

## **Public Relations: The Trustee as a Library Ambassador**

Traditionally, public libraries have done little to sell themselves. At a time when costs and demands are rising and public agencies must compete for limited resources, it is crucial that the director, the staff, and trustees work together to foster a positive public image for the library. While it is important to establish a formal and active public relations program for the library, public relations also encompasses a wide range of daily and informal activities. Library trustees can play a significant role in creating good will for the library. Through their many and varied contacts in the community, trustees have frequent opportunities to inform others about library services, accomplishments, and needs. The trustees are the library's good will ambassadors, building awareness and support wherever possible.

While trustees are being vocal and visible on behalf of the library, they can also be sensitive to community information needs and demands for better library services. Trustees enjoy unique opportunities to serve as liaisons between the public and their library, translating community needs into improved policies and programs.

There are many ways public libraries can inform the public of the wide range of resources and services they provide. Even libraries with small budgets can find creative ways to publicize their accomplishments. Information and examples are available from the Office of Library and Information Services.

### **Board Responsibilities:**

- Establish a public relations policy
- Create a public relations plan and a budget for public relations activities
- Participate in public relations events and evaluate your library's public relations programs
- Encourage staff involvement in public relations and recruit volunteers

### **Individual Trustee Responsibilities**

- Be vocal, visible, and well informed use your library and spread the word about its services and successes
- Look for opportunities to build a positive image for the library
- Tell people about the library's programs, progress, and plans
- Be an advocate for all libraries talk about the merits of quality library service and the importance of reading
- Get to know local officials and persuade them to support the library
- Listen to the community be the library's eyes and ears
- Support the Friends of the Library and recruit new members

## Trustees and the Political Process

It is essential for trustees to be knowledgeable about the political process and to learn ways to affect decision-making. It is equally important for trustees to understand the layers of the political process.

In Rhode Island these layers include city/town and state officials who have certain powers through which libraries gain support. On the national level, Congress makes broad decisions that filter directly down to affect states and localities. Trustees need to cultivate frank, open relationships with all these officials, working with them to produce the best possible climate for libraries.

### Lobbying

Lobbying is the process of expressing opinions to the decision-makers and supporting those opinions. It provides an excellent opportunity for trustees to speak out with knowledge and experience, to present facts, figures, and evidence, and to help legislators understand libraries and what they mean to their constituents. Trustees should get to know their elected officials on the local, state, and national levels and to communicate with them about the issues affecting libraries.

Lobbying is the job of trustees. You represent the community and are advocates for the library. Trustees can make a difference because:

- You see the library from the user's viewpoint
- You have a perspective on the full range of public services
- You represent a broad base of consumers
- You are volunteer participants in government
- You are voters

Remember, you do not have to do it alone. Others in the community will be willing to support you if you provide them with the facts and let them know you need their help. In any lobbying effort, participants need to understand the legislative process and to proceed under a coordinated plan of action.

Although there are a variety of ways to lobby, there is no substitute for personal contact. Remember always to thank your elected officials for listening to you and for helping you.

Keep up with proposed legislation on the local, state, and national levels that may have an impact on library service in your community. Support and participate in state and national legislative lobbying activities sponsored by the Rhode Island Library Association (RILA), the Rhode Island Coalition of Library Advocates (COLA), and the American Library Association. Be a true advocate for libraries!

Lobbying is not a "dirty" word but a cornerstone of democracy; citizens have an obligation to express their opinions and concerns with elected officials. There are many ways to lobby. Personal contact may be the best. However you choose to lobby, some basic rules apply:

- Hostile or threatening behavior has a negative impact. Be considerate and polite. Take a positive approach.
- Timing is important. Keep in touch with officials all year and keep on top of political developments that affect the library. Don't wait until it's too late.
- Credibility is crucial. Clearly state who you represent. Have a clear purpose in mind.
- Know what you are talking about. Focus on facts, figures, evidence.
- Be concise, clear, and consistent.
- Be persistent but reasonable. Politics is the art of compromise. Respect the opinions of others.
- Know the personality and interests of the official you are lobbying. If you can relate your goals to his or hers, you may be more successful.  
Be prepared to back your opinion with those of others, but avoid repetition and overkill.
- Orchestrate your lobbying effort carefully with others.
- Thank officials for their consideration even when they don't agree. When an elected official supports you, follow up with praise and positive reinforcement.

# Intellectual Freedom: A Special Trust

Intellectual Freedom is the phrase to express the concept of access to many kinds of thoughts, ideas and information. Libraries are the traditional custodians of history and the intellectual expressions of men and women, both popular and unpopular.

## Collection Development and Materials Policies

Collection development and materials policies are guided by the principles of intellectual freedom. These stem from the First Amendment of the Constitution which affirms a citizen's right to hold individual beliefs and to express them. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press also apply to their counterpart, the right of unrestricted **access** to the expressions and beliefs of others.

In the process of acquiring and offering materials, libraries may encounter criticism, often in the form of a demand for censorship. Censorship arises out of personal opinions and convictions formed by the experiences and values of individuals. It is precisely the differences between people as individuals and groups that invigorate this country and make it unique. Our citizens strongly value freedom of thought for each individual. The freedom built into the U.S. Constitution enriches the lives of those fortunate to be its citizens. Freedom of expression tolerates and encourages a wide range of opinions, thoughts, and controversy.

Trustees have a mission to protect the right of all people to have access to materials they want and need and to help build a library that answers to community needs and interests. Inevitably, differences will arise over public purchase of certain books, videos, recordings, art, etc. When the library's ownership of materials is challenged, it becomes a **censorship** issue because critics may want not only to remove the material, but also to prevent patrons from borrowing or reading the material.

## What is the Role of the Trustees in this Clash of Opinions?

- Trustees start with a conviction that the library, which cannot own everything, should try to offer a spectrum of opinion. A firm selection policy should be a part of the policy manual and serves as a base for purchases made by the library staff.
- Public libraries play a unique role in the preservation of democracy by providing an open, non-judgmental place where people can pursue their interests and gain an understanding of diverse opinions.
- Trustees play an essential role in safeguarding the intellectual liberty of the public and they must recognize, understand and support freedom of access. The test of a trustee's commitment comes when he/she is called upon to allow and defend the expression of ideas opposed to personal beliefs.
- Censorship campaigns have been waged against ideals and works throughout history for many different reasons -- politics, sex, religion, science, civil rights, race, etc. History has often shown

that what is censored at one time or by one person may be a classic in another time or for another person.

- Trustees have an obligation to assure that the public library provides readers with a variety of materials representing a continuum of viewpoints - liberal, conservative and "middle of the road" -- regardless of special-interest pressure groups.

### **Dealing with Concerns about Library Materials**

One of the major responsibilities of the library director is to handle these complaints in a respectful and fair manner. The key to successfully addressing these concerns is to be sure that the library staff, library board/library governing authority are knowledgeable about the complaint procedures and their implementation.

The written materials selection policy should contain these concepts:

- Selection of library materials is the responsibility of the library director. Members of the professional staff, who are qualified by education and training, may also select books and library materials under the direction of the library director. Materials selected by these trained professionals are considered to be selected by the board.
- Selection of materials will be made based on the needs of the community and standard selection criteria such as: literary merit, accuracy, enduring value, authoritativeness, social significance, format, availability, and cost. No library material should be excluded because of the author's nationality, race, sex, religion, political or social views.
- The board regards censorship to be an individual matter. Patrons are free to reject for themselves materials that they disapprove of, but they must not use this right of self-censorship to restrict the freedom of others to read.
- The library board supports and adheres to the principles of the *Freedom to Read Statement* (Appendix 4) and the *Library Bill of Rights* (Appendix 3), and firmly declares that whenever censorship is involved, no library materials can be removed from the library except under court order.

### **Being Prepared**

The politically astute board and library director should prepare comprehensive collection development and public service policies to guide the selection of materials and **defuse** potential censorship. Trustees must recognize the right of citizens to question any board actions and be willing to listen and to explain the policies of the library. The board should project an open, concerned image without accommodating censorship demands.

## **Handling the Censor**

The recent increased attention to censorship of library materials may be attributed to many things, among them a trend to more accountability in government and a reaction to perceived modern permissiveness. To prevent such an attack, trustees and library directors, working closely together, need to have carefully developed policies in place, plus a "Freedom to Read" public information program in operation.

If an attack comes, trustees and library directors need to be well prepared to enforce the policies and to resolve the complaint amicably if possible, but to meet it with a calm and sustained plan of action. Trustees must firmly support the director in such circumstances.

Libraries need a simple method of dealing with any selection challenges. Ordinarily, the library sets up a procedure by which a patron may request, in writing, reconsideration. As part of this process, the patron should discuss complaints with the library director and then the library board, if necessary.

Rhode Island public libraries can get assistance and support in handling any censorship challenges from the Rhode Island Library Association and its Intellectual Freedom Committee, the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom, and the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. No library should be without the latest editions of *The Intellectual Freedom Manual* published by the American Library Association and the Rhode Island Library Association's *Intellectual Freedom Handbook*.