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Security in a Dangerous World: How to Make your Library a Safer Place

Cindy Gibbon
Multnomah County Library

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How to Make Your Library A Safer Place

by Cindy Gibbon
Central Library Director,
Multnomah County
Library

Ensuring the safety of our customers and staff is mostly about preparing for everyday incidents and emergencies. In Oregon, that includes disaster planning for fires, floods and earthquakes. Libraries must also be prepared to handle criminal activity, domestic disputes that spill over into the workplace, behaviors stemming from untreated mental illness, and a variety of other incidents that are common to all public spaces and workplaces. In making our preparations, we balance our value of open access with the value of safety.

On September 11, 2001, I was thankful that Multnomah County Library had given careful attention to security issues over the last several years. While nothing could have prepared us for the cataclysmic shock of that day, we had in place the policies, procedures and training we needed to cope with the few security incidents that did arise as a result.

Time to Get Serious about Security
About a year after our move into the renovated Central Library we realized that security incidents were increasing, and we clearly weren't handling them well. We had a Facility Security Officer (FSO) contracted through the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office on duty during most open hours, and rules of behavior and exclusion guidelines in place. Still, staff members complained they felt threatened and intimidated by library users who were allowed to act out repeatedly. Dozens of homeless teens were hanging out on the benches outside the library, blocking access to the sidewalk and falling victim to drug dealers and adults looking for sex with an underage prostitute. An after-hours tagging incident left graffiti eight feet tall along the entire south wall of the building. It was time to get serious about managing library security.

Partnerships for Security
Taking control of library security required building partnerships and alliances within the community. We met with the Sheriff to make him aware of our growing security issues, and staff worked with supervisors in the Facility Security unit to insure quality service from our FSOs. Last year we added a second FSO to provide additional coverage and the safety of a back-up officer. While neither deputized nor armed, our FSOs do receive some of the same training as sworn sheriff's deputies. The Sheriff also assisted us by contacting the Portland Police Bureau to assure them they were welcome on County "turf" when they were needed to assist with an incident at the Library.

We began a series of dialogs with supervisors in Central Precinct and at Portland Patrol Inc., a private firm providing uniformed officers who patrol downtown on behalf of the Downtown Business Association, and respond to incidents that may not require full police intervention. Our unarmed FSOs need reliable back-up when serious incidents and crimes occur, but our relationships with those agencies were in poor repair. Talking through past issues and problems, laying out our needs and showing that we are determined to take control of our security issues has greatly improved cooperation and response.

We used our neighborhood DA from the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office as a "translator" and go-between in negotiating the relationship between the Library and the law enforcement community. The library needed to learn what law enforcement and the court system required from us in order to follow through appropriately on incidents and crimes at the library. Both the DA and our counsel from the County Attorney's Office helped us balance the Library's need to preserve access to information but still insure the safety and security of all library users by enforcing appropriate standards of conduct.

We've replicated this successful partnership throughout the library system. Each branch leader now has a working relationship with the branch's neighborhood DA and the local community policing representative. Since branches have no uniformed security personnel, they need to feel comfortable calling for police back-up and to know that back-up will be there.

Across the street from Central Library, New Avenues for Youth, an agency that

helps homeless kids get off the streets, is another important partner. They've worked with us by making sure the kids in their program know they'll lose services if they hang out in front of the library—and that they are welcome here as long as they come inside. They can observe the "action" in front of our building, and they can call if they see inappropriate activity occurring. In return, we've stepped up patrols outside the library to actively discourage criminal exploitation of other homeless kids who may be hanging out on our benches.

We also rely on Project Respond, an agency devoted to serving the chronically mentally ill and homeless community, as well as CHIERS, a transportation and detox service for persons under the influence of alchohol or drugs.

After-hours security also merited our attention. The nighttime tagging incident, which wasn't discovered and reported until staff arrived for work the following day, proved the private security firm patrolling our building at night wasn't meeting standards. We installed a check-point system around the perimeter of the building where the night guards must clock in on their rounds. Security cameras and good lighting outside the building also help discourage illegal activity after hours.

Stronger Rules and Exclusion Guidelines
Building upon these partnerships, we updated and strengthened the library's Rules of Behavior and Guidelines for Exclusion. Working with attorneys certainly lengthened the process, but their collaboration created documents that serve the interests of open access and due process as well as enforceability.

Our rules of behavior are available on the library's Web site. We post them in our buildings and keep them handy at public service desks, both in complete form and as a brief-form bookmark. Staff and security guards distribute them liberally when they are in conversation with library users about behavior issues. Our first priority is to make sure the customer

understands a rule so that he or she can choose to follow it rather than break it.

When users won't follow the rules after they have been explained, or when they commit a crime in the library, they lose their library privileges for a period of time. We follow a set of detailed guidelines for exclusion, based on the severity of the violation and the age of the violator, to insure consistency.

Consistent Documentation and Enforcement
To be effective, the library's security program requires continuous attention and monitoring. In addition to the two Facility Security Officers who patrol Central Library during all open hours, one member of the management team is always on duty as Person in Charge (PIC) of the building. The PIC carries a cell phone that also works as a two-way radio to the FSOs. The PIC is available to respond to staff concerns and to provide advice and back-up for the FSOs. The PIC signs off on all exclusions and assists the FSOs by photographing the subject of the exclusion with a digital camera.

Branches also use the PIC system. Each branch has a cadre of staff members trained on the rules of behavior and exclusion policy. These individuals have legally designated authority to enforce the rules and sign off on exclusions when necessary.

Good documentation of all incidents and exclusions is critical. The FSOs, the PIC and any staff person involved in or witness to a security incident writes a report that becomes part of the record of that incident recorded on a multi-part form. The exluded person gets a copy telling them what rules they have broken, the length of their exclusion, the locations of all library properties from which they are excluded, and how the exclusion appeal process works. The FSOs and the library also get copies. The form is very convenient at Central Library where we handle many incidents. Alternatively, we also issue exclusion letters when a letter is a more appropriate means of communication. The digital photo is another important piece of documentation, helping FSOs and staff to

recognize persons who have been excluded and make sure they do not trespass on library property during their exclusion period.

In order to insure due process, exclusion policies must provide for appeal. At Multnomah County Library, appeals must be addressed in writing to the Library Director. Good incident documentation helps the Director make an appropriate decision in case of an appeal. Since we actively manage security in our library, we expect to go to court on occasion. We do not hesitate to prosecute persons who break the law in the library or who trespass after they have been excluded. Occasionally, an excluded user challenges us in court. Again, good documentation is key to a successful prosecution or to sustaining the library's position.

Emphasis on Staff Training

Staff training is another key to safety and security in the library. Multnomah County Library offers a number of training opportunities to help staff manage difficult customer interactions and administer the library's Rules of Behavior and Guidelines for Exclusion. "Speaking of Security" introduces all staff members to the library's rules and provides basic training for dealing with and documenting security incidents. PICs receive special training to perform their duties. We engage consultants to provide staff training on managing potentially volatile or violent situations and dealing with persons whose behavior is affected by untreated mental illness, which helps staff feel better-prepared to handle incidents when they arise. In the case of a particularly traumatic event, we use the County's Employee Assistance Program to provide a critical incident debriefing for the staff involved.

System-wide Communication

The excluded patron Web site is the most popular destination on our intranet. When a library user is excluded for behavior violations, the incident reports and the digital photo or a physical description are posted on this site. A global e-mail informs staff to check the site when a

new exclusion is issued. Notice of expired exclusions is also sent via e-mail.

We also note the exclusion in the patron's library circulation account record. Many a circulation clerk has spotted an excluded customer because they remembered the digital photo or were alerted by a special message in the circulation record.

Evacuation Planning

Evacuation planning was a key to our preparedness in the aftermath of September 11. As I drove to work that morning my first thought was that we might well have a bomb threat at the library that day. The threat didn't actually materialize until several days later. Meanwhile, we had insured that every public service desk and location with an outside phone line had a copy of the FBI guidelines for handling bomb threats.

Continuous Update and Reevaluation

Managing library security is a continuous improvement process. At Multnomah County Library, managers most closely involved in handling security issues meet regularly to review the success of the program, to evaluate current needs, and to consider and implement any necessary changes to policies or procedures.

The great challenge of library security will always be to make the most open of public institutions as safe as it can possibly be. We make our libraries as accessible as possible when we welcome everyone who is willing to follow reasonable rules of behavior. We make them as safe as possible when we enforce those rules with consistency and compassion.

The Library Administration and Management Association, a division of the American Library Association, published library security guidelines applicable to libraries of all sizes in June 2001. Available on the Web (http://www.ala.org/lama/publications/index.html), these guidelines, prepared by LAMA's Buildings and Equipment Section Safety and Security in Libraries Committee, are a good place to start if you are developing or updating security procedures for your library. ✒