



STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Communications Report

Date: June 23, 2025

To: Toronto Public Library Board

From: City Librarian

It is recommended that the Toronto Public Library Board:

1. receives Communication (a), a public letter of appreciation to Vickery Bowles, from Marcellus Turner, former CEO and Chief Librarian at the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, for information.
2. receives Communication (b), from the City Clerk's Office, City of Toronto to the Toronto Public Library Board, dated June 12, 2025, advising that City Council adopted [Item EX23.5](#) as amended, and requests that City divisions continue to advance the goals and actions of SafeTO: Toronto's 10-year Community Safety and Well-Being Plan, for information.
3. receives Communication (c), a letter from the Ontario Library Workers for Supervised Consumption Sites to the Toronto Public Library Board, dated June 17, 2025, for information.

SIGNATURE

Vickery Bowles
City Librarian

CHARLOTTE MECKLENBURG

LIBRARY

a.

Vickery,

I've always admired your shoes.

As City Librarian for the outstandingly wonderful Toronto Public Library, you have led, challenged, supported, and advocated for libraries and the work that matters to our communities. Thank you for agreeing to take this work on. It was worth it.

I know that with the title came many changes and challenges but oh so many more opportunities and gifts. Please know that the leadership space you assumed and filled for TPL and Canadian libraries was a space that those of us in the United States needed to see as well. We needed to see leadership supporting the tenets and principles of librarianship, the rights of our users, and most importantly for our staff. In each of these, you have been ever the consummate librarian and advocate.

You showed us what grace and strength in leadership looks and feels like and for that, I am appreciative. Years ago, when we were closer neighbors (then I was leading The Seattle Public Library), you were by far, the best neighbor a library could have. I reached out to you on several occasions for advice, insight and sometimes, just an ear when we faced some of the challenges that you'd already moved through. Never one to direct or demand, you simply shared. You shared your experiences, your thoughts, and your missteps (or at least things you would have done differently). Sharing meant everything.

Those of us in the library world observed, learned, and benefitted from your love of and for libraries and for our public's right to have access to information. Your years at the helm of Toronto Public Library and the strides you and your team made offering great programming focused on cultural and civic engagement and diversity, equity and inclusion proved to us that our work matters. Those years also proved that time moves much too fast when great leaders are doing great work.

Thank you again for all you've done for us. It is not lost on a single one of us how much you've done for libraries, and we are all the better for it.

As for your shoes, not only are they big shoes that your successor will have to fill but they are also clean-soled with laces neatly tied. More importantly though, they leave a deep imprint for the next person to follow. Thank you for never treading lightly.

Thanks,



MT

Former CEO and Chief Librarian
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

PS – Thank you also for running the best pony-express ever! B-)

City Clerk's Office

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Ref.: 25-EX23.5**

(Sent by Email)

June 12, 2025

TORONTO PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD:arentulla@tpl.ca
pwilliamson@tpl.ca**Subject: Executive Committee Item 23.5
2025 Update on SafeTO Implementation (Ward All)**

City Council on May 21 and 22, 2025, adopted [Item EX23.5](#) as amended and, in so doing, has forwarded the Item to the Toronto Police Service Board, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation board of directors, the Toronto Public Library Board, the Toronto Transit Commission board, the Toronto District School Board, the Toronto Catholic District School Board, Conseil scolaire Viamonde and Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir.

Yours truly,



for City Clerk

S. Przedziecki/mm

Attachment

Sent to: Toronto Police Service Board
Toronto Community Housing Corporation Board of Directors
Toronto Public Library Board
Toronto Transit Commission Board
Toronto District School Board
Toronto Catholic District School Board
Conseil scolaire Viamonde
Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir

c. City Manager

Toronto Public Library Board
789 Yonge Street
Toronto, Ontario M4W 2G8

June 17, 2025

Dear Toronto Public Library Board,

My name is Kendra Cowley. I am a former TPL Librarian and Local 4948 Area Vice Chair (January 2021- May 2025). I am writing to you on behalf of Library Workers for Supervised Consumption Sites (LW4SCS), a growing collective of library workers and students across Ontario. LW4SCS formed in response to Bill 223, The Safer Streets, Stronger Communities Act, which mandates the closure of Supervised Consumption Sites, including 5 in Toronto.

LW4SCS connects library workers across sectors and municipalities who are experiencing the effects of the opioid crisis in our communities. It does not matter whether the library is large, small, urban or rural, we are all impacted.

Every day, library workers witness how the province has abandoned our most vulnerable neighbours. Libraries are safe havens for unhoused patrons as public space and resources are increasingly diminished. The struggle is palpable in our libraries, leading library workers to take on roles that we aren't properly trained, resourced, or compensated for. Many of us do this work willingly because we care deeply about our patrons.

A [2024 CBC News report](#) highlighted the dramatic increase in drug poisonings in public libraries across Canada, including a **529% increase in suspected poisonings at the Toronto Public Library (TPL) between 2022 and 2023**. According to TPL and Local 4948's Joint Health and Safety Committee, **in 2024, there were 109 reported drug poisonings at TPL, nearly 1 drug poisoning every 3 days**. This number is surely an underrepresentation, as it only captures incidents recognized, responded to, and reported by staff. Additionally, it assumes each incident is only one drug poisoning. Personally, I responded to two simultaneous poisonings my first day at Northern District, represented as a single incident in TPL statistics. This number will increase as public drug use expands in our spaces due to the closures of SCS.

Recently, [LW4SCS conducted an online survey](#) gauging Ontario library workers' knowledge and confidence in overdose response. Approx. 133 library workers responded, including 44 TPL workers. Based on the survey results, **48% of the respondents from TPL have responded to a suspected drug poisoning at work**, but only 50% of those respondents felt confident in how they handled it. Significantly, 64% of the respondents from TPL do not feel confident that they can recognize the signs of an overdose at all.

Increased drug use in our spaces due to closures of SCS means increased exposure to sharps and bio-hazardous materials for patrons and library staff, creating real health and safety concerns. However, we will not let our right to a safe workplace be mobilized to demonize

people who use drugs and deprive them of their right to healthcare and public services. The network of harm reduction services in Ontario provides crucial care and resources, including to library workers on the front lines of the drug toxicity crisis. When SCSs and harm reduction services are eliminated, library staff not only have fewer ways of providing meaningful support, but will be forced to provide medical care we are ill-equipped to handle.

Our experience as public sector workers allows us to identify that these challenges don't stem from people who use drugs, but a host of band-aid solutions and lack of properly funded and comprehensive social support by our government and employers. We cannot do more with less. When institutions that provide valuable access to harm reduction, a core element of healthcare, come under threat, the impact reverberates in our libraries.

We do not want to see further policing and criminalization taking place in our libraries as a response to increases in public drug use either. Policing people in struggle is not a genuine response to a toxic drug supply crisis; it fails to address the real, underlying causes and further pushes vulnerable patrons out of public spaces.

Now more than ever, we need public institutions like TPL to be bold and demonstrate that the lives of people who use drugs matter. This is not a political stance. The library should be one of many institutions working to ensure that people have what they need to live full, safe, and healthy lives in our city, including SCS.

What we are asking:

- 1. TPL management to communicate to frontline staff and the public how it is responding to SCS closures and the expanding opioid death crisis.**
 - Frontline staff are scared for their patrons and nervous about their ability to respond to the increased need for overdose response in our branches. We have a right to know how our employer plans to respond to this emerging need.
- 2. TPL to engage frontline workers on what they need to be better supported responding to this crisis.**
 - We know what we need. Ask us.
 - i. We are grateful for Library Safety Specialists. TPL has 100+ branches. We need more.
 - ii. A voluntary one hour training is a good start. But we cannot train ourselves out of this crisis.
 - iii. Being understaffed has a profound impact on our ability to respond to, and take the time to recover after, responding to a drug poisoning.
- 3. TPL to publicly advocate for harm reduction services with the city and province.**
 - We know that libraries cannot do this alone. We are not a public health agency. However, as part of the web of public services in Toronto, TPL must advocate for access to services that our patrons need. Saving lives is not a political question. Public libraries have a responsibility to speak up at this moment and leverage

their position in support of our most vulnerable patrons and the staff committed to serving them.

Thank you for your time and attention. We have included a [resource document](#) and the [open letter to Doug Ford](#) should you want more information.

We would love an opportunity to further discuss SCS closures and the impact on TPL staff and workers with the TPL Board.

Kendra Cowley and LW4SCS
libraryworkers4scs@gmail.com

