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### Rallying for the State Library Agency in Minnesota

by Bill Asp

Many in the Minnesota library community were shocked to learn on June 4 that six of nine staff working in library development, including Office of Library Development and Services (LDS) Director Joyce Swonger, had received lay-off notices effective June 28. Minnesota has had a state library agency since 1899, and while it was smaller than state library agencies in many other states it had consistently provided essential services to strengthen library services in Minnesota.

The June cuts followed cuts in March, when the state library agency lost 4.5 FTE positions. At that time, library supporters argued that the March layoffs, resulting from Governor Ventura's cuts in state agency budgets, were disproportionate to cuts in other parts of the Department of Children, Families and Learning (CFL), the parent agency.

With the devastating cuts in June, the Minnesota library community immediately began to rally in support of the state library agency. Again, it appeared that cuts to the state library agency were disproportionate. With the lay-off of the agency director, how could we still have a state library agency? Since the three remaining staff had been told that they would report to the Education Finance Manager, how could it be said that Minnesota had a state library agency? How could the three remaining staff carry out all of the statutory requirements in Minnesota law, including provision of consultant assistance and administration of grant programs? Would Minnesota remain eligible for Federal LSTA funds?

At the annual Minnesota Library Association and Minnesota Educational Media Organization Legislative Forum on June 6 and 7, the first morning was devoted to strategizing in support of the Office of Library Development and Services. Participants identified essential state library agency functions that needed to be preserved, including statewide leadership, information and consultant assistance, the collection of materials loaned statewide, administration of state funded grant programs, eligibility for Federal LSTA funds, and contracts for statewide resource sharing and state government libraries automation systems. In addition, participants identified a number of state library agency projects and activities under way that now appeared to be jeopardized by the loss of staff.

The Minnesota Library Leadership Coalition was created at the Legislative Forum to follow up with specific action. Even before the Forum ended, there had been news stories in a number of papers and coverage on public radio. Members of the library community contacted legislators and Minnesotans in Congress to voice their concerns.

Adding frustration to the efforts were statements from Commissioner of Children, Families

and Learning Christine Jax that seemed to be uninformed or deliberately misleading. The Commissioner said that the state library agency had not been eliminated. She said that staffing had been reduced from 23 to 14, but did not mention that 11 were at the Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped in Faribault, MN, providing an important service but not providing library development services.

Many concerned persons, including local elected officials, library trustees, librarians, and library supporters communicated their concerns to Commissioner Jax with specific questions. The most basic question was how the agency intended to fulfill the state statutory requirements for functions to be performed by the state library agency. That question was consistently ignored. Most who contacted the Commissioner seem to have received a standard reply expressing regret at the lay-offs and assuring that services would continue but not answering the questions raised.

Minnesota's plight attracted national attention. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science Chair Martha Gould and Vice Chair Joan Ridder Challinor wrote a strong letter to Commissioner Jax stating that her actions constituted "for all intents and purposes" elimination of the state library agency. They cited NCLIS enabling legislation to advise Federal, state and local agencies on library and information services and offered to meet with the Commissioner. ALA Council, at the Annual Conference in Atlanta, passed a resolution reaffirming the essential roles of state library agencies and expressed alarm and concern about the actions in Minnesota. The Federal Institute for Museum and Library Services sent a letter to the Commissioner asking how CFL would carry out its function and demonstrate its eligibility for funding under LSTA.

The Minnesota House Education Committee, in a June 25 hearing, heard testimony on the impact of the CFL cuts on the state library agency as well as on the closing of two regional Indian Education offices. The Committee had invited persons from CFL to come to testify, but no one came. This troubled a number of Committee members who spoke in support of the Indian Education offices and the state library agency. They acknowledged, however, that there was little they could do now since the Legislature would not be in session again until January 2003.

When it became apparent that the Commissioner would not rescind the six layoffs, the strategy of the library community shifted to hanging on to what was left and seeking a Legislative solution in 2003. Subgroups of the Coalition have met with Commissioner Jax and Assistant Commissioner Ken Hasledalen to discuss disposition of the library collection and development of Minnesota's five-year LSTA plan. Coalition members clearly recognize that the library community cannot "bail out" CFL; that volunteers cannot and will not perform the functions of a state library agency. It will take action by the 2003 Legislature, and funding, to restore a state library agency in Minnesota with the capacity to meet the requirements in state law. In this election year, advocates will need to discuss the importance of the state library agency with candidates as well as incumbents.

In recent weeks the three remaining LDS staff have been reassigned to report to Assistant Commissioner for Management Services Ken Hasledalen, and Commissioner Jax has named Hasledalen to be chief officer of the Minnesota state library agency. Work has begun on preparation of the LSTA five-year plan, with contracted planners leading the effort. Two staff members from IMLS met with CFL leaders over a two-day period.

For some time there had been discussion of whether the state library agency should move from CFL to another state agency, and a major study of this was completed in 2001. Follow-up work on that study continues, and the process may lead to a legislative proposal. The Minnesota library community recognizes that passage and funding will be a challenge at a time when revenue shortfalls continue to plague the state and when other state services and programs have been cut and will be seeking restoration. Maintaining unity in a library community that has not always achieved that in the past will be a challenge too. At the same time, people in the library community realize all that we have lost and recognize that we need a strong and adequately funded state library agency.

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