

Ethics for Library Trustees, Staff, and Friends

By Donald B. Reynolds

“Friends can make the difference between a mediocre and an outstanding library.”

—Jean A. Ashfield, *Friends of Library Handbook*.

To guide the work of librarians, other professionals providing information services, library trustees, and library staff, the American Library Association (ALA) developed a Code of Ethics in 1939, updated in 2008. In 2012, ALA's United for Libraries adopted an amended Public Library Trustee Ethics Statement (ow.ly/T34yQ) to help trustees understand their obligations.

Over the years, to describe the public's expectations about the library, statements also have been developed:

Library Bill of Rights, Freedom To Read, and Freedom To View. In addition, many local library boards, such as our seven counties in East Tennessee, have developed Codes of Ethics to help provide specific guidelines for their members (ow.ly/T34P2).

These statements are designed to assist library staff and trustees, but there has not been a national ethics statement to help Friends of the Library identify their place in relation to both. To define these relationships, in 1994 the Tennessee Regional Library and State Library staffs developed “A Comparison of Responsibilities: Local Library Board of Trustees, Local Library Director, Regional Library, and Friends of the Library,” revised in 2013 (ow.ly/T34Zw).

In *Working Ethics: Strategies for Decision Making and Organizational Responsibility*, Marvin T. Brown writes, “[T]he purpose of ethics... is to help people make better decisions.” So, to clarify Friends' responsibilities and help member Friends make better decisions, the Friends of Tennessee Libraries (FOTL) developed and adopted an Ethical Dozen for Friends of the Library statement for local Friends groups to use as a model for their own ethical behavior:

The Ethical Dozen for Friends of the Library

Adopted September 18, 2015

1. Friends of the Library is a group of individuals who value public library services to the community and who volunteer their time, talents, and efforts to promote and support the vision, mission, and objectives of their library in whatever way will be helpful.
2. Friends organize to help support the work of the library, not to engage in the work and responsibilities of the library trustee

board members or the library staff. Friends of the Library cooperate with both, but do not interfere with either. Friends recognize that they do not perform a decision-making role for the library: they are familiar with and support the policies of the library. Friends provide input into the library's long-range planning process and remain knowledgeable as to the status of the plan.

3. Friends support quality library services in the community through fundraising, volunteerism, and serving as advocates for the library's program.
4. Friends work to ensure that the public has equal access to information, both as a Constitutional right and as the best way to sustain a democratic way of life.
5. Friends subscribe to and believe in the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom To Read, and the Freedom To View statements (ow.ly/T34go).
6. Friends recognize that authority rests with the whole Friends board assembled in public meetings and shall make no personal statements or promises nor take any private action which may compromise the board. They support the actions taken by a majority of the board and clearly differentiate personal opinions from board decisions.
7. Friends do not interfere with the library operations of the library staff.
8. Friends promote the library program to the public.
9. Friends conduct fundraising which complements the library's mission. Friends' activities support library board long-range plans and policies. Friends decide how to spend their funds after conferring with the library director.
10. Friends follow legal, professional, and ethical practices in making decisions. They scrupulously avoid personal conflicts of interest and do not condone them in others. They say nothing in a board meeting that could be construed to violate anyone's civil rights.
11. Friends serve as advocates for local, state, and national library issues and represent the library program to legislators and funders.
12. Friends are open and welcoming to suggestions, questions and communications from the library staff, trustee board members, and the public.

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