

# THE LIBRARY TRUSTEE'S ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

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You are a newly elected or appointed library trustee, and you want to have some idea of what you will be doing. You are a long time library trustee and want to have your understanding of what you should be doing reinforced. The purpose of this article is to assist all library trustees in understanding their role in providing dynamic library service to their communities and to clarify their responsibilities in performing their role.

By taking out a petition, getting the required number of signatures, and going through the election process or by applying to the appointing authority and going through a selection process, you are now a library trustee. You are a representative of the residents in your service area and are directly involved in providing for their library services.

As a library trustee, your primary role is that of a provider. You provide input into the planning process to develop library service. You see that sufficient funds are provided to implement the library services your constituents say they want. You provide the policies necessary for the operation of your library facility. And you provide a qualified librarian to administer the day-to-day operations of your library, implement the policies you have set in place, and administer the annual budget you have adopted.

Let's now go step by step through roles and responsibilities. First of all, the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of *trustee* is "A member of a board elected or appointed to direct the funds and policy of an institution." In itself, a rather simple definition. *Institution* can be defined in many ways, but we will concentrate on the library as our institution.

What is a library? It can be many things to many people; however, it should be the repository of information, the center of recreational reading, the doorway to early learning, and the focal point of lifelong learning experiences for the entire community in which it is located. Your role and responsibility as a library trustee is to ensure that the library in your community meets the needs of the residents. You do not need to be in a contest to "best your neighbor library." Your library should encompass the needs of all

the residents of your community, and reflect your community standards while being in accord with the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*. A library should be nonjudgmental and represent different viewpoints on issues. The library should, within the parameters of the budget, have materials available to inform patrons about these different viewpoints. The library is the first line of defense against censorship. You as a trustee must support this defense and stand firm for the philosophy of freedom of information.

As a trustee you will be a member of a board of trustees. The actions taken by a board of trustees have the force of law and as such must follow the laws of the state of Illinois. The library laws of Illinois are contained in the *Illinois Compiled Statutes* (ILCS), chapter 75. The Illinois Library Association (ILA) publishes *Illinois Library Laws* that contains chapter 75 in its entirety and other chapters of interest to trustees. The cost of the booklet is nominal, and your library should buy a copy for each trustee as well as the administrative librarian. The booklet, however, is no substitute for another of the trustee's responsibilities: hiring an attorney who is well-versed in library law to represent the library in legal matters.

A trustee is responsible for developing the policies under which a library operates. Trustees should have input from the administrative librarian and staff in drafting policies, but the final responsibility for adoption rests with the board of trustees. The following policies are essential for the efficient operation of any library:

- personnel policy
- materials selection policy
- circulation policy
- buildings and grounds policy
- finance policy

The personnel policy directly affects the staff and should include, as a minimum, such things as the length of the work week and work day; definition of full-time and part-time employment; personnel appointment, evaluation, promotion, and termination procedures; vacation and sick leave policies; a grievance procedure that is clear and fair to all sides; and a clear statement that the personnel policy *does not* constitute an employment contract, that employees

serve at the will of the library, and that the board of trustees may amend the personnel policy at any time. This latter statement must be approved by the library attorney.

The materials selection policy covers the broad scope of what is the library's mission and how the collection should reflect this mission. The criteria for selection should be set forth along with the responsibility for selection. The maintenance of the collection should be covered as well as a statement about gifts. There must be a section on how a citizen may request reconsideration of material in the collection.

The circulation policy should cover the length of loan periods for various types of materials the fine policy and schedule of rates for overdue materials definitions of a resident borrower together with what proof(s) of residency will be accepted, definitions of a non-resident borrower and a reciprocal borrower and the means for calculating the nonresident fee.

The buildings and grounds policy covers the maintenance of the library building and grounds; the use of meeting rooms, bulletin boards, display cases, library equipment; and the inventory of library capital equipment. (Capital equipment is any piece of equipment or furniture with a *unit cost* of at least \$1,000.)

The finance policy should specify procedures for the receipt and disbursement of funds; determine who is authorized to sign checks; set procurement limits and spell out who may enter into contracts for the library; delineate how library funds should be invested; and include a statement on conflict of interest.

A trustee is responsible for the financial well-being of the library. It is incumbent upon the board of trustees to ensure that there are sufficient funds to operate the library. The board of trustees reviews, modifies as necessary, and adopts the annual budget, which has been prepared by the administrative librarian with staff input. The board of trustees approves the levy required to support the budget and ensures that it is filed in a timely manner. If the levy is not enough to support library service, it is the role and responsibility of the board of trustees to develop a referendum plan for a rate increase and work as a unified body to pass it. *It is the responsibility of the library trustee to levy for the maximum amount authorized by law and then give the area residents the maximum service for the taxes paid.* A trustee must do this no matter what his or her personal feelings are regarding property taxes.

The library trustee has a key role in the hiring of a qualified librarian to administer the day-to-day operations of the library. The library administrator is the only employee the board of trustees hires and is the only employee the board of trustees evaluates. Should things not work out, the library administrator is the only employee the board of trustees can directly terminate. It is the responsibility of the board of trustees to hire the best person available, at a fair and competitive salary with competitive benefits, and then let the library administrator do his or her job without interference. The library administrator should be evaluated by the board of trustees no less frequently than once a year; should be required to attend all meetings of the board of trustees, except any executive sessions where the administrator's performance is being discussed; and, if problems arise, should be counselled and given direction as to what improvement is desired. There should be no surprises on either side in the board of trustees/library administrator relationship.

Another role of the library trustee is that of political advocate for the community and library on legislative matters that pertain to library service. Trustees need to know their legislators and support those who support library service.

A library trustee must take an active role in planning for the future of the library. As a representative of the residents a trustee is in the best position to know what the community wants from the library and should be able to incorporate these wants into a long-range plan. Library service is not static. It is constantly evolving, and a trustee must insure the library does not fall behind.

The board of trustees is responsible for providing adequate insurance for the library, including errors and omissions insurance for the trustees and administrative librarian.

The library world is greater than that of the local library. In Illinois, it includes the system to which the library belongs and the Illinois Library Association and its many forums of special interest, especially the Trustee Forum for the library trustee. It also includes the American Library Association and its area for trustees, the American Library Trustee Association (ALTA). The role of the individual library trustee is to become active in this world of libraries, especially on the system and state level. Attend conferences. Go to workshops. Network. You can contribute much and gain much. It is legal and proper for the membership dues in professional organizations to be paid for by the

library. It is legal and proper for the library to pay for the expenses incurred by a trustee in the course of library business, including attendance at conferences, workshops, and meetings. Both trustees and the administrative librarian should belong to local civic organizations.

You will probably not be a trustee forever so it is essential that you take an active role in identifying potential trustees and recruiting them when a vacancy occurs. When you are an "old hand" on a board of trustees, it is your responsibility to help in the indoctrination and orientation of new board members. ■