

Policies explain why

Every day, public librarians and staff make decisions. They choose books from the over 50,000 published annually. They decide whether to close the library if a snowstorm hits. They act on requests to use the library meeting room. They accept gifts from the community. They answer questions about public access to the Internet. These and other daily decisions can be handled efficiently, consistently, and fairly when trustees create policies.

Policies bring order, logic and stability to a library's operation. They explain the reasons for procedures, clarify confusing situations, and defuse conflict before it escalates. Policies may not prevent problems, but having policies make staff better equipped to face questions and crises. Policies protect the individual rights and freedoms of all, often by aligning the local public library with its heritage: principles found in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read, and the American Library Association Code of Ethics.

Policies become part of the legal framework of the library. When a member is barred from the library or denied services, policy makes the case that the outcomes are based on clear decision making, preceded by board discussion and staff understanding.

Written policies lend continuity; new board members and staff will have guidelines as they learn the ropes. Trustees use policies to help insure that the board's general service philosophy is followed. If the library's practices aren't consistent with the policies, make changes to the policies or to the practices.

Trustees adopt policies – librarians carry them out

Besides hiring a librarian, creating policy is the major responsibility of public library trustees. Under Vermont law [2 VSA 143 (a)], trustees have the responsibility to make policy. Representing the community the library serves, trustees develop an underlying philosophy to guide the services and operation of the library. The library director, who works closely with the community, has valuable experience and practical perspective to share in policymaking. Staff and community opinion are also important in developing policies.

Policymaking is a group process that results in consensus about philosophy of service. All trustees should stand behind the policies the board adopts, while the librarian and staff put them into practice. If staff find the policies need revision, they suggest changes to the board which may adopt or modify them. It's a two-way process.

Developing library policies isn't easy. Trustees need to think about the ideas and understand their impact. Encouraging debate and public involvement during the policy development process is vital. Once a board officially adopts policy, all trustees and staff must support it publicly and answer questions about it in a positive manner. Work out differing views before staff enforce policy and then back it publicly in a unified manner.

Policies are written and dated

Even the smallest library with a long, stable history needs dated, written policies. Writing policies down prevents misunderstanding by giving everyone involved with the library a common point of reference. When questions occur, the policies can be reviewed for possible solutions. Not every situation will become clearer with a written document, but having an articulated set of values will guide decision making. Including the date when the policy is approved makes it easy to determine what the most current policy is.

Writing policies starts with a general discussion of ideas at a board or committee meeting. One person takes notes and puts the ideas together into a draft policy. The board may look at other libraries' policies for inspiration and language. Mail the draft policy to the group before the meeting so trustees have time to consider it before group discussion. When a committee has created the new policy, the full board then reviews, discusses and votes on the policy. Once the board agrees on wording, the policy is officially warned for voting at the next board meeting. Many libraries include legal review of policies to make sure they agree with Vermont law.

Using sample policies makes writing and discussion easier. The Department of Libraries offers advice on policy drafts. Policies should cite sources and authority when they are issued on the basis of Vermont statute, the American Library Association or other resource such as the PATRIOT Act or the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Writing advice

Use active voice and positive statements. Tell what the library will do, rather than what is not allowed. For example, replace "Textbooks will not be bought," with "The library purchases books of interest to the general reader." Rewrite sentences until they sound straightforward, positive, and authoritative. Use simple language and avoid library jargon to make policies clear and understandable.

Focus on administration of the library, not the board of trustees. Procedures for board operation are called by-laws. Bylaws include election or appointment, term length, rules for conducting meetings and other board issues.

Review library policies annually, and revise them as necessary. If board members sign and date policies on adoption, the date is a reminder for review.

Provide policies to trustees and staff members. Every new trustee and new staff member should be oriented to library policies. Welcome questions as a means to understanding the thinking behind the policies.

Keep a copy of the policies at the circulation desk(s) and on the library website. The staff and public need easy access to policies. Post the code of conduct in the library. Staff should know the policies and how to explain them. Consider publication to local media when the topic warrants.

Develop policies in several areas

In general, every public library's policies should include a statement of its mission, goals, and priorities. In addition, a library's policies should address general operation, collection development, behavior, use of electronic resources, and personnel. If the library is part of municipal government, employees may fall under town/city personnel policies; a separate library personnel policy should parallel that of the municipality. The board should consult with an attorney before adopting personnel policies.

Public Library Policies: What to Cover

Service Philosophy

- Mission statement - the library's role in the community, who it serves, and its priorities
- Governance - relationship to community, municipal government, and services and organizations, reflecting the framework in which it operates
- Identification of primary users and their needs
- Service goals in brief – focus and how the collection matches the focus

General operation of the library

- Who may use the library? Nonresident use, out-of-town borrowers, seasonal residents, etc. Under what circumstances will the library deny privileges
- Fines and fees – not allowed for regular library services. When and for whom fees are charged; how decisions are made
- Hours of operation - a general statement about how they will be determined
- Holidays the library is closed
- Responsibilities of staff, trustees, the municipality
- Relationships and cooperation with community organizations, Friends group, schools, other libraries statewide and locally, and other service agencies
- Use of facilities, equipment, and display space - Meeting room use and exhibit areas should be addressed consistently. ALA has recommended guidelines
- Unattended children and their supervision
- Confidentiality of registration, circulation, and other records (see "Confidentiality" below)
- Nondiscrimination - a statement welcoming everyone regardless of race, gender, religion, economic status, disability, national origin, etc. If the library is not accessible to people with disabilities, note alternative delivery methods and state that programs and activities will be held in alternative sites with prior warning

Collection Development (Materials Selection)

- Principles of intellectual freedom (see below) - refer to national documents, and append to the policy
- Responsibility for selection - who makes decisions or delegates that authority
- Criteria use to evaluate potential additions for the collection, such as:
 - form/format, such as e-book or DVD
 - subjects emphasized; shared responsibility with other libraries (schools, larger/smaller libraries)
 - reading level, scope, treatment - scholarly vs. general or layperson's approach
 - reliance on interlibrary loan for items beyond the scope of the collection
 - tools to be used in selection process. Discuss the process rather than listing review media

- responsiveness to public requests and current interests

- Restrictions, if any, on use – e.g., historical, rare, Vermont, and reference items
- Gifts - apply the same evaluation criteria to them as with other items
- Withdrawal, and disposal - include general criteria and philosophy behind regular reassessment of materials' usefulness to the collection
- Availability of materials for people with disabilities through the Department of Libraries Special Services Unit
- Procedure for review of selections - outline the process used when material is challenged and append a Reconsideration form to be used

Behavior code

- Promote the safety of staff and the general public; safeguard library property
- Reflect the law where appropriate or municipal code (harassment, e.g.)
- Behavior should not single out age groups for special treatment

Personnel

Whether incorporated or municipal, a public library's personnel policies should show cognizance of federal and state employment laws.

- Hours worked, breaks, overtime, weekends, nights
- Leaves for vacation, sickness, jury duty, maternity, family medical emergencies, etc.
- Job descriptions, performance evaluations, probation, , promotion, termination, retirement
- Staff orientation, continuing education, professional organizations, meeting attendance
- Grievance process (usually the only time support staff present at board meetings)
- Payment of staff dues and expenses for travel to meetings, conferences, workshops
- Fringe benefits, employee privileges
- Conduct, attitude
- Use of volunteers
- Nondiscrimination
- Municipal libraries should become familiar with the VLCT Municipal Employment Law Handbook at the Vermont League of Cities and Towns, www.vlct.org .

Public access to electronic resources, including the Internet

The library may wish to incorporate specific guidelines for use, or state philosophy for use. For more information see the American Library Association website www.ala.org

- Philosophy - why service is offered, what the benefit to the public is
- Who may use the services and what is available
- Minors' use of resources and parental supervision

Confidentiality and Privacy

- By VT statute [22 VSA 171ff] public libraries must keep records of patrons 16 or older confidential unless the user waives that right. Public libraries must disclose the records of patrons under 16 if requested by parents
- Confidentiality includes materials viewed in print or electronic form, research questions posed, materials in any format that the patron has requested through interlibrary loan or has borrowed or any other library service or consultation the patron requests

Review/Revision of policy

- Essential: regular review of library policies; procedure for amending or adding policies

Problems still arise in libraries with policies

Policies should be adaptable to fit a variety of situations, but sometimes they are too vague or general. Broad statements such as “our goal is to provide good service” are not clear enough because everyone has definitions of “good” and “service.” Policies should demonstrate what is meant by the terms used.

The library staff should expect a free hand in carrying out policy, just as trustees should expect policies to be carried out with dedication and respect. Policy creation should happen at a warned meeting, not on the street or at the circulation desk. Save disagreements about policies for board meetings, and welcome discussion and examination of policies on a regular basis.


Resources and more information for Sample Policies

Begin with the American Library Association (ALA) for writing and revising policies related to collections and intellectual freedom, privacy, and meeting rooms. Refer to the latest edition of the Intellectual Freedom Manual, currently the 2015, 9th edition. www.ala.org

WebJunction includes policies from many states. www.webjunction.org

Vermont public library policies are posted at the [Vermont Department of Libraries](#)

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