

THE HEALTH AND SAFETY EMERGENCY IN CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Council 31 
AFSCME
August 2025

AFSCME Council 31 represents more than 900 employees throughout the Chicago Public Library (CPL) system. Members of AFSCME Local 1215, these workers perform a variety of roles across CPL's 81 branches, as adult, teen and children's librarians, pages, clerks, library associates, archivists and more. As a largely community-facing workforce, they welcome nearly 5 million visitors to the city's libraries each year, helping patrons access the resources they need and facilitating a wide range of programming for all ages.

Chicago's library workers love the city's libraries and their work in serving patrons. But in recent years, they have faced an ever-growing number of health and safety issues that make it difficult for them to do their jobs. Ongoing HVAC and other building issues leave multiple branches in sweltering heat—even though all CPL libraries are designated as city cooling centers during heat waves. Some branches are flooded during rainstorms. A record number of assaults, harassment and other troubling incidents leave staff at risk of harm. And the hiring freezes and vacancy eliminations put in place due to the city's budget crisis have left dozens of branches with only two or three staff members to deal with these issues.

AFSCME Local 1215 members have attempted to utilize every option to find a solution to these growing problems. However, CPL management has thus far refused to acknowledge the scope of the problems, while issuing opaque and often-contradictory policies without a clear plan to keep staff members safe on the job.

These issues are not isolated to one or two branches; the health and safety of library workers is at risk across the system, and management's inadequate response is a system-wide problem. The following report contains incidents and data from more than a dozen branches, as well as descriptions of the steps library workers have taken to resolve these issues. The report also recommends concrete steps that CPL management and the city must take to address health and safety risks across the system.

Facility Issues: Broken HVAC, Sweltering Heat, Flooding and More

Many of the 81 CPL branch locations are decades old; some, including Blackstone and Legler, were built more than a century ago. In line with their age, these buildings require more maintenance—especially to HVAC systems, modern plumbing, and electric work for which the branches were not originally equipped.

In 2024, library workers submitted more than 4,000 work-order tickets for maintenance requests ranging from small items like key replacements to larger, emergency needs such as broken boilers and flooded bathrooms.



In many cases, these incidents—even when a branch experiences a breakdown requiring emergency maintenance—are not met with the urgency they require. Even in cases where branches become unsafe for staff and patrons—such as when inside temperatures rise past 80°—staff are told to keep branches open without clear communication about when problems will be fixed.

Below is a sampling of recent incidents of facility and maintenance problems that have led to unsafe working conditions.

Gage Park Branch

Gage Park is CPL's only storefront branch, and has experienced structural and facility issues for years. The branch's temperature regularly climbs to near 80°, but the building cannot use spot coolers (portable AC units meant to cool single rooms) as the windows do not open.

On July 25, the branch's issues came to a head during a major rainstorm. The downpour started around 11 a.m.; not long after, the roof began leaking, and water began to drip through light fixtures. By noon, water was backing up from the toilets, flooding into both the bathroom and a carpeted area just outside it. Around 12:45, the building's Wi-Fi and computers all went down, while electricity was flickering on and off. Outside, cars drove through high water, creating waves that flooded through the front door. By 12:55, water was streaming through the building's fuse box. After the branch manager made the decision to close the branch at around 1:15, staff received a phone call from management telling them to go back into the building to reopen. The branch manager refused due to the clearly unsafe conditions, but CPL upper management again insisted that the building be reopened. At no point did management express concern for staff or patrons—only getting the building reopened, even before assessing or addressing its faltering electricity, lack of computers or backed up sewage.

West Lawn Branch

West Lawn has experienced serious air conditioning problems since early June 2025. Whenever the outside temperature is over 85°, the AC stops working halfway through the day. Though the branch was given spot coolers to help alleviate the problem, temperatures inside the building continued to climb past 80° on hot days. On July 24, staff opened the branch with an internal temperature of 81° and held a children's singing program in the main part of the library, near a spot cooler. By noon, the temperature was 83° with humidity at 66% - a heat index of 87°. Staff decided to leave due to feeling hot, tired, and sick due to the heat. However, when informing

management of the decision to close the branch, management told them to keep the building open and asked for the names of all staff members who left for the day.

Walker Branch (Morgan Park)

On July 14, there was an incident at Walker caused by structural issues with the lift elevator. A library patron with three young children and a stroller requested to use the lift. While using it, one of the children fell into the gap between the lift and the door, feet first, until he hit his chin and was dangling by his neck. The child's mother pulled him up out of the gap. The child damaged multiple teeth and had a swollen lip. Staff had alerted management about the dangerous gap between the lift and the door for months before this incident. Even since, management has not committed to a permanent fix. Instead, they have only installed temporary signage alerting patrons to “watch your step”. The lift remains inaccessible for disabled patrons.

Walker has also experienced multiple air conditioning breakdowns this summer. The building’s engineer informed staff that the sensor on the unit that informs him of breakdowns is itself broken. Temperatures have risen as high as 86° inside the building.

Pullman Branch

The branch has experienced serious problems with air conditioning this summer. On multiple days in June, the branch’s internal temperature reached 85° before management finally decided to close the branch. During the week of July 21, the branch’s temperature rose to 80°.

Merlo Branch (Northalsted)

Merlo’s elevator began to malfunction on June 3. On June 9, a technician found the cause was a loss of power to the elevator and tightened wires in an attempt to fix the issue. However, the elevator continued to stall even after this work, including once with a patron inside. As of July 30, the elevator was still unrepaired.

Lozano Branch (Pilsen)

Lozano experienced severe problems with air conditioning throughout the summer of 2024. The branch was told that a part was needed from overseas, and they waited over two years to receive it and have it installed. During that time, staff repeatedly suffered headaches, fatigue, and other symptoms of heat illness. Spot coolers were used in summer 2024, but because they pulled air from the alley where trash was located, the branch periodically smelled like garbage. Despite finally receiving the

needed part, the air conditioning unit has continued to have problems in the summer of 2025. During the week of June 23, a water line from one of the coolers broke, spilling water onto the carpet. The seeping water and the duct line running into the alley near dumpsters caused a rancid smell inside the building and ruined the carpet in the affected area.

Legler Regional Library (West Garfield Park)

The building's air conditioning broke down on the weekend of June 21-22. On June 23, staff reported an internal temperature of 84°, with 63% humidity—a heat index of 88.4°.

Harold Washington Library Center (Loop)

On the building's sixth floor, lights in the hallway near the women's staff restroom malfunctioned in early 2025. Staff reported the issue for more than three months without a fix. Management told staff to "just keep reporting" the issue, with no timetable on a scheduled fix.

Additionally, the southwest "staff only" door on the same floor has no access panel to stop someone from entering unless they tap a staff badge. Without an access panel, staff have no secure area on the floor to escape potential emergency situations. While rewiring work occurred at Harold Washington, staff were told that adding an access panel to the door would "cost too much."

The elevators at Harold Washington experience frequent problems, and the timeline for repairs averages one to three weeks. Overcrowded public elevators are often a cause of frustration among patrons, and in February resulted in an assault on a staff member (further details on this incident in the following section).

Chinatown Branch

The branch has had extensive heat problems throughout the summer, with the building regularly opened with temperatures above 80°. Engineers and HVAC consultants have attempted to fix the AC, but have not been able to get it to full capacity. Spot coolers cannot be used in the building because windows do not open. Additionally, the humidity leads to severe condensation issues, causing water to drip in multiple locations, including near electronics and computers.

Chicago Bee Branch (Bronzeville)

In both winter and summer, the branch has consistent heating issues. No matter the outdoor temperature, the indoor temperature hovers around 80°. On December 9, 2024, the temperature in the staff workspace reached 92°.

Blackstone Branch (Kenwood/Hyde Park)

Blackstone is CPL's oldest branch, and experiences constant facility issues. On July 10, temperature in the building reached 84°. The building's air vents are consistently filthy and have not been replaced in years. The children's area has chipping paint in multiple areas.

Austin/Irving Branch

On June 22, branch staff were required to open the building even as each floor's temperature was over 80° — including 85° in the children's area. Two staff members have health problems exacerbated by heat but were not given guidance by management on how to handle the situation. During the heat wave that occurred May 14-16, CPL management insisted on keeping the branch open despite the chief operating engineer of the Department of Fleet and Facility Management (2FM)—the agency responsible for library maintenance—recommending a two-day closure.

CPL management's responses to these incidents—especially when insisting library workers keep branches open in unsafe heat—is both troubling and contradictory to city policy. During a July 8 meeting with 2FM, AFSCME Local 1215 was informed that all city buildings—including libraries—must abide by 2FM's health and safety protocol on unsafe temperatures. Specifically, library buildings must be kept to a temperature of 72-76° during the summer since they are designated cooling centers. 2FM told union representatives that if the temperature rises above this range and engineers are not able to repair the air conditioning in a suitable timeframe, the building should be closed.

2FM representatives also said they would follow up with a written policy on how long a location is allowed to stay open with an unsafe temperature while engineers attempt to alleviate the problem. However, the department has not yet done so.

Patron Issues: Increasing Assaults, Harassment, and Other Dangerous Situations

Library workers care deeply about the communities they serve. Sadly, their work has become more difficult as they deal with a record number of dangerous incidents

involving patrons—including assaults, harassment and stalking, fighting, and abusive language.

In May 2025, WGN Investigates [reported](#) the alarming trend in incidents wherein police were called into libraries. Data shows that there were 126 such incidents in 2021, rising to 204 in 2022, 243 in 2023, and 342 in 2024. In the first quarter of 2025, there had already been 141 of these incidents.

Library workers are not social workers or police officers. Yet they are forced to confront violence and unsafe interactions with patrons without adequate guidance or training for how to respond to such incidents. While staff are encouraged to fill out incident reports following these events, there is no systemwide access to reports across CPL, and the guidance on suspending patrons from library access is confusing and opaque.

Additionally, as other community support systems—such as mental health clinics and engagement programs—are cut back or closed due to budget cuts, libraries have become the last refuge for many of the city’s most vulnerable residents. As a result, library workers are asked to take on more and more of the burden, with staffing and support already stretched too thin.

CPL management’s efforts to support staff in responding to patron issues have not met the scope of the growing problem. Too many branches—including Blackstone, Walker, Vodak-East Side, Hegewisch, Garfield Ridge, and Mayfair—lack security guards for every hour of operation, while other branches, including Pullman, Edgewater, Austin, and Austin-Irving, don’t have security guards on each floor. Online de-escalation training has not focused on issues that arise specifically within a library context. Other safety measures, such as installation of panic buttons and security cameras at each branch, take far too long to implement. Management has told union representatives that it will take two years to install panic buttons and five years for cameras in all branches.

Below are recent examples of patron incidents that have put library workers at risk:

Harold Washington Library Center

- On February 13, a library worker was conducting a tour group on the sixth floor when they were approached by a patron who was angry about the slowness of the elevators. Though the library worker attempted to de-escalate the situation, the patron hit them with an open hand while shouting threats to kill them. Other library workers responded by radioing security and calling 911. Though security was able to pull the man off the library worker, the man broke free and exited the library without being stopped.

- On February 28, a group of about 15 patrons engaged in a massive fight in the library. During the incident, one of the individuals pulled a knife and began running towards another person involved in the brawl. Multiple staff members were unable to access a safe exit and were forced to take cover by the reference desk stacks. The fight left one person injured who needed to be taken away in an ambulance.
- On April 15, a fight broke out in YOUMedia among three teenagers. The individuals punched each other to the ground and toppled over the YOUMedia reference desk. Staff present in the area kept other students safe and away from the fight while security responded to the incident.
- On April 26, after lightly tapping a man on the shoulder to ask him to step aside so they could enter the building, a library worker was shoved and then followed into the building. The patron was yelling at and harassing the worker. When attempting to issue a suspension, the library worker was first told that they could not do so because the incident occurred outside the library—even though the man followed the library worker into the building.
- Other incidents have involved staff being followed around the building, yelled at by patrons and harassed with threatening language.

Whitney M. Young, Jr. Branch (East Chatham)

- On June 17, staff heard approximately 12 gunshots outside the building, which sent patrons and staff scrambling for cover. Multiple people who ran into the library for safety were left with cuts and bruises in their panic to get inside. Whitney Young still does not have panic buttons installed in the branch.

Merlo Branch

- On July 10, a library worker and security officer approached a patron who was sleeping and snoring loudly to perform a wellness check. Upon awakening, the patron became angry and belligerent, and when asked to leave the library, threw an aluminum can at the library worker's head. The patron then lunged at the security officer, hit the officer in the face, and continued to verbally abuse both the library worker and security officer before leaving the library.

Humboldt Park Branch

- On June 27, a patron told staff that a man sitting behind him was attempting to steal his information and that if he didn't stop, he would kill him. After initially

leaving, the patron returned to the branch and continued to threaten violence if anyone touched him. The patron was told to leave for the day, and as he did so, kicked both glass doors on his way out.

- On July 2, after being told about signs asking patrons not to reshelve books, a man began cursing, calling staff names, and yelling loudly. After slamming a book on the table, the patron was asked to leave for the day, and verbally abused staff as he left.
- On July 24, a regular patron began yelling at another patron for talking on the phone. When asked to lower his voice, the patron began shouting expletives and insults at library workers. When told to leave the library for the day, the patron hit the front doors and exterior display window.

Douglass Branch (North Lawndale)

- On May 1, a teen patron entered the branch with a pellet gun that she had previously shot at one of the branch's clerks. Despite being told to leave, she did not, and three other teen patrons entered despite being suspended for previous incidents. One of the three told the first patron to shoot a library worker with the pellet gun until they turned red, and passed around the gun, shooting each other and dumping pellets on an uninvolved child's head. The group then began taking books off the shelves and throwing them at each other. Library workers called the police, who attempted to get the offending patrons to leave. Once they did so, the branch was put on a "soft lockdown," locking the doors but keeping the branch open, and the teens pounded on doors, windows, and a book drop. The branch was forced to stay in a soft lockdown until closing.

The above incidents are just a sample of the types of incidents CPL workers face every day. But CPL has no system to allow workers access to track suspensions or incident reports. As a result, branches are not reliably informed when a patron at a nearby branch has been issued a suspension, leaving staff to deal with incidents on an individual basis.

Instead of investing in more staff, on-site social workers, or full-time security at every branch, CPL management has attempted to confront the problem by asking staff to fill social service gaps that are the root cause of many incidents. However, staff do not feel they are adequately trained to handle this growing burden. In many cases, staff are not certain of what to do or where to go in an emergency, or how to properly document incidents after they occur.

Keeping Library Workers Safe and Supported: Policy Recommendations

As both facility and patron incidents continue to mount, CPL management must change its approach and work proactively and constructively with the library workers' union to confront the issues at hand. Management must be forthright about the severity of these problems rather than reverting to empty talking points that assert progress that workers are not seeing. Below are several policy proposals that would begin to address these ongoing problems.

Full staffing of library worker and security officer positions

Fully staffed libraries are safer libraries. But too many branches are staffed with too few library workers. CPL as a whole has 100 less staff than pre-pandemic, and an additional 50 positions were eliminated in the FY25 budget. Two or three staff are not adequate to open a branch and provide service to the community members who need it. While library workers understand the city's current fiscal challenges, they are frontline workers taking on more responsibilities every day. Staffing must be bolstered to keep both library workers and patrons safe.

Adhering to protocols on building closures that protect staff and take heat index into account

CPL management must follow 2FM policy regarding building closures, and 2FM must provide clear written communication to both staff and management on closure policy. Staff must be allowed to close branches when indoor temperatures rise excessively and air conditioning is unable to be fixed in a timeframe in line with 2FM policy. 2FM, CPL, and the city must also take into account the heat index when considering criteria for emergency repairs or location closure, just as the Office of Emergency Management and Communications (OEMC) does in its official warnings to the public. In such instances, staff must not be disciplined nor face any loss of pay or leave accruals due to branch closure.

Trauma-informed care training and implementation for administrators, supervisors, and staff

Incidents such as those described above are traumatic experiences for library workers. Both non-management and management staff would benefit from additional training in de-escalation and trauma-informed crisis intervention in order to prevent incidents from becoming violent or dangerous for staff and other patrons. Previous de-escalation

webinars provided to staff were not sufficient to confront the scope of the training needed for library-specific incidents. Library professionals with experience training library workers on trauma-informed crisis intervention should be hired to conduct in-person trainings with all CPL staff within the next six months.

Facility and patron incident report centralization, transparency, and improved documentation across CPL

Library workers must have access to real-time information about ongoing security threats, suspensions, and facility issues. The current database system (only accessible by management) does not track work orders and repair requests; instead, managers must contact 2FM on a case-by-case basis to ask for updates.

CPL administrators should keep a central, accessible and searchable online database for all staff to track the status of individual incident reports, work orders and repair requests. CPL should provide a monthly report on both facility issues and patron incidents to all staff. All staff should be thoroughly trained on writing incident reports and facility maintenance requests, with accessible step-by-step guidelines in each branch. CPL should assign an administrator to oversee these guidelines, trainings, and other needs relating specifically to facility and patron issues.

Removing the burden of social work responsibilities for library staff

Library workers are asked to fill too many gaps in the social safety net. Management must do more to relieve this burden. The City of Chicago must expand resources available at libraries and improve outreach to help with housing, immigration, criminal justice, and health issues. Current municipal social work and mental health crisis programs should be expanded to meet this need at libraries, with a non-librarian staff member assigned to help meet these needs. In high-impact areas, nurses or part-time medical professionals should be designated to administer Narcan and deal with urgent medical crises. Teams from the city Department of Public Health Crisis Assistance Response & Engagement (“CARE”) program should be created in the police districts where libraries are experiencing the greatest challenges with patrons suffering mental health crises.

Conclusion

It is clear that CPL faces a growing crisis of facility and patron issues across the library system. But thus far, management's inadequate approach to these problems has left library workers in unsafe and unhealthy work environments. Management must do more to protect staff, patrons, and every person that comes to one of the city's libraries to read, learn, or access resources. Library workers are ready to help implement the urgent solutions that would make the city's libraries safer. It's time for the city to join workers to make it happen.