

SECTION 2: ENSURING YOUR POLICIES ARE IN PLACE

Libraries are family oriented, public institutions that are responsible for making a broad selection of materials available for all citizens – young and old – in the community.

Providing this valuable service does not come without its challenges. Therefore, a comprehensive set of operating and procedural policies is needed for each library to clarify generally accepted library guidelines and to govern the operations unique to a library's district and individual facilities.

As a starting point, every citizen and every institution, including public libraries, embrace and are protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Additionally, the American Library Association provides a Library Bill of Rights – a six-point policy framework to help libraries *guide* their services. A copy of the Library Bill of Rights can be found in Appendix D.1.

The library's policies should be based upon the board's assessment of local community needs. This is especially important when any member of the community begins to question the library's procedures and policies. Without clear-cut library policies and procedures in place, simple patron inquiries and questions have the potential to escalate into larger community concerns.

That is why every library should take a proactive approach and ask this two-fold question on a regular basis:

Are our policies clear, comprehensive, and up-to-date – and are they effective in meeting the challenges we face today and anticipate tomorrow?

In addition, it is absolutely imperative that library boards and staff members understand and can abide by all of the library's policies. More information about this important process is provided in Section 3 of this toolkit.

Regular Policy Review

There is only one constant: change. Communities evolve, and their diverse nature changes over time. Therefore libraries must be constantly aware of the changing face of their patrons.

In addition, library policies established several years ago may need to be revisited and revised to keep pace with today's ever-changing technology and social and political climate. In that sense, libraries must remain ahead of the curve, not only with what they

offer their patrons, but also in how they maintain the integrity of the library experience for those patrons.

In addressing the issue of library policy, consider the following actions:

- **Be proactive.** Establish a policy review team – if one doesn't exist – composed of library public service staff and board members that can raise issues to the director and the board for further review. Acknowledging gaps and addressing vague or unclear issues are critical to maintaining the public's trust in the library in the event that issues do arise in the future.
- **Be consistent.** Establish a recurring policy review schedule (e.g., annually) to ensure current policy applies to how the library operates and how patrons use the library. In addition, the library board and staff need ongoing education about library policies and enforcement to ensure alignment. (This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.)
- **Be diligent.** Document difficult or sensitive questions and inquiries from the community, which may include perceived concerns (e.g., Internet access, materials selection policy, objectionable material, ADA compliance and accessibility, etc.), and forward all inquiries to a designated individual (e.g., Library Director). Establish a process for providing the appropriate response in a timely manner to any question or inquiry, and determine if the question or inquiry needs to be reviewed by the policy review team. *Please note: all public questions and inquiries, as well as the library's documents dealing with responses to these questions and inquiries, are subject to open records laws.*
- **Be aware.** Remain in touch and engaged on issues affecting libraries locally, regionally, and nationally. Be particularly aware of any sensitive issues facing neighboring libraries and how those issues may soon affect your library.

12 Policies That Demand Your Attention

Libraries have many policies, and to engage in a review of every policy on a recurring basis would be a time-consuming and largely unnecessary exercise. For example, policies and procedures such as the policy for Concealed Weapons or the procedure for Inclement Weather Closing are not likely to change very often. Likewise, there are administrative and procedural issues that are not likely to change on a frequent basis.

However, there are at least 12 critical policies that should be revisited and considered on a regular basis because they are the most likely to be subject to scrutiny if an issue should arise. Careful consideration should be given to the following policies on a regular basis:

1. Collection development and reconsideration process/forms
2. Patron access to the Internet
3. Internet filtering
4. Public records
5. Privacy and confidentiality

6. Freedom to read
7. Intellectual freedom
8. Public participation in board meetings
9. Public meeting rooms
10. Distribution of materials in public places
11. Bulletin board postings
12. Petitioners on library property

Well-developed and legally sound policies on these critical issues have the potential to further enhance the trust that the public places in the library. But, the opposite is also true: the lack of a policy or unclear and imprecise policy language surrounding these key issues has the potential to detract or erode the community's confidence in the public library.

While every library has its own unique circumstances and ways in which it will want to interact with its patrons and the community, there are also a vast number of issues common to every library. If a policy on a specific issue is absent or a concern regarding a library policy is not properly addressed – especially among the 12 issues previously identified – the situation can quickly escalate from a small issue to a major problem.

To support Ohio's libraries, several sample policies and procedures are provided in the Appendix of this toolkit as a framework for policy development. Each sample is grounded in both the ALA Library Bill of Rights and applicable state law, yet also allows the unique circumstances, culture, and community of the library to be considered. As you engage in a policy review, or perhaps create new policies or procedures, you are encouraged to consider these samples as starting points for developing or revising your library policies and procedures.