



One for the Books: a Report on the Library System – May 19, 2005

SUMMARY

In response to citizen complaints, the Grand Jury performed an investigation of the Mendocino County Public Library.

BACKGROUND

The Mendocino County Library has been at the center of conflict and controversy, much of it public, for several years. Some of this is the result of difficult budget decisions, but a number of other problems have arisen. Recent changes in the administration of the Library may have opened the way for some improvements in working conditions, but there remain important questions about the way in which the troubles in the Library were handled.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury visited the Library and conducted interviews of current and past Library personnel as well as other county government officials. Additionally the Grand Jury interviewed private citizens well informed on conditions in the Library system. We reviewed documents and Internet materials.

FINDINGS

1. The Library Director's and Administrative Assistant's offices are located in the Ukiah Branch.
2. Strong, supportive and creative volunteer groups such as the Friends of the Library have provided vital services and financial support throughout the Mendocino County Library system.
3. The Libraries have functioned remarkably well as a result of the dedication of many hard-working employees.
4. In comparison to similar California counties, Mendocino County has a very high proportion of County residents who hold library cards.
5. Under recent administration, employee morale, particularly in the Ukiah branch, has been a serious on-going problem.
6. The Bookmobile was out of service during much of 2004, for lack of a qualified driver.
7. Over the last five years, a substantial number of grievances have been filed with the County and the Union by Library employees.
8. There was a significant failure to follow through on a negotiated mediation agreement within the Library Department, involving library personnel and administration, a representative of the Human Resources Department, and a representative from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).
9. There have been inadequate audit functions within the County Library to account for cash receivables.

10. The Board of Supervisors (BOS) failed to complete the mandated annual performance review of Library administration.
11. Collectively and individually, members of the BOS received many written and oral complaints about conditions in the Library.
12. The BOS failed to respond to a survey of Library personnel that disclosed serious management problems in the department.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Grand Jury recommends that consideration be given to the appropriate location of the offices of the Library Director and Administrative Assistant. (Finding 1)
2. The Grand Jury recommends that cash receivables be handled in dual custody (two individuals working together to handle, verify and record cash transactions), thus providing an audit trail, and that transportation of funds be assigned to bonded employees. (Finding 9)
3. The Grand Jury recommends that the Library Administration make every effort to ensure that the Bookmobile, a treasured resource for County residents in the outlying areas, provides continuous service to County residents. (Finding 6)
4. The Grand Jury recommends that the BOS create a policy and procedure to ensure that grievances and mediation agreements between employees and/or County management are tracked to guarantee compliance and resolution. (Findings 5, 7, 8, 12)

COMMENT

All but one of the recommendations above address practices to be followed within the library. The Grand Jury chose to write only one recommendation that responded to the broader and more important issue of supervision.

The troubles in the Mendocino County Library system were in part the result of poor management within the department, but the supervisory system within the County government failed utterly to respond to warning signs that were plain from the beginning. The Department of Human Resources, the Chief Administrative Officer and the BOS were unable to intervene in any effective manner. These officials are all heavily burdened with multiple responsibilities, but their inaction had consequences for the County, for its employees, and for the patrons of the Library, that were real, considerable, and expensive.

The buck stops with the BOS, as they would be the first to admit. The supervision of department administrators requires both time and specific training, both in short supply for our Supervisors. The creation in March 2005 of the position of the Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer is being touted as a fix for the problem of evaluation and performance review of department heads, as well as general oversight of department functioning. The Grand Jury joins the citizens of Mendocino County in hoping that this will be the case.

Our libraries are a grievously under-funded enterprise. When it comes to bang for the buck, money invested in the Library system yields extraordinary returns that are both intangible and material. This free service to County residents enriches the lives of all who use the system, particularly those of school age. At a time when other services must be cut back, additional funding for the library could help to address some of the pervasive inequities in our society.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

The Mendocino County Board of Supervisors

RESPONSE REQUESTED

Director, Mendocino County Library
Director, Department of Human Resources
Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer
Director, Mendocino County Office Local 707, SEIU