Preparing for Potential Pushback: A Library Program Checklist

Program Policy

A program policy provides guidance to library staff and informs the public of the scope and purpose of library programming. It is a public document that should be reviewed by legal counsel and be approved by a governing body.

- ☐ Do you have a program policy?
    - ☐ Does the program policy reference intellectual freedom?
    - ☐ Does the policy outline programming selection criteria?
    - ☐ Does the policy explain how community members can propose programs?
    - ☐ Does the policy refer to the Library Code of Conduct?
    - ☐ Does the policy refer to the Library Request for Reconsideration Policy?
- ☐ Does your Request for Reconsideration Policy include mention of library programs, events, and speakers?
- ☐ Schedule regular program policy reviews and staff and board education re: policy

Resource: https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/controversialprogramsqa

Additional Policies to Consider

- ☐ Social Media policy: will guide the library's response to inappropriate language or harassment (more under Communication Considerations)
- ☐ Photography and Filming in the library policy, or incorporated in Library Use Guidelines/Code of Conduct

Program Preparation

At times, libraries may receive complaints or pushback on library-sponsored programs, events, or speakers. Below are key areas to consider when planning for and responding to program pushback. Remember to engage your program partners throughout the planning process and maintain a mission-driven approach to communication and community engagement.

Preparing and Supporting Staff

Communication Considerations

Program Logistics & Security

Preparing and Supporting Staff

Public service staff may be the first to receive a public complaint regarding a library-sponsored program. Consider how best to support staff in fielding these concerns.

- ☐ Regularly update staff on the Programs Policy, Request for Reconsideration Policy, and any established procedures for fielding patron complaints or concerns.
- ☐ Communicate early with staff regarding any library programs that may receive heightened community interest.

In the case of emergent pushback on a particular library program, event, or speaker:

- ☐ Share talking points for all library staff who may be approached by the public (in-person, via phone, via email). **See below Communication Considerations.**
  - ☐ Talking points may include:
    - ☐ Language from the Program Policy on purpose of library programming
    - ☐ The goal of the program in question and how it connects with the library's mission
    - ☐ An invitation to the community member to attend and learn about a new or different perspective
    - ☐ Appropriate next steps for the patron: refer to library administration? Fill out a reconsideration form?
- ☐ Develop or review existing processes for dealing with harassment against library staff including: verbal threats, doxxing, cyberstalking, and more.
- ☐ Ask staff directly how they'd like to be supported during times of heightened stress, media attention and public scrutiny.
- ☐ Collaborate with your Employee Assistance Program to offer ongoing support to staff.

Communication Considerations

- ☐ Identify who will respond to media requests regarding the program, event or speaker.
- ☐ Consider developing a crisis communication plan & crisis response team (or activate said team should it already exist and the situation warrants)
  - ☐ Maintain regular contact with program partner(s) or presenter(s) in communication planning to ensure everyone is clear on roles and messaging.
  - ☐ Keep the library Board apprised of potential program challenges rising to the level of their purview.
  - ☐ See: Crisis Communication Planning (ALA)
- ☐ Create talking points for (1) library staff and (2) for use with media
  - ☐ Talking points may include:
    - ☐ Language from the Program Policy on purpose of library programming
    - ☐ The goal of the program in question and how it connects with the library's mission.

- ☐ Continue promoting the library program, avoid self-censorship. Emphasize the purpose & goal of the program and its connection to the library's mission when marketing.
- ☐ Do you have a Social Media Policy (either stand alone or part of larger communications or internet policy)?
    - ☐ If your social media policy allows public comments on posts and events, regularly monitor posts for prohibited language and behavior.
        - ☐ Who will monitor social media accounts:
        - ☐ What language and behavior is prohibited:
        - ☐ What action will be taken in the case of prohibited behavior:
        - ☐ Example:https://www.bklynlibrary.org/use-the-library/policy/social-media-customer-use
        - ☐ See: http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2019/06/staying-social-why-your-library-needs-social-media-policies/

Logistics & Security

Program logistics will vary greatly depending on the type of program being presented (lecture versus story time versus panel, etc.) and level of pushback the program may receive (i.e. a handful of upset community members versus a coordinated protest.) Below are a few considerations for program planners prior to and during the program.

Planning Team

- ☐ Identify program roles for staff, volunteers, and collaborators at the program. Possible roles are listed below. Individuals may fill more than one role.
    - ☐ Room greeter: stationed at the room entrance
    - ☐ Program registration (if required): check-in registrants, keep track of capacity
    - ☐ Library speaker, may include: welcoming the audience, verbally sharing any ground rules/code of conduct, outlining process for Q&A (if applicable)
    - ☐ Q&A moderator
    - ☐ Security - who will take the lead on managing disruptive behavior and enforcing the code of conduct? If you do not have a security team, consider hiring should the scale of pushback warrant.
    - ☐ Library spokesperson: who will speak to the media, should they arrive?

Collaborators: program presenters should feel supported and safe while presenting a library program.

- ☐ Include program collaborators in every phase of program planning, especially conversations on security and audience management.

- ☐ Ask their preferences on program format, space considerations, and security, and make adjustments based on their feedback
- ☐ Invite the presenter(s) to the program space prior to the program or share photos, so that they can get a feel for the space.

Space Planning

- ☐ Know the room capacity. Be prepared to enforce capacity limits, if necessary.
- ☐ If the program requires registration, consider how to handle no-shows (will you allow walk-ins?)
- ☐ Think about how room set-up can support program flow and safety. E.g. wide aisles, clear pathways to exits, podium or tables near the front for the speaker.
- ☐ Is there a chance for a large crowd gathering inside or outside of the library? Develop a crowd control plan in consultation with facilities and security. Consult with local law enforcement.

Security
This may be a good time to review your library's safety planning and emergency preparedness. Resources on Safety and Security in Libraries can be found on this ALA LibGuide:
https://libguides.ala.org/safety-security

- ☐ Consider scheduling security personnel, if they are not already on staff.
- ☐ Consult with local law enforcement; share details about the event.
- ☐ Develop a crowd control plan in consultation with facilities and security. Consult with local law enforcement. Schedule additional staff for both program support and to support library-wide services during the event.

Program

- ☐ Decide the time you will allow entry to the program room.
- ☐ At the start of the event, greet and thank the audience for attending, share key program info and behavior expectations. Examples:
  - ☐ Describe program format " Today's presentation will be followed by a 10 minute moderated Q&A. Please write questions on the note cards on your chair. Cards will be collected and questions addressed to the presenter by staff."
  - ☐ If policy or library use guidelines prohibit photos/filming, mention at start. See https://www.oif.ala.org/oif/auditing-the-first-amendment-at-your-public-library/
  - ☐ Describe the behavior expectation and consequences
    - ☐ E.g. *"Respect for other library users, library staff members, and library presenters shall be maintained at all times. Individuals who do not abide by the Library Code*

of Conduct, which prohibits disruptive or inappropriate behavior, may be asked to leave the program or the library."

- ☐ Options for Q&A: the program may include a Question and Answer portion, depending on the purpose & goals of the program. Consider your options for managing audience questions:
    - ☐ Decide in advance how much time will be spent on Q&A. Stick to the timeline!
    - ☐ Remind the audience to keep questions concise & relevant.
    - ☐ Designate a moderator for the Q&A. This person will make sure the question being asked is relevant, ensure the event continues to move forward, and will redirect meandering comments. Whether audience questions are asked verbally or via written cards, a moderator is a key role for any Q&A.
        - ☐ If taking written questions, collect throughout the event.
    - ☐ Stick to the timeline! Once the Q&A portion is over, invite audience members who did not have their questions answered to connect via email, etc. to continue the conversation.
    - ☐ Q&A is not an opportunity for a debate (unless the program is an actual debate!). If an individual is monopolizing time, invite them to continue the conversation online after the event.

Post-Event

- ☐ Schedule a post-event debrief for planning team and partners
    - ☐ What are the "lessons learned" and how can they inform future events and activities?

Additional Resource:

"How to Handle Controversial Programming." *American Libraries*, 2014, https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/how-to-handle-controversial-programming/