

October 6, 2020

Dear Wicomico County Council,

Please accept this letter as my formal resignation from my position as Executive Director of Wicomico Public Libraries. There were three key factors that led to my decision to leave my position and the poor relationship between the county government and the library topped the list.

“Unaddressed, the ruptures and diagonal cracks will not fix themselves. The toxins will not go away but, rather, will spread, leach, and mutate, as they already have. When people live in an old house, they come to adjust to the idiosyncrasies and outright dangers skulking in an old structure. They put buckets under a wet ceiling, prop up groaning floors, learn to step over that rotting wood tread in the staircase. The awkward becomes acceptable, and the unacceptable becomes merely inconvenient. Live with it long enough, and the unthinkable becomes normal. Exposed over the generations, we learn to believe that the incomprehensible is the way that life is supposed to be.” *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* by Isabel Wilkerson

In Isabel Wilkerson’s latest book, she compares the developed world to homeowners who have inherited a home that appears to be beautiful on the outside but is actually falling apart. She goes on to say that even though the homeowner may not have created the problem, it does absolve them from addressing the problem.

During my year and ten months in this position, I have observed the result of years of lack of support for the public library create an institution that is literally crumbling before our eyes. Adding complexity to my tenure as library director are my race and gender.

I have had personal interactions with some, but not all, of our County Council members. For the purpose of this letter, I will generalize when speaking about my interactions with the Council. The interactions I have had with Council members are overwhelmingly negative and have been tarnished by inappropriate comments that demonstrate a lack of empathy and understanding of the importance of providing library services to marginalized communities. I would be remiss if I did not state these facts plainly and encourage the Council to keep in mind that you do not only serve at the pleasure of a select group of citizens of the County, but you are tasked with representing the entire County and your decision making should reflect this.

My first recommendation to the County Council would be to immediately review the County Charter. I have grave concerns about how much power the local government has over the public library and I consider this to be a threat to democracy. When the government is empowered to control the information that is made available to citizens there is a real danger that the end result will be censorship. Concerned Council members have questioned my decision making on everything from what library programs are offered to what grant funding we are accepting. This is unacceptable and, in my opinion, is an example of the government becoming too involved in the day to day business of the public library which is governed by a Board of Trustees. Similarly a concerned Council member questioned our process for selecting Board members without knowing that the person they recommended to the Board had made homophobic remarks to the library director. The County government needs to step aside and let the library director run the library.

My second recommendation would be for the County Council to make a concentrated effort at engaging the library director in a positive relationship. Due to the negative outcomes of the majority of my interactions with the County Council, I engage with the government with a healthy dose of suspicion. For example, a Council member asked for the library's budget, and specifically questioned how the library spent the program budget, which I promptly furnished. At the very next Council meeting, citizens came to the Council to request to defund the library even though the program they were protesting did not involve the use of library funds since a community volunteer offered to do a story time for the library at no charge during Pride Month. Furthermore, in a follow up email from a member of this body, it was insinuated that I misled Council regarding the use of library funds. I was questioned about why my professional membership dues were not disclosed as part of the library's budget. My professional membership dues are not paid by the library and I was greatly offended that an email message from a member of Council would make such an accusation. My honesty and transparency with the County Council has not been appreciated and therefore I engage as little as possible with this body.

Third, the County Council is also responsible for being transparent with the people who have elected you and also with the library director. I have had private conversations with more than one member of this body and felt by the end of the conversation we had come to a mutual understanding. The next thing I know, these same Council members made public remarks that made it appear that somehow I was going against their wishes or that the library should be penalized for my leadership. I would have much preferred to have ended those private

conversations agreeing to disagree. Instead I felt blindsided by mixed messaging from the Council.

Fourth, the government should not be threatening the library's leadership. I had a private phone call with a member of this body who vowed to defund the library if we proceeded with a library program. Of course this information was not made public until now. This is such an egregious abuse of power that the only thing I can think to say about this incident is to not do this again. It is irresponsible and inappropriate for Council to make emotional decisions based on personal beliefs.

My fifth and last recommendation is for Council to understand that libraries are for everyone who lives in the County, not just for those who complain. I highly recommend the council and other government officials engage in regular and ongoing equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) training. I would also recommend you then implement policies that put into practice what you learn as the result of EDI training. As the library's first Black director, I have been appalled by the ignorance surrounding these topics by our elected officials. There is a complete lack of awareness, from my perspective, of the impacts of this County's racial past on current race relations. I recall telling this group about a complaint received during Black History Month when we had a display of books up at the entrance of one of our branches. When I shared the story of how a customer told the branch manager that she was tired of seeing all of the black faces on our books, this body wrote this customer off as an exception, not the rule. To be clear, if one person said it, there are many more thinking it. I'm sure the Council is aware of the controversy surrounding Pride Month programs at the library, including a proposed Drag Queen Story Time. In this case, misinformation about the LGBTQ+ community created a hostile environment for not only library partners but also library staff. The rhetoric was homophobic and demonstrated a clear need for why programs that all community members are welcome to attend are needed to help residents develop a better understanding of those who are different from them. There is a lack of understanding of and engagement with marginalized populations and I am not aware of efforts by the Council to address this. I have an obligation to provide equitable library services that meet the needs of all community members. Members of Council have made remarks that I would consider homophobic and racist, especially as it concerns library programs. You don't have to agree with your constituents' personal beliefs, but you should at least respect them.

The library's lack of funding from the County continues to be problematic. This issue pre-dates me by at least two other library directors. Too often I have heard members of this body and in the

community express concern about how much is spent funding the public library and if we are using those funds responsibly. In FY 21, the library was allotted \$1,469,295 (this does not include \$50,000 which is the County's match toward the cost of a new Bookmobile). This figure represents less than one percent (0.009%) of the County's general fund revenue estimates for 2021.

In FY 09, the library received \$1,648,477 from the County, which is \$179,182 more than what we currently receive. Over the course of time library expenses have continued to increase and we continue to do more with less by expending a lot of staff energy applying for grants and requesting private partnership support.

Put another way, at \$27.11 spent per capita on library services in Wicomico County, we are only ahead of Allegany County at \$26.60 per capita as far as public library spending in Maryland goes. In Allegany County's defense, their population is estimated at 72,130 residents and they had a major employer leave the area which undoubtedly impacts their tax revenue. In relation to other Eastern Shore public libraries, we invest the least in our library system when looking at the numbers per capita.

Which brings me to our facilities and the irony of Isabel Wilkerson's analogy of a crumbling building to racism. In 2019, the library celebrated 150 years of service to the community. Our Downtown Branch, a former armory, has existed since 1963 with the last major renovation in 1980. Is there historical value to this building that makes us continue to struggle with roaches, old electrical panels that were recently replaced due to safety concerns, an elevator that is too small, and the continuous upkeep that is required of a building that has outlived its useful life? At this very moment our fire alarm panels require replacement. How is this acceptable? How is this safe?

The Centre Branch is a donated space courtesy of the Centre at Salisbury. There are other models, notably in Anne Arundel County, of what a retail space library located in a mall could be. We have settled on a space that is too small and now with COVID, operational shifts have forced library staff to repurpose the meeting room as work space.

The Pittsville Branch was supposed to be an experiment. For fifteen years, the library has existed in a trailer. Without my input or consent, Mr. Culver insisted on relocating the library to an auto body shop. Why make the investment without meeting the needs of citizens? I'm sure the people of Pittsville would have appreciated participating in focus groups led by a qualified library

facilities consultant to ensure the best use of state and County funds could be made in designing a new building.

A simple application to the library capital grant could provide upwards of 86% in grant money toward the cost of a new library. The County would only need to provide a 14% match and I previously shared this information publicly, pre COVID, during a previous County Council meeting.

It is time for the County to make a sustainable investment in the public library. Too often I feel I have pleaded and begged for support when it should have been there all along.

To conclude, a colleague once told me that a public library cannot be successful without the support of the government. I believe this is true—it is not realistic to expect the library to fundraise for operational costs and for new facilities all on our own. The public library staff, who have won both the 2019 and 2020 Citizens for Maryland Libraries Outstanding Employee Awards, deserve a county government that looks out for them and supports them.

I am proud of what has been accomplished in the year and ten months I have been in this role. I feel *most* library staff show up every day and do the best they can with very limited resources.

- Implemented a strategic plan for the library (<http://www.wicomicolibraries.org/strategic-plan-2020-2023>)
- Celebrated the 150th Anniversary of the library (a fundraising event for the library)
- Received Board approval for a program policy for the library (<http://www.wicomicolibraries.org/public-program-policy>)
- Worked with Senator Carozza and Delegate Anderton to obtain \$100,000 in funding for a new Bookmobile
- Prioritized library staff getting out into the community and meeting the community where they are

I am less proud of County government that has at various times bullied and attempted to intimidate me as I worked to serve at the pleasure of the citizens of Wicomico County.

Perhaps if the same energy were expended into working together to serve the people of Wicomico County, the Council would have been able to fulfill their obligation to the people and

fill the County Executive position and make the county a better and more functional place for all current and future residents.

Sincerely,

Ashley Teagle