



Difficult, Hostile, and Potentially Dangerous Library Visitors: Protecting People and Property

What are the best ways to protect your library’s customers, employees, and property from visitors with serious issues, while ensuring all actions taken are ethical, respectful, and legal? It starts with partnering with professionals in law enforcement and social services, ensuring everyone knows what to do, and committing to consistency and fairness. Learn how a safety policy that everyone takes seriously also can support great customer service.

1. Understand the importance of frontline consistency at dealing with so-called problem library users.
2. Initiate required training for every employee, fulltime and part-time, paid and volunteer, professional and support status.
3. Partner with local government and nonprofit agencies for education, sharing resources, and staff support
4. Be alert for the possibility of profiling the homeless, mentally ill, minorities, strangers, New Americans, and people who are “different”.

The Four Principles: Your Score

____ Library staff members who interact with library users and each other in a confident, friendly manner.

____ Policies that promote professional, workplace limits and ensure materials and money are handled appropriately.

____ Physical environment that is well-lit and safely maintained, and

____ Partnerships with police departments, social services, neighboring businesses, and the greater community.

Effective Safety Policies Cheat Sheet

1. Take all concerns seriously.
2. Take all threats seriously.
3. Investigate concerns and threats, and let people know that objective evidence counts, not gossip and rumors.
4. Check policies with the library's legal counsel.
5. Policies are congruent with laws of greater institution and community.
6. Everyone means all employees: PT, FT, director, administrators, managers, supervisors, tenured, degreed, support, students, volunteers.
7. Everyone gets the same information in writing about safety policies.
8. Everyone gets training and orientation on all policies.
9. Everyone attends yearly meeting on safety issues.
10. Everyone complies with safety policies uniformly.
11. Everyone is evaluated on how well they implement policies.
12. Everyone knows the chain of command, and what to do when they are alone or the chain is broken.
13. Everyone knows when to call the police.
14. No one is punished for making a mistake.
15. If you don't know the safety policies, ask politely and firmly for written information to guide your actions as soon as possible.
Without written safety policies, you will have to decide whether or not to stay in your workplace.
16. Read *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin De Becker.

Effective Property Protection Cheat Sheet

1. Everyone knows the proper use of equipment and materials (inventory).
2. Systems are in place for handling money and inventory.
3. Everyone knows the systems, and the information is written down, displayed and in everyone's possession.
4. The systems are taught as part of orientation.
5. Random checks sample and spot-check money and inventory.
6. The responsibility for checking money and inventory are shared by many people, not just one or a few.
7. Your systems for protecting money and property are audited by outside experts once a year.
8. Theft by staff and library users is prosecuted swiftly. Staff and library users know this is your policy.
9. No accusations are ever made without evidence.
10. The laws of your community and state are obeyed at all times in pursuing problems.
11. Theft and destruction of property are treated as symptoms of problems the library might with policies and behavior regarding a particular group of people, but the group is not demonized.
12. The library partners with the greater book community – other libraries, new and used bookstores, and rare book dealers—to discourage theft.
13. Technology is used to limit computer problems.
14. Staff is taught to look for behavior, not to profile people.

Audit: The physical surroundings of my library?

(This is an audit about ways to make a place safer, particularly without a lot of money. The problem is that few libraries are designed for the safety of staff, and customers, except in some major buildings. This is more than just having locked doors for the administrative offices.) Check the items that you think your library could use or do better. If you don't know or don't understand the item, please put a question mark (?). Write N/A if not applicable.

1. Physical arrangement of lobby, desks and offices?
 - a. Ability to move around?
 - b. Ability to see people?
 - c. Ability to seat people?

2. Place to meet with upset people privately?
 - a. Ability to listen to upset people privately?
 - b. Ability for upset people to calm themselves down?
 - c. Ability for upset people to read and write a statement?
 - d. Ability for upset people to fill out a comment form?
 - e. Ability for upset people to have a glass of water?
 - f. Ability for someone ill to lie down?

3. How crowded is the front of the library?
 - a. Ability for people to have distance from each other?
 - b. Ability for lines to form instead of mobs?

4. The use of greeters or greeter “behavior”?
 - a. Ability to greet and observe all library users?
 - b. Ability to intervene in case of a problem?
 - c. Ability to report in case of a problem?

5. Outside lighting and safety?
 - a. Lighting front and back, at all entrances?
 - b. Safe places to walk around the library?

6. Isolated areas inside the library?
 - a. Lights?
 - b. Cameras?
 - c. Sight lines?
 - d. No one is left alone in a building?
 - e. Cell phone issued?

7. Physically dangerous areas?
 - a. No one can see or hear?
 - b. The closed door with no window?
 - c. No windows?

8. Locks and alarm systems?
 - a. Staff obeys the rules?

9. Signs?
 - a. Big enough
 - b. Clear enough?
 - c. Right place?

Audit: The structure of rules at my library?

1. What are the rules on customer service—for staff?
2. What are the limits to customer service—for library users?
3. Who is in charge when no one is there?
4. How is individual and patron safety supported?
5. Where does the library draw the line on problem library users?
6. What about the “problem” employee?

How can I improve the overall policies of the library?

1. How is the board/council/senate addressing access, safety and service?
2. What are the legal ramifications of their decisions?
3. Do they update these issues every year?
4. Does the library’s lawyer review the policies?
5. Do they include law enforcement and social services in the process?
6. How do the director and branch managers, supervisors and department heads interpret these policies consistently?
7. How does the staff practice the rules?
8. Are they evaluated for practicing rules of safety?
9. Do you participate by seeking information and trying to improve your own skills, or do you lurk and complain?

Audit: How can I improve our library's relationship with the community?

1. Is our building or library complex part of a neighborhood watch organization?
2. Do we regularly invite law enforcement and mental health officials to our library for community safety programs?
3. Do we discuss safety issues with our physical neighbors?
4. Are we involved in community policy decisions of safety?
5. How do we get problematic groups involved?

How can I help create a crisis management plan for our library?

1. Do we have a crisis plan for:
 - a. Angry and otherwise uncomfortable situations
 - b. Dangerous situations
 - c. Law-breaking situations
 - d. Illness and accident
 - e. Major physical accident
 - f. Nasty media events

Avoiding Making the Biggest Mistakes With the Media during a Crisis

The first time you deal with the media should be when you show up at their offices with food, information files and a list of resources for their staff to use.

In a crisis:

1. Speak only if you are the person with the authority and information. Otherwise, pass the ball to the person who does have the authority and information.
2. Tell the truth; then, be quiet.
3. Keep to the subject. One agenda, please.
4. Be polite, calm and friendly. Your nonverbal communication will have as much impact as the content of your words.
5. Never bluff. If you don't know, you don't know.
6. Do not interrupt the interviewer.
7. Do not discuss the situation with anyone except those who are in authority. Do not put friends, co-workers and family into sticky situations by telling them stuff.
8. Almost any event can blow over. Keep the big picture in mind.
9. Even nice people will talk about you behind your back; oh well.
10. Have an interesting story prepared, so that you have something to give the reporter if you don't have dirt.
11. Never think you can “control” the media. But you can be honest and mature in the face of misunderstandings.