**DEALING WITH COLLECTIONS OR PROGRAMMING CHALLENGES**

All across Alberta, individuals are questioning library collections and programming, with a range of concerns in mind. Some are focused on LGBTQ2S materials and programs; others question the inclusion of various perspectives.

No matter what has prompted the challenge, there are some steps that every library should be prepared to take.

**BEFORE A CHALLENGE OCCURS**

Before a challenge happens, be sure that your board members have a full understanding of the [Libraries Act](https://open.alberta.ca/publications/l11), [Libraries Regulations](https://open.alberta.ca/publications/1998_141) and [Municipal Government Act](https://open.alberta.ca/publications/m26) (as it relates to Libraries). The role, authority and responsibilities of the Library Board are outlined here. Also reference any local municipal policies or bylaws that are relevant to supporting the autonomy and authority of the library board.

Check that you have relevant policies in place to deal with challenges, disruptive behaviour, protests, staff harassment and other key issues. It is advised that each library have a policy outlining acceptable behaviour at board meetings. For example, many organizations stipulate that people can attend open meetings so long as they are not disrupting the proceedings by shouting or interrupting. They also ban placards, signs and other items that may be disruptive. The consequences for violating the policies are spelled out, and usually involve expulsion from the meeting and property. Consider whether you will ban individuals from taking photos or videos of the meetings.

Similarly, you should have a policy/bylaw that outlines the library’s process on delegations to board meetings. This should include some policy wording on how people can address the board, time allotted to speak or ask questions, etc. Your municipality’s “delegation/presentation to Council” policy can be a starting point for wording, or review [Yellowhead Regional Library’s bylaw](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Uymsc0vTdlbCgiEOOjGfqqUyEP5L-k6U/view) for ideas.

The time to update and post these policies is now – before a challenge comes forward. Be sure to post them to your website so they are readily available for public and media access. You are also required to file your policies with Pubic Library Services Branch (PLSB), so be sure to do so.

**WHEN DEALING WITH NEWS MEDIA**

Sometimes, media are alerted to perceived issues related to the library, its collections and programming. When thinking about “who” is considered to be media, remember that influencers, podcasters and bloggers attract wide audiences and are not often held to the same standards as journalists. So even if someone is not from a traditional media outlet, be sure to deal with them as if they were. They can have tremendous reach and influence in a community.

**What to do when a reporter calls:**

* Be sure to get the reporter’s name and outlet he/she/they represent. They must identify themselves.
* Don’t panic. Never do a cold-call interview! Find out what questions they wish to ask. Tell them you/someone will call back in an hour (then do it). Take the time to research facts/figures as needed.
* Think about what you want the public to know about this topic. Keep it simple and avoid using jargon or acronyms. Keep your message to three or four key points. Make it brief and memorable, and use relatable facts to back up your statements.
* **Reporters do not need to tell you that you’re being recorded.** You can be recorded on the phone or on a video platform without the reporter telling you. Assume the mic is always on, and the interview isn’t over until you hand up or watch them drive away.
* Answer questions within your scope or authority only. Don’t speculate on what changes to legislation might be happening, for example, or other things beyond your direct control. Instead, say something like: “I’m sorry but you’d have to ask [organization] about that…”
* It’s ok to say “I don’t know.” Offer to find the answer and call the reporter back.
* Do not comment on personnel matters, incidents under Police investigation or matters before the courts.
* Don’t make jokes
* Don’t speculate or guess
* Don’t offer personal opinions
* Don’t be an unnamed source
* Make a record of each call including date/time/method (phone, email, in-person), questions asked and answered, and any notes about the interaction.

**CHALLENGE TO THE LIBRARY BOARD AND ITS AUTHORITY**

Sometimes, people challenge the library board, its decisions, policies and membership, as a way to undermine the authority and autonomy of the board.

**If a challenge comes forward:**

* The Library Director should brief the board chair to act as the spokesperson for the board. For this issue, the chair is the only person who should speak to media about the issue.
* The Library Director should also brief other board members, and all staff, on the issue and advise them that all inquiries must be directed to the chair. They are not permitted to speak to media.
* Create key messages for the chair specific to the challenge that has been presented. For example, if someone is challenging how board members are selected, be sure to give the board chair the facts on the selection process. Include the PLSB fact sheet on board appointments. Back it up with any municipal policies or bylaws that outline how the municipal representatives are selected.
* Identify when the last selection process was held, how it was conducted, and when it will occur next.
* Create key messages with facts from the Library Act, Library Regulations and/or Municipal Government Act.
* Be sure to loop in the Mayor and CAO of the municipality, since most people believe libraries are municipal departments. Let the Mayor and CAO know that the board chair is the only person who will speak on behalf of the library and its board.
* Keep a log of media inquiries that includes the name of the reporter, media outlet, date/time, questions asked and answers given. This record can help you going forward if challenges persist or the media doesn’t quite get the facts correct. Mistakes happen, so be sure to send the reporter the correct information as soon as you see an error.

**CHALLENGE TO INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM/CENSORSHIP**

Sometimes, people have strong feelings about what they deem to be acceptable in terms of moral, ethical or religious views. They can be quick to call out the library if their expectations aren’t met.

The issue here is twofold: first, it’s very hard to change someone’s mind when it comes to censorship. They believe what they believe. Second, it can be easy for them to whip up support and create a significant community concern aligned with their beliefs. After all, many individuals believe they are “protecting” the community from bad things.

In Canada, the courts determine what is illegal information, not libraries. Our job is to provide information that people want; not to decide what information is available.

**Before a challenge is received, libraries should:**

* Have and post a clear policy on the development of library collections and how items are weeded. Ensure it spells out the kinds of materials the library buys, and how materials are removed after a period of time.
* Help people to understand that libraries bring in a range of materials and make decisions based on cost, availability, and local demand.
* Resources, such as the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) can provide ideas for position statements, policies and general wording. Check the Censorship Support tab on the website for an [Intellectual Freedom toolkit](https://cfla-fcab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2024-Intellectual-Freedom-Toolkit.docx-2.pdf).
* Be sure to post your library's Plan of Service on your website so that the public and media can see what your priorities are. Goals are usually tied to the library’s core mission of being a welcoming space, encouraging literacy, and providing access to the catalogue of information and materials, in hard copy and online. It will be apparent that there’s nothing political or subversive among the library’s priorities.
* All this to say: libraries don’t tell people what to read, so individuals shouldn’t try to dictate what *not* to read. As individuals, we each have free will to choose what we access, read and take interest in. Libraries merely facilitate access to a world of information, perspectives and resources.
* YRL’s role is to provide recommendations for selection and de-selection; however, ultimately it is up to the library staff to determine what materials and resources they will acquire and maintain.

Below are the criteria YRL uses to help library staff with their choices. It is important for each library to articulate its selection criteria as part of their collections policy.

**Material Selection**

Here are some of the things YRL takes into consideration:

* Recommendations in recognized professional journals.
* Recommendations from professional development opportunities or bibliographies.
* Selection lists from reliable publishers or distributors.
* Award winners.
* Member demand and anticipated demand.
* Relevant to community needs and interests.
* Representation of diversity, equity and inclusion.
* Suitable format for library use.
* Hands-on assessments of materials available through publishers’ displays, visits by publishers’ representatives or bookstores.

**If you receive a challenge to your library’s collection or programming**

* Ask the individual to provide you with their concerns in writing. Ask them to clearly outline which item or program they object to, and why. You may also have a [request for consideration of library material form](https://drive.google.com/file/d/14YAk9lRwcBQvBFDkyWxjKawLfzNDs59Y/view?usp=sharing) or [request for consideration of library program form](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-9KgPec_GpzHykxAtdu-GMHHKXDsczEv/view?usp=sharing) that an individual can fill out to help facilitate this person's concerns.
* You do not need to respond on the spot. Take time to review the complaint and research the individual’s concerns. Advise the person that you will get back to them by a certain date, and be sure to follow through.
* Have your library’s collections policy available online. Let the person know where to find it, or have a printed copy to hand out if appropriate.
* Monitor local newspapers and online discussion groups to see if this concern is gathering steam. It’s important to stay on top of issues, especially if they start to grow.
* For challenges to the library’s collection or programming, ensure that the library director is the only one to respond to media inquiries. The director is best equipped to speak to the collection policy, and overall responsibilities that libraries have to support intellectual freedom. Board members and staff should not speak to the media.
* Create key messages for the library director specific to the challenge that has been presented. For example, if someone is challenging how children’s books are selected, summarize the collection policy and reasons why the item was selected. If appropriate, remind the individual that they need not access items or programs they find offensive. Equally, they cannot prevent someone else from accessing that item.
* It is not the library’s role to parent children, nor to limit their access to items and programs. Parents retain the authority and responsibility over what they wish their children to access.

**WHEN DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

Library staff deal with a range of people every day. Most are reasonable patrons but sometimes, difficult people present themselves at the library, on the phone or at a board meeting. It’s important to understand what their issues are, and to know how to diffuse situations as best you can.

What’s unacceptable?

* Abuse
* Swearing
* Yelling
* Name-calling
* Put-downs
* Gaslighting
* Passive-aggressive behaviour
* Sabotage
* Threats (physical or verbal)

What to do when dealing with difficult people

* Move the conversation out of the public eye. Don’t give emotionally-charged people an audience. That said, be sure to consider your personal safety when choosing a location. If possible, have another staff person with you.
* Don’t get baited by provocative statements. Don’t give ‘power’ to bullies. Take the high road and thank the individual for their comments. End the discussion as quickly as you can.
* Don’t take it personally. It’s not about you. When things are highly emotional, it seems there is only one outcome: someone wins and someone loses. Find a way to compromise or end the discussion.
* Keep your own emotions in check. Stay detached. Breathe deeply, exhale. Pause before responding.
* Lower your voice and speak calmly. Keep it brief. Stick to the facts. Speak slowly and deliberately.
* Practice active listening. Active listening helps ensure each person understands the other. Be attentive, ask probing questions or request clarification or examples. Summarize what you’ve heard and ask the individual if you got it right.
* If things take a turn for the worst, say “I am only prepared to talk with you in a calm, respectful way.” Empower staff to hang up or walk away if someone becomes abusive.

When dealing with difficult situations, use the Emotion | Fact | Action approach:

* **Deal with the emotion first. Empathy can help reduce the temperature and restore calm.**
* “I understand how upset you must be.”
* “I understand how difficult this is for you.”
* **Outline the facts, calmly. Don’t be defensive, merely state the facts.**
* “I have looked into your issue, and here’s what happened…”
* “Here’s the process to [do something]…”
* **Wrap up with your next actions. Be specific about what you will do to address the concern.**
* “I will have this resolved by Tuesday…”
* “My supervisor will call you this afternoon…”

Contact your Consultant or the YRL Director if you need assistance in dealing with any of these issues.