

Testimony on Mold and Health Hazards in the City College Library

My name is Alycia Sellie and I am a library faculty member at the Graduate Center. I am speaking today in place of my colleagues in the City College Library who cannot take time away from their jobs to deliver this testimony.

On August 28, staff in the Cohen Library discovered mold on a number of library books. In the past there have been issues with mold in this library, usually due to leaking infrastructure.

But this fall the mold is different. We are now experiencing a mold infestation.

We initially thought it was caused by damp air coming out of HVAC blowers in the library. And yet it has not been possible to isolate the mold to these areas near the blowers alone. The mold-affected books are located in scattered clusters in sections of shelves. There are not clear patterns to explain the areas where the mold is currently growing. It has been difficult to tape off or mark the affected areas and warn patrons of the shelves which we know to have mold. We are concerned for our students who go into these sections of the library.

We will need to assess which books can or cannot be saved from these mold outbreaks. The loss of books that will be discarded compounds because our library budgets remain stagnant and do not include extra funds or allocations for replacing moldy books. It is also likely that many of the books will be impossible to replace. This work to assess, potentially replace, clean, sequester and arrange damaged books demands library faculty and staff hours that we do not have. After years of understaffing and underfunding our libraries, time devoted to managing this mold robs time away from our other library duties and diminishes the time we have to provide direct support for CUNY researchers.

Our students have complained about this issue to the City College president. We have had many meetings with health and safety and facilities. Facilities has cleaned some of the books but we are not certain that such cleaning is effective for the mold outbreak we have. We've seen cleaning and re-cleaning of the same spaces which implies that cleaning alone will not solve this problem. We were told by our health and safety officer that the air in the library was tested, but we cannot see the results of these tests. He claimed that the humidity levels were safe for books but the amount of mold we have found shows otherwise.

There were some upgrades made to the HVAC system back in 2022-2023 and since then the air has not been the same. Many of us have had respiratory issues over the years; we don't want to get sicker.

We have immediate demands for a fleet of industrial dehumidifiers until the HVAC system can be assessed. We are using gloves and masks to handle books in our collection, but we will need additional supplies if this situation continues. We would like further testing and diagnosis of the issues to be done by a professional mold remediation company. We would like assistance from trained professionals to assess the affected collections, and for a systematic way that

environmental issues could be addressed throughout CUNY instead of being swept under the rug—or taped off and left to bloom into a larger problem.

[Written by Prof. Trevar Riley-Reid from City College]

One of our library staffers discovered mold on some of our books on August 28, 2024, a few days into the fall semester. In the past when we've had issues with mold on books it was usually due to leaking infrastructure. In this current instance, the mold was due to damp air coming out of the HVAC blower. The mold-affected books are scattered here and there or in clusters on a few shelves. There was no rhyme or reason to where the mold was growing. After further examination, we found even more books throughout our collection on all floors that have mold in a variety of places, not just under the HVAC blowers; right now the highest concentration of moldy books is on the 4th floor of Cohen Library.

We originally taped off the area where we first discovered the books to prevent patrons from entering. A student sent a complaint email to our college president who then alerted our environmental health and safety officer of the situation. We were already aware of the problem and were in the process of isolating the books.

We have had many meetings with health & safety and facilities. We are now experiencing a mold infestation. These are some of the things to note:

- * an agreement was reached that facilities would clean off the books using micro cloths sprayed with a solution to kill the mold (we were not told what was in this solution and whether it actually kills mold)
- * we originally closed off the area but have found mold on books scattered throughout the library and have not been able to keep students from using the space
- * facilities has not been doing a very thorough job of cleaning the books so they have had to come back to clean the same areas again;
- * the books have been put back in the wrong order all over the place so library staff has had to go back to reorganize everything
- * we asked for and were given gloves and masks for when we need to handle the books
- * we were told by the H&S officer that the air was tested, but they will not share results; he claimed that the humidity levels were safe for books; the amount of mold we have found shows otherwise

* we are currently trying to determine which books can be discarded; many of the affected books are older and may or may not still be in print; we are planning to replace as many titles as we can, but our collections budget has not been increased

There were some upgrades made to the HVAC system back in 2022-2023 and since then the air has not been the same. Many of us have had respiratory issues over the years; we don't want to get sicker.

We are asking for:

- * industrial sized dehumidifiers (at least 10 to start) until the HVAC can function properly
- * an air quality test by an outside company
- * professional mold remediation company to diagnose and address the problem
- * assistance from trained professionals to clean or replace books that are affected
- * more gloves/masks/ppe for library staff
- * a systematic way to deal with environmental issues on a CUNY level (some campuses don't always want to acknowledge these problems and prefer to sweep them under the rug)