



For Release on June 7, 2024

On April 29, 2024, Boston Public Library staff were told that repairs to the loading dock, located in the Boylston Building of the Central Library in Copley Square, would require turning off the HVAC system. This system regulates the temperatures for the McKim and Boylston Buildings. Staff were assured that Senior Leadership would monitor the temperatures throughout the buildings and work on mitigation strategies to keep spaces comfortable for staff and patrons. Staff were instructed to keep all windows and doors closed to maintain temperatures within the building.

On May 20, 2024, Chief of Staff Sarah Zaphiris emailed staff, "...The contractor has been working steadily and we anticipate that Phase 1, which requires the heating and cooling to be turned off, will be complete by the first week of June".

Only a few days after that email, on Friday, May 24, staff worked in an increasingly hot building all day, and then the Boylston Street building closed for the remainder of the day due to the heat. By then, the majority of spaces in the building were at 86 degrees or more. Staff were given the option to find another location to work or use paid time off (PTO) and go home. Those whose duties could not be done remotely were excused for the day. Conflicting messaging led to many staff members working from home for the rest of the day, only to find out that BPL required them to use their PTO for that time. "Work at an alternative location" did not clearly state that Senior Leadership expected staff to work from a branch, not their homes.

Staff who preferred to work from a branch location had to navigate finding a branch without support or assistance from Senior Leadership. For some, working at another location is simply not possible, as their skillset and work do not easily transfer to being done at a branch.

After less than an hour on Saturday, May 25, 2024, the entire Central Library reached the threshold of 86 degrees and had to be closed to the public. This threshold was seemingly set arbitrarily and without discussion with the unions.

Despite now having had to close the building twice and a forecast that promised more hot days ahead, Senior Leadership took no steps to "mitigate" the problem.

On Tuesday, May 28, 2024, an announcement was sent out at 8:50 AM that the Boylston Building was too hot to open. Many staff leave their house well before the beginning of their shift and had already made their way to Copley Square when they received this information. That same day, the McKim building closed at 5 PM. Staff who worked the evening shift were told they could “work from a cooler location” or use PTO. With the entire building now closed, there weren’t any cooler spaces in Central. Only a few branches remain open past 6:00 PM on Tuesdays resulting in staff having to unfairly use PTO for the rest of their scheduled shift.

The Central Library would remain closed on May 29 and 30, 2024, with options for staff to work from a branch location, use their PTO, or do professional development from home if they had the technology available to them to do so and were pre-approved by their supervisor. Staff were not informed of this option ahead of time, which would have allowed them to bring home any necessary technology. This lack of warning unfairly impacted our members who do not have access to technology at home, or who now had to find a branch to work from or use PTO if working from a branch was incompatible with their work.

When staff arrived on the morning of Friday, May 31, 2024, they found that once again no steps had been taken to mitigate the heat and humidity within the building. Except for Senior Leadership advising staff to open windows where possible, nothing about the situation had changed and no other steps to keep staff, patrons, or the spaces cool were taken. For those staff, including members of our Borrower Services, Shipping, Custodial, and other departments, who do not work in areas where there are windows, no solutions or alternatives were provided. Those same departments also saw an increase in their workload as they caught up on the backlog that resulted from multiple days of closure in a row.

The buildings remained open for full staffing and elevated temperatures and humidity from June 1 - 5, 2024. Staff and patrons continued to experience workplace-related heat illnesses and reactions during this time and only received platitudes from Senior Leadership. We’ve heard reports of employees being unable to eat lunch due to heat-induced nausea. Employees are developing increasingly bad headaches as temperatures in the building rise through the day. Employees with chronic illnesses share worries the heat will cause a flare-up, forcing them to take sick time and miss out on personal events.

Wednesday, June 5, 2024, required the Boylston Building to close yet again when temperatures rose above 86 degrees in the early evening. Senior Leadership, in an email sent by Zaphiris earlier that day, stated that they would be receiving reports about the temperature every two hours. It was only after prompting by the unions that staff began to see individuals taking readings and obtaining copies of reports. These readings have been based on a 10-second read in areas not closest to the computers and staff or patrons. The unions continued to ask for reports when they were not supplied promptly. Those reports showed that while the building was getting increasingly warmer, it had not yet hit the Library’s arbitrary threshold for closure. No 5:00 PM report was taken and by 6:00 PM, after Senior Leadership had gone home, the library staff member left in charge of the building had to call to get permission to close the building.

The chaotic approach of Senior Leadership in the decision-making process around whether or not to close library spaces caused undue stress on everyone involved. Caregivers traveled to the Central Library to enjoy storytime only to be met with closed doors and updates sent out too late; visitors from out of town were hoping to learn more about the art and architecture of the historic Boston Public Library; Staff commuted all the way to work only to receive an email minutes before the start of their shift telling them their workplace was closed. The lack of open and honest communication during the past two weeks is reprehensible. Staff are unsure day-to-day about reporting to work. Staff working in the branch locations are told nothing at all, finding out that the Central Library is closed from BPL's social media or website.

In failing to adequately address the issues brought on by the HVAC being turned off, Senior Leadership is also failing the users of the Boston Public Library. BPL's own Appropriate Use Policy states "...our facilities to be clean, comfortable, and safe places for community use." With the level of heat we've experienced inside of the buildings over the past two weeks, it is clear that BPL does not prioritize the comfort or safety of library users.

On Thursday, June 6, 2024, an announcement was sent out that the construction requiring the HVAC system to be turned off would not be completed on time. The updated timeline estimates the repair completed no earlier than Tuesday, June 11, 2024. With temperatures predicted to be in the high-70s and low-80s for most days between now and then, and the relative humidity on the higher end, staff can't help but wonder what, if anything, Senior Leadership will finally do to follow through on their promise to attempt to mitigate the heat in the building and take care of their staff?

This morning, large fans appeared, not in work areas - in the public areas. Is this a result of WBZ and/or an effort to cool down the building for the Brookline Center's Kids Fund Gala tomorrow night?

Tonight, Friday, June 7, 2024, is the annual Staff Appreciation Dinner. When asked, Senior Leadership said they still intended to hold the dinner as planned. What would show *true* appreciation, would be to take staff needs into account.

We show up, time and time again, through COVID-19, extreme temperatures, and bomb threats, all risking our health and safety. Enough is enough. We are now going into week three of the HVAC being turned off, and still no plans or solutions from Senior Leadership.

This is not just a staff issue; it affects everyone who walks in our doors. Please contact your City Councilors and the Mayor's Office and demand they hold Senior Leadership accountable.