

Pay Equity, Support Staff, and ALA

By Gene Kinnaly

A good friend of mine is a library assistant in the cataloging department of a small college in New York State. She has 15 years of experience in cataloging, performing all the original cataloging completed at her library. She has a Master's in Germanic studies from Cornell University, is fluent in German, has a reading knowledge of Russian and French, and has extensive experience and training in information technology. But with all her education, experience, subject and language expertise, and daily responsibilities, and after a significant raise last year, her annual salary is not quite \$22,000.

She's not alone. In libraries across the country, library workers of all types are underpaid. It's a situation that has existed for decades, and it's not getting any better. There have been studies and salary surveys and articles and speeches, but no one has acted - forcefully and inclusively - to change the status quo ... until now.

The Issue

Simply put, the issue is pay equity. On their website, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) offers this definition: "Pay equity, also called comparable worth or fair pay, is a remedy for one type of wage discrimination against women and people of color. It tackles the type of discrimination that occurs when jobs filled predominately by women and/or people of color are paid less than other jobs filled primarily by men that require similar levels of skills, effort, responsibility, and working conditions."

Library jobs are jobs predominately filled by women. That simple fact alone has had a negative impact on wages. According to the 2000 Census, women who worked full-time, year-round earned just 73% of what men earned who also worked full-time, year-round. Despite local and national legislation, greater numbers of women in the workplace, higher educational accomplishments for women, and more opportunities to enter higher-paying, non-traditional jobs, the gap between the wages earned by men and women persists.

Library director salaries are low; librarian salaries are low; and in general, library support staff salaries are ridiculously low. As the largest group of library workers (approximately two-thirds of the library workforce) and as the lowest-paid group of library workers, library support staff feel the impact of the wage gap more acutely than any other segment of the library community.

Clearly, pay equity is an issue affecting all library workers, but support staff suffer an additional burden by often being hit with a double whammy of pay *inequity*. Their skills, experience, education, and responsibilities are rarely compensated for at the same level as those employed in non-library occupations requiring similar qualifications. And within the library, support staff have increasingly assumed "professional" responsibilities with

little or no adjustment in salary. Both external and internal pay equity are issues of concern for support staff.

The Task Force

During his presidential campaign, ALA President-Elect Maurice J. (Mitch) Freedman stated many times that he would “use the power of the ALA presidency to fight for pay equity and better salaries for all library workers.” Soon after his election, Freedman began the process of assembling a task force to address this campaign promise, and his insistence in including support staff in this endeavor shows his commitment to improving salaries for **all** library workers.

The first meeting of the ALA Better Salaries & Pay Equity Task Force took place November 9-10, 2001, in White Plains, New York. The Task Force is chaired by Patricia Glass Schuman, former ALA President and President of Neal-Schuman Publishers. The membership is inclusive of all levels of library workers from support staff to library directors, and includes other key players in the library community such as library board trustees and library school professors.

The meeting began with an intense brainstorming session, followed by breakout sessions on specific topics, and the most important outcome of these small group discussions was the formation of several working groups. Each working group is coordinated by a member of the Task Force, and the membership of each working group includes Task Force members and other individuals interested in assisting the work of the Task Force. The working groups are open to all interested ALA members willing to help the Task Force (see box).

An open meeting was held at ALA Midwinter in New Orleans, jointly sponsored by the Status of Librarians Task Force and the Better Salaries and Pay Equity Task Force, to discuss the issues of status and salaries. The room was packed, emotion was high, and the intense interest and concern among those present was obvious. Audience members were encouraged to speak up during the open microphone segment of the meeting, and they did so enthusiastically, including several support staffers.

Support Staff

That library support staff are underpaid is hardly a revelation. Compensation has always been high on the list of concerns for support staff. In 1996-97, a survey of support staff was conducted by the Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT). Many concerns were identified, and task forces were established to address the top three concerns: career ladders, continuing education, and compensation. The final report of the Compensation Task Force can be found on the LSSIRT home page - <http://www.ala.org/ssirt/compensa.pdf> - and recommendation #4 states that “ALA include support staff in any and all considerations and recommendations concerning library salary levels.”

A deliberate and clear process of education is a key component in the effort to raise awareness of, and ultimately receive fair compensation for, the many skills and responsibilities of today's library support staff. Task Force member Margaret Myers states: "As with librarians, it is necessary to explain to the public and officials who have control over job classifications and salaries what support staff do and how their roles have changed and grown."

It is in everyone's best interests that support staff are included in all considerations of pay equity and related matters. There's a saying that goes "a rising tide lifts all boats." If people at the lower end of the pay scale have improved situations, everyone will; if support staff make strides in achieving pay equity, all library workers will benefit.

"The fate of all library workers is intertwined," according to Pat Schuman. "That's why we are delighted that support staff leaders are working closely with the Task Force and its working groups. The issues they have already raised are many – and valid ones – and we ignore them at the peril of our libraries and our profession."

Coming Attractions

It is the belief of every Task Force member that the Task Force must achieve tangible results. A major product will be the development of a pay equity toolkit. This toolkit will include fast facts & key messages, case studies, pay equity resources, handouts, salary negotiation strategies, and more.

Existing legislation and other initiatives are being examined. Task Force member Kathleen de la Pena McCook, professor at the University of South Florida's School of Library and Information Science, says "I am hoping we will make the "Living Wage" an aspect of the Task Force work. Each community should determine the Living Wage and fight to be sure (at a minimum) that all employees are paid no lower."

At the Midwinter Meeting in New Orleans, ALA Council approved the creation of a separate allied professional association, and one of the primary tasks of this new association will be to advocate for better salaries for library workers. The Task Force strongly supported this action, convinced that the new association will have greater freedom than ALA to have a positive and lasting impact on library salaries.

Programs at the national and state level are being planned. At ALA Annual 2002 in Atlanta this coming June, one of the LSSIRT programs will be a panel discussion on pay equity for support staff entitled: *The Role of ALA in Supporting Library Workers' Salaries*. It is a two-hour session featuring 15-minute presentations by each of the four panelists and a one-hour question-and-answer & discussion session. The four panelists are: Mitch Freedman, Gene Kinnaly, Donna Mandel, and Patricia Glass Schuman. The panel discussion will take place on the afternoon of Saturday, June 15, 2002. More information about this session will be made available as we get closer to the Annual Conference.

The work of the Better Salaries and Pay Equity Task Force will continue through to the end of ALA Annual in 2003. It is hoped that library workers will benefit from this work far beyond 2003.

What you can do

Visit the Task Force home page - <http://www.mjfreedman.org/tfhome.html> - to keep abreast of the latest work of the task force. Take advantage of the feedback form to send your comments and suggestions directly to Mitch Freedman and the Task Force. Tell your story, good or bad, so that others may benefit.

Look over the Task Force working groups. These groups are coordinated by Task Force members and composed of librarians and support staff interested in specific aspects of the Task Force's work. Consider joining, or at least sharing your expertise via email.

Be aware of pay equity and related issues, and the impact the wage gap has had on library workers over the years. Seek out and share additional information on this issue. Become active in your state or regional library association, and urge those groups to also address the pay equity concerns of their members.

Explore the possibility of joining ALA. With the Support Staff Membership Initiative - <http://www.ala.org/membership/sstaff.html> - ALA membership has never been this affordable for library support staff. Speak up and let others benefit from your views and experiences.

The Future Is Now

My New York cataloging friend has gone back to school. She expects to get her MLS later this year. She's working full-time and attending school full-time, and in the process, she's getting deeper into debt through her student loans.

Having an MLS won't mean a thing with her current employer — her current position doesn't require an MLS, and there aren't any librarian positions open. And if one opens and my friend gets the position, the increase in her pay won't come close to compensating her for all the knowledge and skills and experience she has. Why is she doing this? She feels the need to do something, to take action, to do what she can to improve her skills and to add to her already-impressive academic credentials, in the **hope** that it will pay off in the end.

Library workers should have more than hope. They deserve more than hope. They deserve to be compensated fairly for all they do, for how well they do it, and for the value they add to one of this country's greatest institutions – the library.