

To: Authors and Signers of the DPLA Letter of Concern

From: DPLA Board of Directors

RE: Community Letter of Concern

Date: November 21, 2018

We write to thank you for and respond to your letter of concern dated November 14, 2018 and recognize that releasing this letter on the day before a major US holiday is likely to mean fewer people will read it right away. We assure you that is not our intention as we wanted to get these answers to the community as quickly as possible, so we are releasing the letter today, and will push it out via social media again on Monday.

We recognize that the announcement of the recent restructuring of the DPLA staff has created significant concerns and questions for the larger DPLA community, and we greatly appreciate the care and spirit with which you have expressed those concerns.

Let us say this up front: we should have done a better job engaging with and explaining these decisions to our community. We are sorry that we did not do so, and that the lack of engagement has damaged the trust of the DPLA community. We can and will do better in the future.

As a board of directors, we are accountable for the mission, vision, and viability of DPLA. DPLA is a nonprofit organization with finite resources. While we have managed our resources responsibly, the manner in which we have been operating is not sustainable in the long term. In recent months, a hard look at DPLA's finances highlighted that to continue serving our mission, we needed to reduce our cost base. It is incumbent upon us, as its directors, to ensure that the organization serves its mission in a sustainable manner.

We know that staff changes in organizations like ours affect a broad constituency. While we cannot share details about individual employees, we can assure you that the organization is committed to helping our former colleagues move to the next stage of their careers, including by providing access to career services.

We have done our best to answer your questions within this letter. Many of them are among the questions we anticipated taking on during the next few months as part of a transitional period that will include, when appropriate and helpful, different parts of the community.

In response to your specific questions:

1. *How will the growth and maintenance of current work in cultural heritage, e-books, and digital innovation specifically be accomplished with fewer DPLA staff? For example, how will DPLA coordinate community efforts to grow and sustain the aggregation and curation work going forward? Who will coordinate hub communication and activities? How will the aggregation process work without a metadata librarian on staff?*

DPLA remains committed to supporting the high-quality metadata standards and processes it has established with the community. Our national cultural heritage work continues to be among DPLA's top priorities.

In the short term, the work ahead has three components: re-downloading data from hubs, working with existing hubs to accommodate changes they have made in the data they share with us and bringing on new hubs that are in process. We will continue to re-ingest data with the current staff. The implementation of new tools, particularly Ingest 3, has made this work easier and more efficient. We intend to continue building off the progress of the past few years that has enabled us to grow from ingesting 3.1 million items in 2015 to 5.8 million in 2016 and 9.4 million so far in 2018. Our reduced staffing size will not reduce our continuous rate of growth in ingestion of records from our current partners now that our process is well established and running.

For all current member hubs, where there are no significant changes to the data format, we expect that current DPLA staff can manage ingestion in accordance with the schedule that we previously established, published [here](#). For hubs that make changes to their data format in the near term, changes will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, as per our standard practice and we may find that we additional help to ensure that we can respond to those changes. As before, member hubs will have preference on the ingestion schedule.

DPLA will continue to expand the network by onboarding organizations based on a schedule mutually defined by DPLA and the hub. We are currently in conversations with, or have scheduled onboarding for, Arizona, Kansas, Vermont, Delaware/New Jersey, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. As we bring on new hubs, we may learn that we need additional help.

In the longer term, we are aware that we will have to develop plans for supporting metadata and community coordination work based on realistic assessments of our ability to allocate available resources to DPLA's strategic priorities. We know that we need to identify and develop new resources and approaches to sustain and grow the work, and we have been working diligently to do so.

We will continue to grow our work in e-books and to develop new areas of work based on new revenue, described below.

2. *What burden will this plan place on the remaining DPLA staff?*

We are evaluating the full impact, and we will continue to evaluate this over the next few months as part of a transitional period. We have begun to review the work with staff to determine what work we have the capacity to continue; what work we need to pause; what, if any, work we can outsource; and what work we need to stop until we have more resources. As we secure additional resources in future months, we will add to our staff capacity as needed.

3. *If no such plan exists, why were staff let go before one was established and agreed upon by the Board and Advisory Council?*

The timing of the staff reorganization was primarily driven by the financial constraints. The Board was aware of and approved a general plan to execute a strategic direction to ensure DPLA's fiscal viability.

DPLA staff have been in regular and consistent contact with the Advisory Council during the development of our new strategic direction. The decision to make a change in staffing was made for both strategic and financial reasons. While the Advisory Council works closely with DPLA staff to provide feedback and advice on programs that affect the members and to identify opportunities and potential network initiatives, the Advisory Council does not have a role in staffing decisions at DPLA.

4. *A highly successful component of DPLA's program has been the creation of primary source sets and exhibitions that facilitate the use of primary source materials in classrooms and beyond. The primary source sets represented 30–35 percent of traffic to the DPLA website during the school year, and exhibitions represented 15–20 percent of overall traffic. Recently, educators in the process of developing these materials were directed to cease their work, despite the fact that a relatively small investment in the creation and curation of these*

invaluable materials produced such a large ROI. We ask that the Board also investigate and report on this decision to provide further clarity to the DPLA community.

We are proud of the collaborations that have produced DPLA's primary source sets and exhibitions. We are sad to say that the funding given to DPLA for that purpose was not renewed. Earlier this year, we made the decision to put our curation work on hiatus, due to lack of funding and immediate needs in other areas that prompted us to assign staff to other organizational functions, such as fundraising. DPLA will continue to look for ways to enable the network to play a larger role in designing and doing this work.

- 5. Digital library communities have long-held concerns regarding the long-term financial sustainability of DPLA's ambitious and valued operations. Can the Board release information about DPLA's current financial situation, including a specific breakdown of how hub network fees are spent, to be transparent with the DPLA community? What portion of DPLA funding goes to administrator salaries and what is designated for core staff?*

We think it is important for the community to have the information it needs to best understand the context in which DPLA operates. To that end, we have published our recent 2017 audited financials at our website and awaiting final approval of our 2017 990s and will share add that information as soon as they are approved by the IRS. Our preliminary analysis of 2017 spending reveals that 91% of our total salaries, wages and benefits for FY17 went towards the cultural heritage work, 5% went to indirect costs and 4% for the ebooks work.

- 6. What plans are in place to move the DPLA onto a more sustainable financial footing?*

Everything we are doing is designed to make DPLA a sustainable and impactful enterprise. We will continue to be disciplined in regularly assessing both the quality and sustainability of the initiatives we lead. For instance, one of the intended outcomes of our e-books work is to develop a source of earned revenue to support the larger work of the organization beginning in 2023.

We continue to explore ways to collaborate with others; if elements of our work would be better managed by other national organizations, we will pursue such opportunities.

- 7. What is DPLA's plan for ongoing communication with the hubs and the larger library, archive, museum, and education community going forward?*

We would like to engage in an open conversation about the future and how to best to realize DPLA's potential. Toward that end, we invite you to join us for our regularly scheduled board meeting on January 15 at 1:30–3:00 p.m. ET. Details on how to join will be posted on the dp.la site in advance. Additionally, the Network Council has proposed using its next meeting as a forum for hubs members and nonmembers to talk with DPLA leadership. The meeting, to be scheduled during the first two weeks of December, will be recorded, and the notes will be shared publicly.

The project to build a Digital Public Library of America remains an urgent one and we, the undersigned Board of Directors of DPLA, remain committed to working with the community to build our future together.

Thank you for your thoughtful feedback, and we look forward to continuing the dialog.

Sincerely,

Digital Public Library of American Board of Directors

Brian Bannon, DPLA Chair

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