

Practical Tips for Dealing with the Most Challenging Library Patrons

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Goals: Reduce the number of problems and learn how to deal with the problems we can't prevent.

I. Reduce the Risk of Serious Problems

- A. Create a good environment
 - Clean, well-lighted, well maintained (“broken window” concept)
 - Friendly and professional
 - Avoid a wall of “no!” signs

- B. Reduce the risk of violence by treating everyone with respect
 - Be sure the person knows you are listening. Make eye contact.
 - Tone of voice and body language is crucial
 - Attitude is as important as actions
 - People need to feel heard and will fight for respect

- C. Never let it get personal
 - These are the library's rules, not yours.
 - Show you will do everything possible to help.
 - Show that you are making an extra effort
 - Give the patron the benefit of the doubt

- D. Apologize
 - A simple “I'm sorry about this problem” can go a long way towards calming people down.

- E. Focus on the library issue
 - Don't get drawn into discussions about taxes, the government, etc.

- F. Avoid shuffling patrons around needlessly.
 - When you do refer elsewhere, be sure that the patron is sent to the proper place and that there is someone to help. If not sure, call or walk with the patron.

- G. Handle complaints professionally and politely.
 - Listen and let them know you hear them.
 - Offer options
 - Explain policies – everyone on staff should be able to say why we do something.
 - If the explanation does not satisfy, be sure staff knows how to refer to the next step
 - Letter to the Director
 - Contact person at City Hall
 - Appear at Board Meeting
 - Be willing to get a supervisor

- H. Address only the most pressing needs when someone is upset.
Especially true for someone under the influence
Do the minimum and get the person out, explain other issues later via phone or letter.

- I. Never back someone into a corner
 - Give outs and give options – Supervisors, give flexibility to staff
 - Compromise as you can
 - Let staff know they can break rules to deter violence (check out a reference book)

- J. Greeting people prevents crime.
 - Banks and police are recommending it
 - Prevents the feeling of anonymity that gives permission to crime

II. Prepare for the Worst

- A. Make a plan to deal with frequent problem patrons. We know who cause most of our problems.
 - Listen to concerns from staff and encourage them to share issues.
 - Have key staff make a plan, decide how to carry it out and who is responsible.
 - After carrying it out, share the outcome with other staff. Put it in writing as documentation. Remember - this could become public record.

- B. Create a policy manual to train staff on handling emergencies.
 - Our example is at www.daytonmetrolibrary.org/ala
 - It's important that staff at all levels are involved in creating the document
 - When complete, train staff and guards and a way to train all new employees

- C. Learn how to deal with people with mental illnesses

- D. Make connections with community resources
 - Mental health facilities, homeless shelters, children services, police, etc. can help you deal with potentially volatile situations
 - Can help write sections of manual and train staff
 - Make it a two way street by talking about what the library can offer them: provide booklists, research support, meeting space, etc.

- E. Consider installing security cameras
 - Fairly inexpensive
 - Less likely to cause complaints than years ago
 - Need to work with staff and union to assure that the library is not monitoring their behavior
 - Create policy before installing (who can look at pictures, what is done with them, are they sent to other libraries, when to contact police, etc.)
 - Let the public know that cameras are in use. A simple sign or two is generally adequate
 - In the first two months, our cameras gave us evidence to ban several patrons. Helped to convict one violent person.

III. Handling the Tough Situations

- We can control ourselves. We can control the environment. We cannot control other people. We have to work on what we can control.
- Stay calm.
- Don't take it personally.
- Be friendly but firm.
- Tone of voice is important.
- Never touch a patron.
- Keep some physical distance (table, check-out desk, etc.)
- If possible, sit down with patron. This creates a less stressful environment.
- Keep conversations in a public area if there is any risk of violence. Avoid going into an office.
- Team work is critical. When a staff member notices a patron talking loudly to another staff member, get there quickly. Two heads are better than one for finding a way to solve a problem or to get help.
- Have signals to get help (nonverbal, code, panic buttons, etc.)
- Be sure that every staff person knows he or she is authorized to call the police in an emergency.

IV. Banning Patrons – An important option for the worst offenders

- A. Be prepared
 - Have clear, written policies
 - They should be reviewed by legal counsel regularly
 - Be communicated to the staff and public

B. Train staff

- All staff and guards need to be “officially” trained on the policies
- Be sure training is updated as policies are changed are added

C. Document incidents

- If banning a patron for more than a few days, written communication with the patron is important
- Document incidents daily and keep a record to show a pattern of problems
- Send a letter to the banned patron with details including the length of the ban, description of the actions which lead to the ban, a copy of the policy and any other relevant information
- If there is no address, leave the letter at the door and hand it the next time the patron comes in
- Include a right of appeal, first to the library director then to the library’s governing board (due process)

D. Be sure your policies are clear

- Vague and overbroad policies are hard to defend in court
- Too vague: “Patron dress and hygiene shall conform to the standard of the community for public places.” Safer: “Patrons whose bodily hygiene is offensive so as to constitute a nuisance to other persons shall be required to leave the building.”
- Think about how a non-library “reasonable” person would interpret the policies

E. Don’t ban more than you need to

- Only ban the worst offenders, find other ways to handle other problems
- Look for limited bans: an internet abuser can use the library but not the Internet, someone with an odor problem can come back when clean

F. There is risk in **not** banning potentially dangerous patrons

- If your library knows, or should have known, about a risk and does not address it, a lawsuit that will be hard to win

G. Balance legal court vs. court of public opinion

- Get sued means publicity
- If you are doing something to protect the public, you can win in public opinion court (throw out flashers, violent people, etc)
- If, however you throw out homeless who is smelly on a freezing day, you will lose in the public’s eyes
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H. Don’t be intimidated by threat to sue

- If a patron says “I’ll sue you!” the best response is simply “Ok.”

I. Think about

- How would an outside average person perceive this?