

INTRODUCTION:

As part of its strategic planning process, the Somerville Public Library invited staff to complete a six-question survey focused on their work experiences and ideas for the Library's future. In October 2025, **20 Library staff members** responded, offering thoughtful reflections on their roles, the Library's strengths and challenges, and opportunities to improve programs, services, and spaces. Collectively, their input provides valuable frontline insight into how the Library can better support staff while continuing to meet evolving community needs.

Throughout this report, **numbers shown in parentheses** are used to **indicate when staff members mentioned an idea, theme, or comment more than once**. Parenthetical counts are included only for repeated ideas and are intended to highlight areas of shared experience or recurring concern rather than to quantify priorities or rank ideas.

1. What are the first three words that come to mind when you think of your job at the Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Staff shared a wide range of descriptors reflecting both the **rewarding nature** of library work and the **intensity of day-to-day operations**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Community (x6)
- Fun (x4)
- Important (x3)
- Rewarding (x3)
- Collaborative (x2)
- Enjoyable (x2)
- Fulfilling (x2)
- Overwhelming (x2)
- Resources (x2)
- Service (x2)



Additional descriptors included **busy**, **challenging**, **meaningful**, **stressful**, **under-resourced**, and **welcoming**.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff view their work as **purpose-driven and community-centered**, while also acknowledging the emotional and operational demands of the job.

2. What do you like the BEST about working at this Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Responses overwhelmingly emphasized **people**, including patrons, coworkers, and the Somerville community.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Relationships with patrons and community members. (x12)
- Supportive, mission-driven colleagues. (x10)
- Helping people access information and services. (x7)
- Serving a diverse and creative community. (x4)
- Variety and daily unpredictability. (x3)
- Community-building across departments. (x2)

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff derive the most satisfaction from **direct public service, collaboration, and relationship-building**, reinforcing the Library's role as a community connector.

3. What do you like the LEAST about working at this Library?

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Concerns centered on **staffing capacity, safety, facility conditions, and external support**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Understaffing and slow hiring processes. (x5)
- Safety concerns and difficult patron interactions. (x4)
- Lack of City support or responsiveness. (x3)
- Facility deterioration and cleanliness issues. (x2)
- Inconsistent procedures or enforcement. (x2)
- Insufficient staff-only spaces. (x2)
- Limited off-desk time at West Branch. (x2)

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff feel deeply invested in their work but report feeling **overextended**, with staffing and safety issues directly affecting morale and service delivery.

4. Name one change—the single most important change—you think we should make to the Library's interior or exterior space.

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Staff identified **infrastructure reliability, space configuration, and basic building conditions** as top priorities. Many comments were branch-specific.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- **Central Library:**
 - Ensure elevators are reliable or replaced. (x4)
 - Fix temperature regulation and the HVAC system. (x3)

- Better organization and modernization of storage and back-of-house areas. (x2)
- Expand and improve teen and children's spaces. (x2)
- Improve staff kitchen and staff-only spaces. (x2)
- Add more public restrooms.
- Deep cleaning and general maintenance.
- Improve patrons' entry experience, lighting, and accessibility.
- **East Branch:**
 - Expand and renovate the building overall. (x2)
 - Add space dedicated to programming.
 - Create an off-desk staff space separate from the break room.
 - Reconfigure shelving and remove outdated infrastructure to gain space.
 - Reduce the HVAC noise and improve air quality.
- **West Branch:**
 - Add a computer and an additional staffing point (e.g., reference desk) near the public computers.
 - Add a staff bathroom separate from the eating area.
 - Install an alarm at the back entrance for staff safety.
 - Reduce blind spots and improve sightlines for staff safety.
 - Replace worn or unsanitary seating near public computers.
- **System-Wide or Unspecified:**
 - Make better use of existing space by improving organization and modernizing. (x3)
 - Increase the number of quiet spaces, study rooms, and phone call areas. (x2)
 - Improve overall cleanliness and maintenance. (x2)

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff consistently emphasized **functionality, safety, comfort,** and **accessibility** over aesthetic improvements. Branch-specific needs vary, but there is shared concern that aging infrastructure limits both staff effectiveness and patrons' experiences.

5. Please share up to three ideas for new Library programs, materials, resources, or services that you believe the community would find valuable/interesting.

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Staff proposed a wide-ranging set of ideas focused on **learning, outreach, equity, and workforce capacity.**

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Technology and digital literacy classes. (x6)
- Makerspace expansion with dedicated staffing. (x5)
- Additional staff, including social workers and outreach roles. (x4)
- Expanded outreach and off-site services. (x4)

- Career and job readiness programs. (x3)
- Offer programs in multiple languages. (x3)
- Teen-focused programs and advisory groups. (x3)
- Library of Things expansion. (x2)
- Passive and low-barrier programming. (x2)

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff envision the Library as a **multifunctional access point for skills, support, and connection**, but repeatedly note that program growth must be paired with staffing and space investments.

6. Please share any additional feedback or suggestions you have for the Library and how it can better serve the community over the next five years.

FEEDBACK OVERVIEW: Final comments reinforced themes of **access, values, staffing, and facilities**.

KEY THEMES AND HIGHLIGHTS:

- Commitment to kindness, empathy, and open communication.
- Continued focus on technology access and training.
- Expanded meeting rooms, classrooms, and consistent HVAC.
- Ongoing need for more staff.
- Recognition that current services are strong.
- Staggered evening hours across branches.
- Support for community empowerment and civic engagement.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS: Staff express pride in the Library's work while noting that **maintaining current service levels** will require continued attention to staffing, facilities, and technology.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS:

Across all six questions, key considerations include:

- Address **branch-specific facility priorities**, starting with HVAC, elevators, safety, and space configuration.
- Expand **quiet, flexible, and dedicated spaces** for programs, study, and staff work.
- Improve **staffing levels and hiring timelines** to reduce strain and support service expansion.
- Invest in enhanced **access to technology and digital literacy**, especially for underserved groups.
- Reinforce **internal communication, consistency, and staff support systems** across branches.
- Strengthen **outreach capacity and partnerships** through dedicated roles.

CONCLUSION:

Staff feedback reflects a strong sense of **mission, community connection, and pride in public service**, with employees consistently describing their work as meaningful, rewarding, and deeply rooted in service to Somerville residents. Staff value their relationships with patrons and colleagues and see the Library as a vital community anchor that supports learning, access, creativity, and connection across all ages and backgrounds.

At the same time, staff raised clear, recurring concerns about **staffing capacity, aging facilities, safety, and basic infrastructure reliability**. Persistent understaffing, slow hiring processes, and limited off-desk time strain employees' ability to deliver high-quality service and sustain morale. Facility challenges, particularly HVAC performance, elevators, space configuration, and cleanliness, were identified as barriers that affect both staff working conditions and the patron experience.

Looking ahead, staff envision a Library system that continues to expand its role as a **hub for digital literacy, outreach, youth engagement, and inclusive programming**, supported by adequate staffing, functional and welcoming spaces, and consistent internal systems. Addressing foundational needs while investing strategically in people, spaces, and services will be essential to maintaining current service levels and positioning the Somerville Public Library for long-term resilience, relevance, and community impact over the next five years.

NOTE: See the supplemental *Somerville Public Library Community Ideas Report 2026* for details regarding respondents' specific ideas.