

Developing Essential Library Policies

10

Policies guide the daily operation of the library and the decision-making of the library director and staff. Essentially, policies provide the framework for library operations and services. Carefully developed policies can help ensure high-quality library service that provides for community needs, wise use of library resources, and fair treatment of library staff and library users.

Library boards should approve policies to cover many issues, including the services offered by the library (such as the hours the library is open to the public), circulation of materials, selection of books and other resources, confidentiality of patron records, and use of electronic resources. The library personnel policy (see *Trustee Essential #7: The Library Board and Library Personnel*) and the board bylaws (see *Trustee Essential #3: Bylaws—Organizing the Board for Effective Action*) are two essential statements of policy relating to library and library board internal operations.

Wisconsin Statutes authorize the library board to establish both “external policies” (policies that determine how the library serves the public) and “internal policies” (policies that govern library board operations and library management). Wisconsin Statutes Section 43.52(2) provides that “[e]very public library shall be . . . subject to such reasonable regulations as the library board prescribes in order to render its use most beneficial to the greatest number. The library board may exclude from the use of the public library all persons who willfully violate such regulations.” Additional broad authority is granted by Section 43.58(4): “. . . [T]he library board shall supervise the administration of the public library and shall appoint a librarian . . . and prescribe [library employee] duties and compensation.”

Policy Development Steps

The following basic steps provide for careful development and review of library policies:

1. Director, with staff (and maybe public) input, develops recommended policies.
2. Board discusses, revises (if necessary), and approves policies.
3. Director makes sure staff and public are aware of policies.
4. Board reviews policies on a regular cycle so all policies are reviewed at least every three years (perhaps one or two policies could be reviewed per meeting until all of the policies have been reviewed, and revised if necessary).

The library board must approve all policies in properly noticed public meetings (see *Trustee Essential #14: The Library Board and the Open Meetings Law* for details).

In This Trustee Essential

- Who is responsible for developing and approving library policies?
- How do you develop good (and legal) policies?
- Who carries out policies?

In consideration of policy matters, it is important that you give adequate time and attention to the many complex issues that may be involved. All library policies should promote the best interests of the community and be consistent with the library's mission and strategic plan. You should be satisfied that a policy is legal, clear, and reasonable, and that all ramifications (including the effects on the public image of the library) are understood.

After a new policy is established, it is important that the policy be clearly documented and available to staff and public. It is helpful for a library to gather all library policies into a policy manual available to all staff and readily available to all library users. Many libraries are now posting their policies on their websites (see <http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/boards-directors/policy-resources> for examples) to help make the public more aware of the library's services and policies.

Although disagreements during the development of policies are natural, each board member should support staff in implementation of policies once they are established. Challenges to policies are most common on the topics of material selection and public Internet access (see *Trustee Essential #23: Dealing with Challenges to Materials or Policies*).

Legally Defensible Policies

It is important for policies to be legal. Illegal policies can open the municipality to liability. (See *Trustee Essential #25: Liability Issues*, for more information.) Below are four tests of a legally defensible policy:

Test #1: Policies must comply with current statutes and case law. For example:

- A library policy charging patrons for use of computers in the library would be contrary to Wisconsin Statutes Section 43.52(2), which requires that public library services be provided free of charge.
- A policy that says the library's public meeting room cannot be used for religious purposes would be unconstitutional under a Wisconsin federal district court decision.

Test #2: Policies must be reasonable (and all penalties must be reasonable). For example:

- A library policy that says, "All talking in the library is prohibited, and anyone who talks in the library will permanently lose library use privileges," is clearly an unreasonable rule with an unreasonably harsh penalty.

Test #3: Policies must be clear (not ambiguous or vague). For example:

- A policy that says, "Library use privileges will be revoked if a patron has too many overdue books," is too vague to be fairly administered.

Test #4: Policies must be applied without discrimination. For example:

- If a library charges fines, it cannot give preferential treatment to some individual patrons. For example, if the library sometimes waives fines, that waiver must be available to all patrons on an equal basis—not just to friends of library staff or to politically important people.

Many libraries find that it is helpful when developing or revising policies to review the policies of other libraries. Many examples of Wisconsin public library policies and other resources are available from the *Wisconsin Public Library Policy Resources* page.

Policies vs. Procedures

In addition to a policy manual, many libraries find it helpful to write up procedure manuals, especially for covering complex activities like the selection, ordering, and processing of new materials. Procedure manuals outline the steps necessary to accomplish various tasks and therefore are especially valuable to new staff.

Procedures must conform to the policies approved by the library board. While it is true that the library board is responsible for the entire administration of the library, your library will operate most effectively if the board delegates responsibility for the development of procedures and the day-to-day supervision of library operations to the library director. A properly trained library director is well equipped to handle this responsibility. “Micro-management” of library operations by the board is, in almost all cases, an unnecessary use of the board’s time and a practice that can undermine the authority of the library director. (See *Trustee Essential #6: Evaluating the Director* for recommended procedures for handling any concerns about the director’s performance.)

Discussion Questions

1. What steps can be taken to help a library develop good policies?
2. What would be an example of a “bad” library policy, and why would it be bad?
3. What should a library trustee do if he/she disagrees with a library policy?
4. Who is responsible for carrying out library policies?

Sources of Additional Information

- *Wisconsin Trustee Training Module #2: Development of Essential Policies for Public Libraries*
- Your library system staff (See *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*.)
- Your municipal or county attorney
- *Wisconsin Public Library Policy Resources*