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# City Reading Center's Plea: Children's Librarian s Wanted

By Susan Herbert

In the southeast outreaches of San Francisco, where the highest density of the city's children live, four neighborhood reading centers are asking for services their staff say would greatly enhance many young lives.

But those services - two part-time children's librarians to provide each center with 10 hours a week of programs and outreach - were not part of the city's budget this year.

And libraries, like most other city departments, are facing a further 10 percent cut in their departmental budgets during the coming fiscal year.

"It would be so nice to have a children's librarian, even once a week," said Shirley Brown, library technician at the Visitacion Valley Reading Center on Leland Avenue.

Brown would like to see storytelling and lapsit sessions for Visitacion Valley youth, and outreach visits to the nearby schools. Only a children's librarian can provide those services.

"This is the first year we haven't been able to provide any children's services at all," said Hope Hayes, chief of branches. "Before, whenever we had a children's librarian available or could assign someone to the centers, we did it."

Mayor Art Agnos blue-penciled the reading centers' access to children's librarian services when he made budget cutbacks last year.

This was only the latest setback for the reading centers.

Full libraries until 1980, Visitacion Valley, Ingleside, Oceanview and Portola were

demoted to a "reading center" classification by Mayor Dianne Feinstein in answer to that year's budget crisis.

The classification allowed the facilities to function without the services of accredited librarians by replacing them with librarian technicians. This savings assumes that minimal library services are sufficient for the neighborhood readership.

Along with the demotion in title came a cutback in hours. Now open four days a week, five afternoon hours a day, and never on weekends, the reading centers struggle to maintain a presence in the neighborhoods.

On Broad Street in the Oceanview District, the reading center is a rented storefront tucked between a liquor store and a Tae Kwon Do studio. The smallest library installation in the city, it has been a *cause celebre* with the neighbors.

Because the center had been allowed to become rundown, the city proposed closing it last year and moving the facilities to nearby

Oceanview Playground.

Center patrons, in concert with neighborhood activists, turned the tides, and literally went in with brooms and paintbrushes and refurbished the place.

Tim Williams, currently assigned to Oceanview, is librarian and supervisor of the four reading centers. He agrees that the centers need help capturing young readers.

According to city figures, 15 to 25 percent of the city's children reside in the general area of the reading centers.

"I think the city is concentrating their children's services in the wrong place," Shirley Brown said at her Visitacion Valley post. "People don't want to send their kids downtown for the children's programs at the Main Library."

"People do not even want to go out of their neighborhood," she added.

Hope Hayes has not turned a deaf ear. "I am very sympathetic to their needs and I have put in a request for two part-time children's librarians," she said.

VISITACION VALLEY DISTRICT, S.F.

EXCELSIOR BRANCH LIBRARY  
4400 MISSION STREET  
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94112



PHOTOS BY BRAD KELLING



Above, the Oceanview Reading Center shows off its spiffy new looks, while at left, Sofala Mayfield takes advantage of the Visitacion Valley Center's large



*Jennifer Quan, Eve Baron, Angie Shepard and Liv Shaefer stop off at the Ingleside Reading Center after school to look for books; some they need for homework, some just for enjoyment.*

Each would work 20 hours a week, splitting time between the centers. In that way, each reading center would enjoy the services of a children's librarian for 10 hours.

That would suit Shirley Brown to a tee. "We're already seeing a lot of new faces. Kids six to 13-years-old come by. Some do their homework, some just to pick out books," she said.

Brown would like to offer

activities that would help youngsters make the leap into the world of books and adventure.

Edna Harrison, librarian tech at Portola Reading Center, a storefront at 2434 San Bruno Ave., said, "We've asked for a children's librarian and we will keep asking."

With five schools in proximity, the Portola center is a natural for outreach programs.

Marie DeWitt, librarian tech at

Ingleside Reading Center, 387 Ashton Ave., knows what kind of a difference a children's librarian can make -- especially in the summer.

"A few years ago when we had a children's librarian, about 300 kids signed up for our vacation program," De Witt recalled. "We can't even invite school classes anymore. We don't have enough staff to help."