

## Documentation of the Mastery: Library Ethics

1. The concept of free and open access to libraries is fundamental to their very existence.
2. Staff should be aware of and comply with NYS library confidentiality laws.
3. Staff should know what to do when a patron comes to them with a complaint.
4. Staff should be mindful of the needs of all users, and not grant special favors to friends or family.
5. Staff should not put themselves or others at risk.

**Proof of Mastery:** Employee will take a quiz provided by a Training Proctor and will discuss the questions and answers with that Training Proctor.

## Current Training Proctors for this Mastery: Library Ethics

- Meg VanPatten
- Julia Schult
- Nancy Howe

## Resources:

**This task is estimated to take 15 minutes for someone to master.**

## They will need:

- access to the documentation
- May need to discuss with an Expert

## Documentation:

The concept of free and open access to libraries is fundamental to their very existence. Such access takes many forms: convenient hours, a well-designed facility and website and friendly, helpful staff. The role of the public library is to be a valuable resource to everyone in the community.

Library policies are spelled out in a Library Policy Manual kept by Meg, available in Meg's office. Our library policies are based on the principles of the American Library Association's [Library Bill of Rights](#) and [Freedom to Read Statement](#).

**Staff should not put themselves or others at risk.** As stated in our emergency procedures, your personal safety outweighs the important priorities of helping others and maintaining our facilities.

Staff should be aware of and comply with NYS library confidentiality laws. **Staff should not make any comment on patron choices and must guarantee the privacy of patron information requests.** The state's **Library Records Law** ([CVP Sec. 4509](#)) prohibits access to any information that links the name of a library user to any library material, information request, or any other use of the library, unless the library is presented with a subpoena or search warrant from an authorized legal entity. That state law includes but is not limited to "records related to the circulation of library materials, computer database searches, interlibrary loan transactions, reference queries, requests for photocopies of library materials, title reserve requests, or the use of audio-visual materials, films or records". Therefore, we can discuss a

patron's borrowing record only with that patron, not family or friends. This is true for both adults and children. We can discuss these things with other library staff for work purposes, but we should not share any information outside of work or that is not part of our work duties.

Staff should be mindful of the needs of all users, and not grant special favors to friends or family. **Just because we can make exceptions, we should not do so lightly.** For instance, holds should not be bypassed for ourselves, friends, or family. We have the power to renew items even when there are holds waiting for that item, but we should only exert that power in extraordinary circumstances.

Public libraries play a unique role in the support and preservation of democracy by providing open, non-judgmental institutions where individuals can pursue their own interests. To the extent that their budgets permit, libraries attempt to collect materials and information that represent varying points of view on controversial topics. But as the repositories of our culture, both the good and the bad, libraries sometimes contain information or ideas that are controversial or threatening to some people. Expressions of disapproval, dismay and even outrage over library materials are not uncommon, even though public libraries explicitly avoid doctrinal positions or the espousal of a particular point of view. **As difficult as it may be in some cases, [staff and] trustees must be very careful to separate their personal opinions from the philosophy of the library as an institution.**

The first amendment to the United States Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the courts have long held that this guarantee extends to the right to receive information freely. Free access to information is the cornerstone of the American public library. Every person has the right to read, or not to read, any book; to view or listen to any media. The responsibility for children's reading and viewing falls to the parents, not the library.

(This wording is from the *Handbook for Library Trustees of New York State*, 2015, p. 74; available online at <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/trustees/handbook/handbook.pdf> )

Patron complaints about any part of our library collections are thoroughly covered in the Library Policy Handbook (in Meg's office). **The first step for all staff when a complaint involves items in the library collections is to refer the complaint to the librarian in charge of the relevant collection.**

**All other patron complaints should be handled as follows:**

1. Do what you can to assess the situation and meet the patron's needs within library policy.
2. If it becomes clear that you cannot satisfy the patron, refer the patron to the staff member most likely to be able to resolve the complaint, to your supervisor, or to the library director. Start with people in the building, and if you need to refer a complaint to someone who is not currently available, be sure to write down the patron's complete contact information and a description of the complaint and its circumstances. Let the patron know when and how they can expect to be contacted.