Minutes of the Library Advisory Committee (LAC)

For the Montgomery County Correctional Facility

For March 12, 2018

The meeting was called to order by LAC Chair, Katharine Lorr. Also in attendance were LAC members Mier Wolf, Richard Lorr, and Patricia Hulsebosch, Tanner Wray (the Liaison to the LAC for the Montgomery County Library Board), James Donaldson (the MCPL Acting Assistant Director, Collection and Technology and Interim Library Manager), and Victor Drilea, a member of the public and former member of the LAC about 6 years ago. Absent: Frank Wolf.

1. The Committee dispensed with a reading of the minutes of the February 5, 2018 meeting, and they were approved without changes. Mr. Drilea provided his background as an MCCF volunteer.

2. As to Membership recruitment, Ms. Lorr noted previous communications with Zeina Azzam, who at the Poetry Program last spring read her poetry to inmates and was recommended by Ethelbert Miller, indicated she was not a resident of Montgomery County and, therefore, not qualified to join the LAC. No progress was reported on recruiting a former inmate who has been released for at least two years.

3. As Interim Library Manager, Mr. Donaldson reported that the MCCF is in dire need of book donations; fiction is always in demand. He reminded the LAC that every incoming donated book must be cleared, which means that such books appear on the library’s MCCF shelves slowly. He reported that the solicitation for MCCF librarian was due to be announced on March 14 and would be open until March 28. The solicitation is for a Senior Librarian with a Master of Library Science degree. He was hopeful that the pool of applicants would contain a group of 3 to 5 strong candidates. His office has done a wide search for librarians, including the Facebook librarian site and other lists that serve librarians seeking employment. He was fairly confident that the solicitation would obtain a sufficient number of applicants. Even if he can choose a librarian for MCCF soon after the solicitation closes, the selectee will not start before the summer (July at the earliest) because of specific corrections facility training requirements (such as anti-manipulation training) that takes about two months to complete. In the meantime, Jessica Champion has now been trained and is ready to assist Denise Habib, the interim librarian at the facility.

4. Mr. Donaldson also reported that the MCCF Library is currently running a trial of an office version of NEXIS/LEXIS which could be used by inmates. Inmates are not allowed to do research on the internet and this version of the program could provide them with resources to do legal research without going online. The staff could teach research techniques to the inmates. The data base of the program is updated quarterly and the research could be supplemented by librarians using Westlaw on line for the latest judicial decisions and statutes. The library has 6 computers, and this system would be on 4. When the month-long trial is completed, the MCCF will decide whether the program is worth the cost. If purchased it would relieve a lot of pressure on librarians to do research for inmates.
5. Mr. Wray reported that the Library Board is in making significant changes to the LAC Handbook and encouraged the LAC members to read the amended handbook when it was finalized.

6. There followed a discussion of the LAC Roles and Responsibilities. It was pointed out by Mr. Donaldson and Mr. Wray that the MCCF Library is jointly administered by the Montgomery County Public Library system and the MCCF; James works collaboratively with Deputy Warden Gale Starkey. With respect to libraries located in county correctional facilities, the facility prescribes the regulations governing the use of the library, pays the salaries, and pays for legal research. The MCPL is responsible for the content and management of the books, subject to jail regulations, and for staffing the collection management unit. The LAC’s function is to see how the library can serve the needs of its users, the inmates. One of the problems facing the LAC is how to find out what inmates need from the library or to find out why some don’t use the library. A former librarian had suggested that the LAC concentrate on poetry because of the high borrowing rate for poetry, but Mr. Wolf said he suspected that there could well be a strong interest in memoir writing. One way to find out what the inmates want from a library would be to survey them, but there was some concern whether MCCF officials would be in favor of this and some questions were raised about how it could be implemented. Mr. Donaldson agreed to ask Ms. Starkey about the viability of a survey and Mr. Wray said he would look for other model library survey instruments.

Mr. Donaldson confirmed that until a permanent librarian for the facility is chosen, the library and the jail have agreed to suspend programming initiated by the LAC for the benefit of the inmates. On the other hand, volunteers are free to approach the MCCF separate from their roles as LAC members to see if MCCF is interested in having programs presented to the inmates. In such a capacity, Ms. Lorr said she would ask Deputy Warden Starkey whether the MCCF would be interested in having poetry readings for Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. She also mentioned Director Robert Green’s presentation and discussion at the February 20 Presidential Dialogues, noting that his concerns for bringing focused educational activities into the MCCF are in line with the LAC’s vision for meeting library user’s needs.

7. In the ongoing discussion of the Poetry Program, Ms. Lorr noted that the reading by the celebrated author, publisher, and scholar, Carolivia Herron, for Black History Month was riveting. The LAC is learning a great deal from each program and discussed the need to develop an informal procedural document, or check list, to ensure that inmate poetry contests are held in a consistent manner over time. Such procedures would address the following topics among others: the time frame for participation, the formalization of the solicitation of potential contestants, the standardization of the time to review the poetry submissions, the development of a document to obtain waivers from inmates to permit the sharing of their work with others, whether there should be question and answer periods with the poets, whether non-winners would be permitted to read their work aloud to supplement the readings by the winners, and the type of rewards available to the winners. Ms. Lorr asked Mr. Wray if he could obtain programming documents/check lists established by other LAC’s. Ms. Lorr said she would circulate an informal procedures document to Mr. Donaldson, Mr. Wray and the members of the LAC for their input. She also requested copies of the waiver forms currently available.
8. Ms. Hulsebosch said she had been in contact with the Bethesda Library’s book sale coordinator and had reached out to Denise Habib at MCCF to determine what types of books they needed and the procedures for ensuring that book donations reached the MCCF. She said she had picked up 7-8 boxes of books from Bethesda and two boxes from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring and would drop them off at the Long Branch Library in small batches so that they could be reviewed and delivered to the MCCF library more efficiently. She said that she was working with other groups, Books to Prison Group and the Difference Makers in Takoma Park, to develop future sources of books. She reported that Ms. Habib had advised her that inmates were particularly interested in reading nonfiction, e.g., cookbooks with pictures, books about sports, dogs, urban fiction, and the dummy series of books, like Mechanics for Dummies.

8. There followed a brief discussion of the advantages of establishing a Friends of the Library (FOL) organization to raise funds to pay for library programs and books and the difficulties of establishing a FOL in support of a prison library for captive inmates. Concerns were raised by Mr. Drilea that the MCCF Library is not present on the MCPL website. Mr. Donaldson said he would look into this.

Minutes prepared by Richard Lorr
LAC Secretary Pro Tem
March 20, 2018