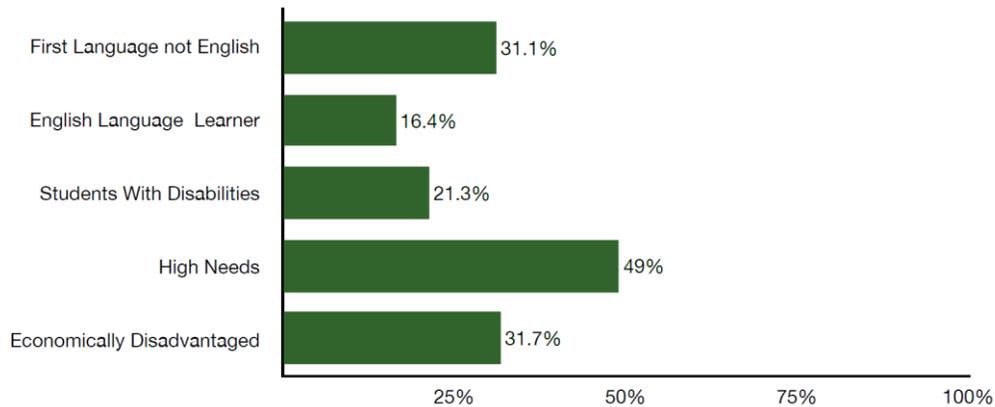
- Thank you for having me. Begun by a single mother, the Survival Center was started in the 1970's during the movement for anti-poverty programs. It was once housed in the Jones Library. It is a community center. It is a place for people to connect and share experiences and resources. The Center relies heavily on volunteers. "Through sharing, there is enough."
2. Judith, the Literacy Project began in Greenfield and has spread to five towns, including Amherst. As a college town, the value of education is clearly understood. Why did the Literacy Project end up in Amherst?
 - Since 1997, has been located in Amherst. Amherst is challenging because space is an issue. Started in the basement of the Jones Library. Excited to move back to the Jones once expanded/renovated. Those who are not fully educated are often overlooked in Amherst. 52 students in Amherst are enrolled; ages 16-66 years old. Immigrants and refugees are served. 70% of the students are non-white. Students face systematic inequities. The students are courageous and strong. Education equity is a social justice issue.
 3. Lynne, you have been working with English language learners in Amherst for over 30 years. Can you tell us a little bit about how the ESL program at the Library got started?
 - Wanted to have one of her students appear on this Chat, but it's hard for an English language learner to present via Zoom, so I would direct people to the Library's website to view three pre-recorded videos by Jones Library ESL students who address today's topic.
 - In the 1980's, the Library performed a needs-assessment to see if there were any members of the community not being served by the Library. The report showed that a cluster of Cambodian refugees were not coming in to the Library because they couldn't read/speak English. So the Library began collecting instructional materials for English language learners, as well as establishing a one-to-one tutoring program. Goals – help with drivers permits; citizenship; Job interviews. Eventually began serving immigrants from all over the world with a variety of backgrounds. Service was eventually extended to spouses.
- F. We are at an important moment again in the history of Amherst as there are really striking changes to who we are as a community, what we need to thrive, and how best to serve the entire community. Just twenty years ago, Amherst was 79% white, with 42% of its residents holding a graduate degree and another 27% holding a Bachelor's degree. The median family income was \$61,237 and the median rent was \$687. But in 2019 the median income in Amherst dropped to \$57,000 while rents increased to \$1,376 (dollars have not been adjusted for inflation). Our poverty rate in Amherst was projected at 28% of our population with 10% of our community members lacking access to the internet. Looking at the enrollment in our elementary schools can be a window into our population trends:

2020/2021 Amherst Elementary Enrollment



Source: doe.mass.edu

2019/2020 Amherst Elementary Enrollment



Source: doe.mass.edu

1. Lev, could you tell us about the programs and services at the Survival Center today and how you might be seeing the needs of the community shift?
 - This is a robust community center with free food, clothing, housewares, & activities. When COVID hit, tough decisions had to be made. The focus is now on food insecurity and personal care products. Many new people are coming to the Center; people who are now not able to make “ends meet.” They are trying to increase their outreach efforts. Looking forward to being able to re-integrate their other services because the need is still there.
 2. Judith, could you tell us about the programs and services at the Literacy Project today and how you might be seeing the needs of the community shift?
 - Penni has been living in Amherst since the 1970’s. Has been at Literacy Project for last two years, in order to get her GED. COVID has made things hard, but classes have been occurring via Zoom. It a great program and it is needed in this community. We write a book of poems every year. They are also able to take college classes through GCC.
 - Digital literacy as a skill is now part of their core instruction. Thanks to private donations, 66 laptops have been given (not loaned) out to students this year. They also collaborate with Community Colleges to see what jobs are available. Their teachers are hard-working and dedicated.
 3. Lynne, could you tell us about the programs and services at the Jones ESL Center today and how you might be seeing the needs of the community shift?
 - There is an increasing demand for one-to-one tutors. We hold five Conversation Circles per week (now via Zoom). State-funded classroom programs (of which the Jones program is not a part) have narrowed their focus, which doesn’t help older students – so the Jones ESL program is helping. There is an increased number of asylum seekers. There is also an increase in the number of international research students (pre-COVID). Everyone is welcome here.
- G. When we think about things like equity, inclusion, diversity, and accessibility at the Library we are thinking about how do we mitigate any kind of barrier that would prevent anyone from accessing our services. Those barriers may be literacy, language, or a physical barrier. What do you see as your biggest barriers or challenges to providing services? Also, what does the Library mean to the populations you serve?
1. Survival Center – There is a stigma around living with lower income and not having access to healthy food; transportation access and language access are also critical barriers. The Library provides access to bathrooms, computers, warmth during the winter and coolness during the summer, kids toys, and books.

2. Literacy Project – Students need a place to go to study; students need access to books. Rent is high in Amherst; we feel the wonderful promise of being able to engage more fully with the Jones Library.
3. Jones ESL Center – Remote instruction for language learning is difficult; having enough space for one-to-one tutoring to occur all day is important; students need private spaces to be able to have confidential conversations – so they feel free to make mistakes, which is a part of the language learning process, while they learn. Shifting services to immigrants, and only immigrants, being located in an auxiliary space sends the wrong message to immigrants – we want them to feel welcome here in our community of Library patrons.

4. Public Comment

1. How many users?
 - i. Survival Center – pre-COVID: we served 6,000 people per year in about 42,000 visits per year; post-COVID: more than 7,000 people per year is estimated.
 - ii. Literacy Project – 50-60 students per year | Amherst – classes are intentionally small.
 - iii. Jones ESL Center – approximately 200 students per year are served; and four Conversation Circles, each with ten people, are occurring 52 weeks per year.
2. How do you advertise?
 - i. Survival Center – word of mouth; speaking engagements; bookmarks being distributed by the Jones Library.
 - ii. Literacy Project – word of mouth; fliers distributed at schools; collaborations with the Survival Center. The collaboration with the Library is very valuable.
 - iii. Jones ESL Center – word of mouth; referrals from other agencies.

5. Adjournment at 5:31pm