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Guns in the Library | Safety & Security

by Jennifer A. Dixon

Feb 05, 2018 | Filed in Programs+

Libraries grapple with gun rights—and safety

RUN. HIDE. FIGHT. The video walking viewers through these steps for reacting to an active shooter in a public place has received 6.5 million YouTube views since 2012 and forms a key part of a new generation of safety training for libraries. Gun violence has recently impacted public spaces such as concerts, schools, and churches and hit particularly close to home for many library professionals and patrons when a 16-year-old killed two public library employees in New Mexico in 2017. In this environment, many library leaders are taking new steps to keep their staff and patrons safe.

KNOW THE DRILL

For some libraries, this means organizing “active shooter” trainings that prepare staff to react to dangerous situations. In 2016, the Clifton Park–Halfmoon Public Library (CPHPL) in upstate New York committed to providing such training and worked with the local Saratoga County Sheriff’s Office to offer a 45-minute presentation to staff. In addition to learning about the “run, hide, fight” protocol, staff took a walk through the library to consider how those steps would apply in their own building.

Following this presentation, staff applied what they learned in a drill one morning before the library opened. Jim Foster, CPHPL assistant director, notes that libraries are unique spaces in that they are by definition open to anyone from the public who wishes to enter. “It is trickier than an office building, where you lock your door and hide under your desk,” he says. Instead, staff learned, they should get to an exit if they can, or hide someplace like the stacks.

Realizing the value of the drill’s lessons, library staff next chose to provide training to their patrons and in fall 2017 offered an educational presentation similar to that received by employees. About 100 people attended, eager to learn about how to protect themselves in public spaces. Two days later, the library held a drill during open hours. It announced the drill in advance and required anyone remaining in the library when it started to participate. Staff applied what they had learned to help patrons hide and react in a safe manner. About 200 patrons participated in the lockdown drill, which was followed by a debriefing from a sheriff’s deputy. The library plans to have both staff-only and public drills annually to keep the knowledge fresh for all.



PARTNERS IN SAFETY Staff at the Clifton Park–Halfmoon Public Library, NY, attend a safety training presentation given by the local Sheriff's Office; police officers then offered a debriefing after a librarywide drill. *Photos courtesy of CPHPL*

IMPROVING AWARENESS

The New Jersey State Library (NJSL) has held active shooter trainings for staff in multiple locations, all of which have been oversubscribed. NJSL worked with a local security association, primarily comprised of former state troopers, to prepare frontline staff for the chaos of an active shooter situation. Kathleen Moeller-Peiffer, deputy state librarian for library support services with NJSL, advises libraries to be “proactive” in training their staff, as preparation and awareness are key to making good decisions in tough circumstances. She notes that shortly after a training, a staff member at a New Jersey public library saw someone with a gun on the premises and called the police. “I would like to think that [was] someone who was at a training and was more aware,” she says.

Moeller-Peiffer brings a unique perspective, having come to NJSL from New Mexico, a state with much more liberal gun laws and that experienced a fatal shooting at the Clovis-Carver Public Library (CCPL) in August 2017. “It was interesting to see the conversations that went on in the wake of that,” she says. “People called for a ban on guns in public libraries—but just because there is a ban on guns doesn’t mean that people won’t bring them in.”

Margaret Hinchee, director of CCPL, tells *LJ* that while her staff had never conducted an active shooter training exercise in advance of August’s tragedy, they had reviewed policies and procedures such as knowing to exit the building. However, she notes, in the panic of an active shooter event unfolding, even the most detailed policies can be forgotten. “You just take it for granted that that kind of thing is not going to happen here at the library. Looking back at the whole incident, from beginning to end, it was less than ten minutes.”

Nevertheless, Hinchee explains, the “most important thing” is to have some form of policy in place and for staff to know where they should go for their own safety. Libraries should also make sure that first responders at a local police department and fire department know the layout of their building, she adds, including the location of exits and alarms.

STRICTER SECURITY

Moeller-Peiffer notes that officials at some libraries, such as Portales Public Library (PPL), near CCPL, reacted to the Clovis shooting by considering more aggressive security measures such as Plexiglas in front of the circulation and reference desks. However, aside from personnel and response training, says PPL director Denise Burnett, no other security changes have taken place to date; the estimate provided by the construction company was too high, and her request that the city hire an in-house contractor for the library remains in the works.



In November 2017, the New Mexico Library Association (NMLA) made recommendations to help prevent another violent event, including a focus on comprehensive building security such as limiting the number of entrances and exits in a library and never having an unlocked entrance at the rear of a building. The New Mexico presentation also featured suggestions for libraries with limited budgets, such as seeking out donations of discarded but still working equipment from larger agencies that are upgrading their own security systems; grants; and community partnerships with local security system contractors.

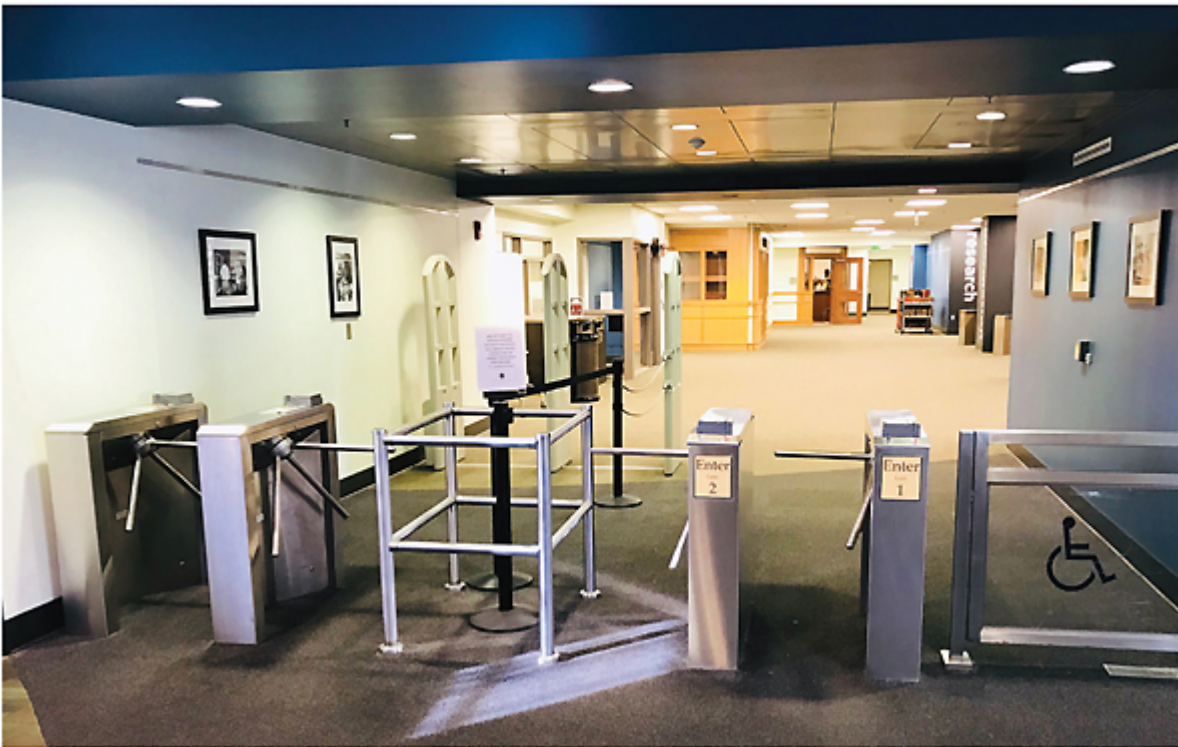
Major actions such as the use of metal detectors or full-time security guards remain rare in all but very large institutions or those in major metropolitan areas. Hinchee notes that a security guard may not be able to make a difference in preventing a shooter from entering and harming someone without additional barriers like metal detectors. Staff in Clovis are now required to carry walkie-talkies while on the library floor.

Academic campuses, including their libraries, are no stranger to gun violence. In 2010, a student at the University of Texas, Austin, started shooting with an AK-47 outdoors before running into a campus library and taking his own life. In 2014, three students were shot when a former student opened fire in the midst of the crowded Strozier Library at Florida State University (FSU), Tallahassee. Both incidents demonstrated the vulnerability of academic libraries.

In advance of the FSU shooting, the campus had already prioritized library security, with a security force of full-time staff, as well as student workers and public safety officers from the university, monitoring visitors in the library lobby. The library required all patrons and visitors to swipe through turnstiles before entering the main space. According to a report released by FSU

in the aftermath of the shooting, security footage showed the gunman entering the lobby shortly after midnight during the busy exam period and staring at the turnstiles, “perplexed,” before exiting and opening fire on the library steps. Julia Zimmerman, dean of university libraries at FSU, notes that “[the shooter] could easily have jumped over, but it’s a psychological barrier. Had he actually breached the turnstiles and gone into the library,” where hundreds of students were studying for exams, “it could have been a disaster.”

Zimmerman adds, “One of the things that we really learned is just how vulnerable we all are.... You can’t prepare for every eventuality.” In the wake of the shooting, the university initiated a security audit of major buildings. The audit “made us a believer that putting those turnstiles in was absolutely the right thing to do,” says Zimmerman. While many students and employees ran for cover or fled the building the night of the shooting, others walked closer to check out the commotion or see what was happening. There is “only so much you can do” to prepare a very large and constantly revolving student body to make the best choices in a crisis, according to Zimmerman, so instead the library relies on regular active shooter training for all of its staff, including student workers. The library leadership also continue to work closely with FSU security to develop best practices.



A DETERRENT Turnstiles at Florida State University’s Strozier Library helped prevent a more severe incident.

Photo courtesy of FSU

EXPERT TIPS

Steve Albrecht, a security expert who has worked with libraries throughout the United States on workplace violence prevention and has written for *LJ* on library security, emphasizes the importance of teaching staff to recognize danger signs in the context of their own community. In a state with more liberal gun laws, he notes, seeing a person carrying a gun may not merit an immediate call to the police. Staff should consider whether a person's body language or demeanor suggests they are looking to threaten or harm someone. The NMLA presentation, similarly, advised "situational awareness" to look for people who appear uncomfortable or suspicious.

This is understandably a murky area that could lead to targeting of innocent patrons, such as homeless or mentally ill persons, or those fitting a particular racial profile. Instead, Albrecht gives the example of patrons in open carry states who are "showy" with guns rather than carrying them in a discreet holster, or who repeatedly refuse to make eye contact. Overall, trainings like the New Mexico presentation encourage employees to trust their instincts and remain aware of who is coming in and out of the building.

Albrecht also describes trainings—such as that organized by New York's CPHPL and many other institutions—and staff meetings as key opportunities to have "difficult discussions." Staff meetings may use role play to portray dangerous scenarios to help employees consider how they would respond to a stressful or frightening situation. Staff can also undertake a security assessment of their library building, identifying exits and safe hiding places. Items like carts or shelves can be used to block doors and keep shooters out, he notes, while thick books could potentially stop bullets.

Albrecht adds, "In a perfect world, libraries would have a good relationship with their local police or sheriff's department. Police can be seen as partners for library staff and patrons." As was the case in the CPHPL active shooter drills, local police or private security companies can also provide support for trainings and safety assessments. Some library/police collaborations are even more proactive and go beyond the institution itself: as this article went to press, Kansas City Public Library, MO, announced a partnership with the Kansas City police department and Moms Demand Action to offer gun safety presentations and free gun locks to library patrons.

However, library and local police collaborations can prove challenging in municipalities with limited resources. CCPL's Hinchee notes that she has requested regular police visits to the library and, since the shooting, additional security tools such as panic buttons. These requests have been met with slow or sporadic response, and local police still do not have a detailed understanding of the library's layout or a commitment to helping secure the building at vulnerable times such as opening or closing. Moreover, a police presence in the library can present other issues, making some patrons feel unsafe.

Many professionals who spoke to *LJ* are prioritizing preparedness and confidence for their staff over more rigid security procedures like additional guards or entry checkpoints. Overall, library administration and employees are doing their best to walk a fine line between keeping patrons safe and maintaining the openness that makes libraries such a vital part of their communities.



NO GUNS ALLOWED

Guns in the United States are regulated state by state, creating a patchwork of rules about who may own and carry a firearm and where they may carry it. Given these disparities, library administrators nationwide take varying approaches to addressing firearms in and around their buildings.

Advocating for Change

Confusing regulations have spurred librarians to take action in Missouri, where the law permits many residents to carry a gun legally without a concealed carry permit. The most recent concealed carry law provides 17 locations or instances where weapons may be prohibited, including those that serve large numbers of children, such as schools and churches. The law does not, however, include public libraries. According to president of the Missouri Library Association (MLA) Vicky Baker, “It is our belief that we were inadvertently left out of the law—there are always children in our building. We are now trying to get across to the legislature that we want to be able to decide what to do about this.”

In October 2017, MLA voted on a legislative agenda at its annual conference, expressing a desire to have the law changed so that library administrators may choose whether to prohibit or allow firearms on their premises. The association is working with a legislative advocate and communicating with individual legislatures to clarify its position on the topic. Librarians in Nevada encountered a similar issue in early 2017, with a bill going before the Nevada Assembly that would prohibit weapons from public library property, absent written permission from the governing board of the library. Before the bill died in committee in May, vehement Nevada gun rights supporters spoke out in opposition to the restriction of weapons in public libraries.

With respect to the MLA legislative agenda, the National Rifle Association (NRA) has published a response on its website that describes the position of MLA as vying to “opt out of allowing law-abiding citizens to defend themselves.” Baker admits that the topic of firearms is “contentious” and emphasizes that MLA is simply advocating for the ability of individual libraries to decide what approach to firearms is best for their location—

appropriate rules may differ in rural areas vs. a city such as Kansas City or St. Louis, she says. While not all librarians and patrons across Missouri agree on the best restrictions for guns in their libraries, notes Baker, “I think we can all get on the same page...[by letting] the local community decide.”

Protecting an Open Campus

The University of Virginia (UVA) faces unique challenges, as it is home to a network of academic libraries but is also—as illustrated by the violent demonstrations of August 2017, when white nationalists clashed with counterprotesters on campus grounds—a historic space open to public visitors. UVA is also located in an open carry state, where concealed weapons and open carry without a permit for people over 18 are legal, although the university does have a carve out from state law, meaning its campus is an exception to open carry rules and firearms are prohibited.



PUBLIC AWARENESS The permanent sign displayed at University of Virginia buildings stating the campus stance on guns. *Photo courtesy of UVA*

According to John Unsworth, dean of libraries at UVA, however, there is “no reason to believe that the general public” is aware of that carve out. In recent months, a working group at the university has started to address questions of policy and awareness around guns on campus, including developing signage that informs people they cannot bring guns into university buildings. Signs are now posted on buildings that receive regular traffic from the general public, including libraries. Unsworth explains, “I didn’t want the people who work at the desk to have to think about what they would do if someone walked in with a gun, wondering if they are aware of the policy. They can just call 911.”

Guns Outside the Library

Other libraries take compromise positions in order to comply with regional laws. In Ohio, the Dayton Metro Library (DML) policy prohibits visitors from bringing all dangerous weapons, including firearms, into library buildings. As of last year, there is an exception

to the rule barring guns from library premises: concealed carry permit holders may store their firearms in locked vehicles on library property. DML instituted this change in response to a 2017 change in Ohio state law, permitting concealed carry permit holders to leave guns in secured vehicles. The bill represents a middle ground, much like the similar compromise attempted in Nevada.

Tim Kambitsch, DML executive director, describes the change as a “modest” one that addresses state law while also staying consistent with the view that “the library is no place for guns or other weapons.” As is the case with any shift on a hot-button issue such as guns, it did spark some controversy. Kambitsch recalls a member of a local gun group who came to a library board meeting in advance of the vote on the policy changes “to make a case that any restriction on open carrying of firearms outside of library buildings is in violation of state law and the Ohio constitution.... The local gun group representative returned the following day with a gun in his holster but did not enter our building.” The individual engaged with security guards and left of his own accord without incident, and since then the policy has garnered limited concern or reaction from staff or the public.

Regardless of local laws or standards, libraries around the country share the same priorities—creating a space that is open to the communities they serve and that provides patrons with a safe environment. As the recent American Library Association (ALA) statement on the effect of gun violence on libraries makes clear, libraries are meant to be “safe havens” and can serve a vital role in promoting conversations and progress about sensible gun policies.

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