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Jennifer Dixon

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Safety First | Library Security

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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THE SAFETY OF STAFF and patrons is a top priority for all libraries, with managers striving to maintain a welcoming and secure environment for all who wish to make use of the space. Library systems nationwide enact security policies tailored to their respective communities and resources. Although these vary from library to library, librarians must strike a balance between offering a broad open door policy for all community members and ensuring a safe, secure environment for staff and patrons.



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SPOTTING & ASSESSING TROUBLE

While libraries are committed to making all people welcome, not all behaviors are equally so. A wide variety of patron actions can prove disruptive and dangerous, from drug use and public intoxication to abusive language. Library staff must be on the lookout for dangerous conduct, and libraries must articulate policies on how the offending patrons should be treated.

Many libraries address these issues by banning repeat offenders from the premises for a period of time, which serves both to remove disruptive individuals and send a message that the library doesn't allow such conduct. For example, the Omaha Public Library (OPL) recently adjusted its policies on suspending library privileges in response to staff concerns that the previous policies were too lenient. The penalties for the two most common violations—public intoxication and harassment of staff or patrons—have been increased to one month for a first offense. According to OPL executive director Laura Marlane, the library banned a significant number of people when the penalties first increased this January, but the frequency of such disciplinary action has since “tapered off as people realize that [such] behavior is not tolerated anymore.” The library will also ban patrons for a longer period for more serious infractions. For example, OPL recently permanently banned a patron who threatened staff with a Taser.

Melissa Munn, community conduct coordinator for the King County Library System, WA, describes a policy of teaching patrons “how to be a successful library user” by clearly communicating the library’s expectations for behavior. Staff are trained to assume that misbehaving patrons don’t know about the rule that they are violating and—provided their actions are not violent—are given warnings and an opportunity to modify their conduct before they are

asked to leave. Munn explains that the library also trains staff “to focus on the behavior and not the person...which has helped responses become more balanced. If a child is screaming, the child will be asked to leave the library the same as a [disruptive] adult” might be.

Some public libraries attempt to combat the root causes of problematic patron conduct through outreach. In Tucson, AZ, for example, the Pima County Public Library (PCPL) brings in registered nurses specializing in public health hired through the county’s Department of Health to address behavioral and mental health issues among patrons. These are challenges that library staff may lack the time or the expertise to handle properly. According to PCPL deputy director of public services Karyn Prechtel, behavioral health problems can be the “root cause” of many dangerous activities. Since starting this program in 2012, the library has seen a marked reduction in 911 calls reporting threatening conduct and an increase in calls seeking help for health crises.

SECURITY ON-SITE

Librarians and paraprofessionals cannot be in more than one place at a time, and managing troublesome patrons can prove too much for them to deal with alone. It is common for larger public libraries in urban settings to hire some combination of professional security guards and off-duty police officers.

Such support comes at a considerable cost. PCPL budgets just shy of \$650,000 for the salaries of security guards at 12 out of 27 branches and off-duty police at two. That budget doesn’t include the cost of security cameras, another common measure, installed at nine locations and potentially expanding to more.

Owing to the expense, library systems must prioritize higher-risk branches for enhanced security staffing. According to Marlane, OPL will “target the branches that need it most,” and security officers will “trade off roving schedules and go to other branches to check in as needed.”

Interactions between library security and patrons don’t always run smoothly. The Shaw branch of the District of Columbia Public Library made headlines in March when a library-employed security officer

demanding that a patron remove her hijab or leave the building, spurring protests and a widespread lack of trust on the part of patrons. The library has issued an apology, and the officer was put on night duty, where he would not have to interact with patrons.

Security employees can become a valuable part of the library, however, if they are properly integrated into the environment and form positive relationships with community members. For example, according to Prechtel, PCPL has made an effort to “find officers who are friendly and



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AND NOT THE PERSON.”**
—MELISSA MUNN, COMMUNITY CONDUCT COORDINATOR,
KING COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM, WA

great with kids and really fit in those communities” served by the library. “That can make all the difference in the world,” she says, and when guards make “personal connections” with patrons their presence is less likely to meet with suspicion or concern.

It can also be valuable for libraries to form relationships with their local police force. This increases communication and understanding between library staff and the officers responsible for taking calls from the library. Munn emphasizes the value of “educating law enforcement about what our mission is—to provide open and free access to everyone.” Marlane tells *LJ* that she has made an effort to meet with local officers, including participating in a police “ride along,” to get a chance to see what they deal with and to strengthen the bond between librarians and police. Local law enforcement and library staff can collaborate as partners to exchange ideas and support.

The Bozeman Public Library, MT, has taken an unusual approach to the need for library security and collaborative relationships with the police without putting pressure on the library’s budget. Because the Bozeman police force recently experienced a shortage of staff space, the library provided an office on its second floor, which is regularly occupied by officers who respond to calls in and around the library. The police will also be developing an interactive children’s museum within a small room in the lobby. According to director Susan Gregory, this creates a “very low-key, very positive” visible police presence. In the weeks since setting up the new office location, Gregory says, the frequency of patron behavior problems has noticeably decreased.

LISTEN AND LEARN

Library staff are “on the front lines and know the environment better than anybody,” Munn tells *LJ*, and managers should listen to their opinions on security matters and empower them to make security decisions. Holding input sessions with staff about their experiences gives them an opportunity to point out frequent problems and offer ideas for solving them. Munn calls this the “emotional intelligence” side of library security.

“Staff are oftentimes the ones who are the first to respond and manage a patron-on-patron conflict that may escalate into a fight,” Munn explains. Staff have to deal as well with other threatening issues, including drug use, gang activity, and patrons who “become verbally abusive when asked to correct a behavior, yelling at staff, calling them every name in the book,” Munn says. Staff can also encounter more dangerous conduct. Marlane notes that OPL employees have experienced patrons who “set fires in the bathrooms, and one who shot a BB gun at staff through a window.” At Bozeman PL, staff cope with “transient, unstable patrons who on occasion approach our young female [employees]...for dates,” says Gregory.

Management must stand behind public services staff. It is important that “staff feel like they are supported and...can do their jobs,” says Marlane. This approach includes increasing confidence through training and clear policies and “letting people know that if they have to make a tough

judgment call...their supervisors will...not [override] them,” she says. It is valuable for staff to have documentation of how and when to draw boundaries with problem patrons. When staff make an error in judgment, she says, it is preferable to “talk about that away from the patron and, if the situation warrants it, clarify the issue with the patron themselves. That keeps [staff] in control and makes them feel accountable.”

Additionally, libraries should provide clear guidelines on expectations, for example offering policies for when staff should attempt to handle situations on their own, when they should contact management, and when they should call 911. Gregory notes that, in dealing with misbehaving patrons, Bozeman staff must adhere to a “Behavior Policy” that emphasizes the role of the library as a compassionate institution. If a staffer were to discriminate against a patron or abuse their power, she says, “we would write the staff person up immediately and give a verbal warning. We do not—ever—tolerate bullying...from our staff.”

Libraries also may work with the police to provide valuable training, teaching staff skills for crisis management and increasing their ability to address challenging situations. Annual staff days at Bozeman PL, for example, include law enforcement instruction that addresses common situations, such as how to de-escalate conflicts or how to approach individuals who are mentally ill or violent. Such training “gives staff a level of self-confidence,” says Gregory.

Staff can also combat security concerns simply by remaining visible, according to Munn. “Being present can be a major deterrent to bad behavior. The more engaged we are with our patrons, the less bad behavior we are going to see,” she says.

Overall, reliable security “allows librarians to focus on their work” and provide “much-needed services to patrons” without constant worry about managing behavior, says Prechtel. “It absolutely makes a difference.”

Jennifer A. Dixon is a graduate student at the School of Information, Pratt Institute, New York, studying Library Science. Prior to starting at Pratt, Dixon worked as a commercial litigator and federal law clerk in New York City

library security

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