Trustee Training

Topic 10: Developing Essential Library Policies

Developing Essential Library Policies

- 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 Stages

- 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).

Policy Development Stages

- 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.

Policy Development Stages

- 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 to help make the public more aware of the library's services and policies.

Legally Defensible Policies

- Test #1: Policies must comply with current statutes and case law.
- Test #2: Policies must be reasonable (and all penalties must be reasonable).
- Test #3: Policies must be clear (not ambiguous or vague).
- Test #4: Policies must be applied without discrimination.

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.

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?