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Waterford Public Library's Director Christine Johnson is seen here in her office, with a cart of "MOBYPacks," themed kits for families and children who'd like to explore "My Own Backyard." They will become part of the circulating collection, available for



## More Than Mere Stacks, a Library is a Support System

Local libraries inform, engage and enhance a community's quality of life



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By Gretchen A. Peck Apr 21, 2025 2:17 PM

Local amenities ensure a healthy quality of life for residents of New London County. There are beaches and parks, as well as cultural institutions for art, music and theater. Perhaps the most profoundly influential amenity is the local library. Beyond providing access to books, periodicals and other sources of information, the local library aims to support all residents, no matter their age, with a myriad of services. To better understand how libraries improve the quality of life for their communities, Welcome Home spent some time getting to know the services and staff at two local libraries in New London and Waterford.

Madhu Gupta is the executive director of the Public Library of New London, an institution that dates back to the 1890s and still occupies the historic landmark building at the top of State Street.

“We support over 27,000 residents, the population of New London. If you look at our foot traffic—the number of people who visited the library this past year—we had over 97,000 visitors,” Gupta estimated. Six days a week, the library serves as a community hub. “About five minutes before we open in the morning, we see people lining up to come in,” Gupta said. It’s particularly bustling in the after-school hours.

The library has a diverse funding model.

“The major part of our funding comes from the City of New London. The rest, we generate through donations, fundraising and grants,” Gupta explained. Grants are typically project-specific—to fund a program, an initiative, technology or upkeep of the building.

Many residents of New London may be familiar with the library’s books and reference materials, but it also offers support to the community in other ways. For example, it has free WiFi and computers that anyone can use, with or without a library card.

“We have a digital navigator at the library, who has helped people look for and apply for jobs,” Gupta said. “They may be people who have never used a computer or a mouse before, and they need help creating their first résumé. Our digital navigator sits with that person—not once, but as many times as they need—to help them write an application and prepare for the interview. There are people who have come back to tell us they found a job thanks to our librarian.”

“We’ve helped grandparents who wanted to set up a Facebook or Zoom account, so they can connect with their grandchildren,” she added.

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The library maintains a card catalog of seeds, where residents can pick and choose from vegetable and flower seeds to plant in their home gardens. It can be a source of free or discounted passes to musical, theatrical or museum events.

“We also have a toy library, which we opened two years ago, and a ‘library of things,’ or non-traditional items. If you want to learn something new, a hobby that you want to explore, the library may have what you need. We have a jewelry-making kit, a knitting kit. Or maybe you’re going out for a hiking trip and you need binoculars or a backpack. The library has all of that,” Gupta said. “We have a telescope, a microscope, outdoor games for families. All of that you can check out with our library card, at no cost to you.”

Gupta reported that 80 to 90 toys are checked out from the toy library each month.

“Children outgrow toys. How long does a child play with the same toy over and over again? So, this gives you an opportunity to come in, play with the toys at the library or check out a particular toy that you like, play with it for a few days, bring it back, and check out another toy,” the executive director suggested.

The toy library may be a favorite for New London’s youngest residents, but it also benefits the broader community. “You’re not adding to a landfill. You’re not creating more waste,” she said.

In 2021, a teen room was opened in the library’s lower level, equipped with computer workstations and a full kitchen. Teens gather in the safe space during after-school hours to play games, enjoy the company of their peers and join in an array of programs, including cooking classes.

In another nook of the library, people gather at tables to play chess.

“We also have a local history room, where you’ll find old yearbooks and information about New London’s history,” she said. “We have a repository of ‘The Day’ newspapers, as well as microfilm machines that are always super busy.”

There are year-round programs and special events, too.

“We’ve had workshops hosted by the Ledge Light Health District and the City of New

London. Yesterday, we had a workshop on mental health by the Yale School of Medicine, Gupta said. “Next week, we have a financial literacy workshop. And we’d had a document ‘shred it’ day for the community.”

Even if someone isn’t expressly interested in one of the library’s programs, they’re still welcome.

“There are people who are very lonely, who come to the library just to socialize,” Gupta said. “A library is a safe place, and we want everyone to use the library.”

All are welcome

Christine Johnson has been working in libraries for more than 30 years. After studying business for her undergraduate degree, she faced a dilemma—whether to pursue her MBA or to seek a master’s degree in library sciences (MLS). “I thought, which would make me happier in the long run? I chose libraries,” Johnson said.

Johnson is the Waterford Public Library’s director. She manages a team of 11 full-time and seven part-time staffers. The library has roughly 4,500 library card holders from Waterford, and Johnson estimates that they see 1,500 or so regular visitors from outside of Waterford.

“Our doors, like all public libraries, are open to all. Whoever is in the community is welcome to come through—whether they’re local, living in another town nearby, or whether they’re just passing through—and use our resources,” Johnson said.

Some visitors come for the free WiFi or to do research in the library’s extensive local history collection.

The staff is poised to help answer visitors’ questions—perhaps they’re in search of an address or phone number, references for health research, or instructions on how to access social services.

“We also spend a lot of time helping the community with technology,” Johnson said. “We have public computers—10 for adults and four for kids—and we have a printer/copier.”

Waterford’s library hosts weekly “English conversation circles” for residents for whom English is a second language. The meetings are led by an ESOL-certified teacher. “They’re learning English, but they’re also learning all about living in the United States—like

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holidays and all the little things someone who has lived here all their lives already knows. But for immigrants, everything is new,” Johnson said.

For children who are learning English, the library provides a series of “talking books,” which provides audio accompaniment in English as they flip through the pages.

There’s also a toy library, with items for all age groups—from infants to teens.

“People think that Waterford is a wealthy community ... but 30% of families are cost-burdened. So, that means when it comes to things like toys, they’re not considered a necessity,” Johnson said.

For children who enjoy reading or are facing challenges as they learn to read, the library has a “Read to a Dog” program. Service dogs are patient listeners.

“It helps especially struggling readers by giving them some comfort as they read aloud. They can practice reading in a comforting, non-judgmental environment. ... It makes reading fun,” said Johnson.

Libraries support communities in countless ways, but they also need support from the community to be sustainable. “Get a library card,” Johnson suggested. “If you’re using the library, please tell your friends and neighbors all the great things that the library offers to them, free of charge. Attend your town meetings and budget hearings, and reach out to your elected officials at the town level, state level and federal, so they know why libraries are important to you.”



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