

Don't Deputize Intolerance: Keeping Your Security Policies Safe from Your Patrons

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To live in rural Oregon is to live in tension. Crook County exemplifies the tensions of living in rural Oregon in many ways, and not just because it is located dead center in the middle of the state. It also encapsulates the contradiction of some residents trying to keep a hold on a past they perceive as idyllic, while others live with the opportunities and harsh realities of the present. Crook County sees this contradiction reflected in its reliance on industries both historic and modern: ranching, wood products, and auto tires on the one hand, and data centers, health care, and hemp on the other. This tension can boil over into conflict, even when it comes to something as supposedly simple as a change in library policy.

Like in many other communities suffering identity crises, some people in Crook County, and its only incorporated town of Prineville, ran afoul of the rising use of opioids (Chaney, 2019). Those of us at the public library saw the effects firsthand. In 2018 and 2019, the library faced a confluence of opioid-adjacent situations:

- finding needles, intravenous drug paraphernalia, and vomit on library grounds;
- patrons in the building who were apparently unconscious, not just sleeping;
- someone going through severe opiate withdrawal while visiting a social worker; and
- the departure of the county mental health provider, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, which had been operating a day center that drew in unhoused people. (McCallister, 2021).

These incidents presented a serious security dilemma for the library where we worked as director and assistant director: How do we ensure safety for the most vulnerable patrons, including those experiencing adverse effects from drugs, while generally keeping the library welcoming for everyone? This dilemma led us to two security-related decisions: to forbid sleeping in the library and to install security cameras. Both decisions ultimately demonstrated how choices made, ostensibly, to protect patrons' physical safety, or to help some people feel more "secure," can adversely impact safety for patrons who are already marginalized.

No Sleeping in the Library; No Rest for the Downtrodden

As in many rural communities, some Crook County residents think certain other people don't "fit in" to the community or its idealized cowboy past. It is not uncommon to hear conversations or see online comment threads, even involving police and city/county officials, that "those people" are ruining Prineville. Many of "those people" gravitate to the library: individuals without permanent housing, LGBTQ+ teens, people of color, unemployed individuals, and so on. The Crook County Library is a place where these besieged individuals can get things unavailable to them elsewhere: computers and Wi-Fi, restrooms, shelter from extreme weather, space where they won't be bothered, or even simply a staff member that says hello and acknowledges them.

Sometimes, these and other people slept in the library. Some had nowhere else to go (neither of Prineville's two shelters were open during the day), some had stressful lives even if they had a house to stay in at night, and others just drifted off while reading. The building's quiet alcoves and cozy, living room-like seating areas encouraged dozing. Nevertheless, other patrons were quick to point out this behavior to library staff, particularly when people laid down on sofas. The appearance of opioid paraphernalia—which at this point was just beginning to occur—raised concerns that some people, thought to be dozing, were actually overdosing or "nodding off." As a result, frontline staff often requested rules prohibiting sleeping.

At the 2018 Oregon Library Association Conference, Jane, who was Crook County Library's assistant director at the time, was surprised when most attendees at a panel on weapons in the library confirmed that their libraries had policies forbidding sleeping. Several participants pointed out that it is difficult to tell whether a patron is truly asleep, or unconscious due to a medical emergency. This resonated with Jane, as staff at Crook County had recently called 911 after a man found sleeping could not be roused. There had also been an incident where a woman in the computer lab had gone into diabetic shock. While this patron had recognized her symptoms and was able to alert staff, conference attendees pointed out that other patrons in similar situations might appear to simply fall asleep. Other participants noted that patrons with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often had out-sized startle responses that could escalate to violence, making it dangerous for staff or other patrons to wake them.

Upon her return to Prineville, Jane requested that the library's Code of Conduct be revised to forbid sleeping on library grounds. On May 10, 2018, this change was proposed and adopted by the Library Board of Trustees, adding the language "do not sleep, appear to sleep, or camp" (Crook County Library, 2018). The new policy was justified primarily to preserve the safety and health of the sleeping patrons themselves. Jane also noted that by snoring or taking up undue space, sleeping patrons could disrupt others.

The change was enacted with an unusual provision—the policy would go into effect on July 1, not immediately upon adoption by the Board. Staff felt that patrons should be given adequate notification of the new policy, so they would not be penalized unfairly for violations. Immediately after the change was adopted, signs went up around the library advertising the policy change and explaining its pro-safety intent. These signs were favorably remarked upon by patrons, particularly those who were unlikely to be sleepers themselves; "about time" was a common refrain from the public.

Meanwhile, management trained staff not only in how to wake patrons without touching them, but the trainers also tried to communicate that sleeping was not a harmful activity in and of itself. Sleepers were to be treated with empathy and kindness. It was specified that staff could not trespass a patron for sleeping without the intervention of a manager or designated Person in Charge. This differed from past training on Code of Conduct enforcement, which tended to emphasize progressive discipline. It also deviated from the library's separate Use Restrictions Policy, which gave leeway for staff discretion to enforce policies but did not distinguish between "red" rules that always must be followed to the letter (e.g., no alcohol consumption) and "blue" rules that could be bent in some circumstances to help create equity, for example, maintain a reasonable speaking volume (Dowd, 2018, pp. 213-214). These deviations from standard practice confused some staff, especially those who had been punished by previous management for not following "the letter of the law." As a result, staff needed frequent reminders about proper enforcement.

Unfortunately, signs advertising an imminent policy change proved to be too enticing in a community where a small but noisy contingent pined for vigilante "cowboy justice." Enlisting themselves as self-styled "Nap Mastersons," a handful of patrons took it upon themselves to patrol the library for violators. If we were lucky, patrons informed the staff of sleepers, who then took appropriate action. On a handful of occasions, though, patrons woke the sleepers themselves. In taking the policy into their own hands, patrons risked their own safety while often violating the dignity and safety of the sleeper.

The potential for privacy violations among the vigilantes was high. Patrons often drifted off among stacks of library materials. When "vigilante" patrons attempted to wake a sleeper, they often committed the cardinal no-no of touching the sleeper—a massive violation of personal space (and remember those outsized startle responses?)—and in doing so got close enough to snoop the sleeper's book selections. Given that the rule enforcers often justified their actions based on whether or not the sleeper had a "valid reason" for being in the building ("all they're doing is sleeping and reading comic books!"), the reading, viewing, and listening material of sleeping patrons likely came under scrutiny during these interactions.

This sudden influx of patron enforcers, combined with the challenge of encouraging a previously micromanaged staff to enforce policies with empathy, led to even more trepidation for the library's next decision on safety and security.

Who Secures the Security Cameras?

The circumstances that led to the adoption of our no-sleeping policy did not abate, and by the end of 2018 we began to consider security cameras as another necessary measure. First, the evidence of drug use on the library grounds posed an immediate physical safety hazard. Paraphernalia was found on the patio of the very popular library meeting room, which often hosted parties and other events frequented by children. The potential of a child picking up and playing with a needle was real.

Second, the appearance of needles in the courtyard coincided with a marked increase in the number of mandatory reporter calls made by library staff. Public library staff in Oregon are statutorily required to report suspected incidents of child abuse and neglect (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2021). Sexual harassment of patrons and the nearly all-female staff also seemed to be picking up in frequency, as indicated anecdotally and in internal incident logs.

Third, through behind-the-scenes conversations, the library was being pressured by local law enforcement and county officials to limit the 24/7 Wi-Fi. Officials claimed, without evidence, that the availability of free internet during off-hours was causing unspecified “problems.” We were loath to limit hours, given that the library was one of the few sources of public Wi-Fi that did not require a purchase or interaction with a customer service employee. Some of the same individuals alleged to be causing problems after hours also used the library during the day because they had nowhere else to go.

The library’s troubling experience with the no-sleeping policy heightened our concerns about adding cameras. The increased surveillance could easily become a tool to police and invade the privacy of the library’s most vulnerable individuals, including many of the same patrons targeted by the self-appointed sleep sheriffs. This potential for surveillance abuse was not theoretical. Members of the local neighborhood watch—a group very invested in the idea of Prineville as a “good” community—were interested that the library was considering installing security cameras. Both watch members and law enforcement felt that cameras could be used to investigate neighborhood happenings.

We ultimately decided to install the cameras in April 2019. They were a compromise that allowed us to retain 24/7 Wi-Fi, while hopefully discouraging drug use on library grounds. But our experience with the no-sleeping policy led us to limit who could access the footage and when, including:

- Retaining the footage for only one week.
- Locating cameras only on the exterior of the building and interior parts with limited visibility. No cameras were put in areas where protected patron activity might be exposed: the front desk, children’s room, computer lab, meeting rooms, and common seating areas.
- Narrowing views of exterior cameras to only cover library grounds, not to the wider neighborhood.
- Requiring a formal public records request for non-library staff to review footage.
- Purchasing a system that was self-contained and not connected to any other Crook County system, to limit law enforcement’s ability to review footage without permission or cause.

Although it's unclear whether these provisions were responsible, the cameras created fewer problems than the no-sleeping policy. Their presence appeared to reduce the drug paraphernalia found on library grounds. The footage also was not requested by the public or by law enforcement, perhaps because we chose not to widely publicize the cameras and only posted inconspicuous signs at the entrances. And fortunately, we found little need for the footage aside from one time when we unsuccessfully tried to find out who started a literal dumpster fire on the Fourth of July and another time when there was a mistaken case of bike theft. But the mere existence of the camera footage meant that abuse was a real possibility.

Lessons Learned

From the point of view of the local neighborhood watch, the library was doing a bang-up job protecting the community Old West-style with its sleeping ban and security cameras. We were not so sure. In enacting these changes, we realized that the actions we'd taken to protect the immediate physical safety of all our patrons were being used to violate the safety and security of specific patrons. It just so happened that all of the patrons being identified as violators were unhoused, or were teenagers, or were Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC), while the enforcers overwhelmingly belonged to more privileged demographics. What could we have done to avoid creating these inequities?

When libraries create policies or enact tools to change patron behavior, we recommend that they start with these three basic premises:

1. Everyone belongs at the library.
2. All library patrons, regardless of personal factors including age, ability, and housing status, are rational actors with dignity.
3. Not everyone agrees with premises 1 and 2, and may never agree despite your best efforts.

When we wrote the no-sleeping policy and installed security cameras, our first priority was protecting the physical safety of our patrons and staff. Given the frequency of sleeping patrons and needle discoveries, it seemed like an opioid-related disaster—an overdose, a child stuck with a needle—was imminent, and that we needed to move quickly. In our haste to get policies drafted and enacted, however, we neglected to consider issues of safety and security beyond our own privileged point of view. We didn't consider how these policies would be interpreted by the people they were intended to protect, or how some might use the policies to justify harassing marginalized groups whom they perceived as “not belonging.”

In hindsight, we still believe that the security cameras were needed to protect the immediate safety of staff and patrons. We also believe that we made the right call when we instructed staff to wake sleeping patrons, as we had several incidents both before and after the policy change in which “sleepers” turned out to be having medical crises. However, we could have made choices to mitigate the negative consequences of our policy changes. If we had to do it over again, we'd give our past selves the following advice.

Slow Down

Neither of us have seen a dead body on the job yet, and we were in a hurry to ensure we never did. In situations where an immediate safety risk has made itself known, there are certain actions you can take immediately (like installing sharps containers in accessible places)

and some actions that require more consideration. Changing a policy, or taking an action that could violate the privacy of library users, are both examples of the latter. Not every complaint made by staff or patrons rises to the level of action, and very few rise to the level of immediate action.

Identify Staff Training Needs, and Change All Relevant Policies

Crook County Library had separate Code of Conduct and Use Restrictions policies. The former outlined what you couldn't do at the library, while the latter outlined the possible consequences for misbehavior. While the Use Restrictions Policy was written to give staff leeway to enforce rules, it essentially treated all Code of Conduct violations as equal; the policy did not explicitly permit staff to bend a rule to preserve equity, or to assist a disadvantaged person. If your staff have been punished for not following policies exactly as written in the past, the idea that some rules might need to be bent will not be readily accepted, to put it mildly.

Ask Yourself: Are You the Best Trainer for the Job?

While the *Librarian's Guide to Homelessness Academy* (Dowd, 2018), available free through the State Library of Oregon, is not without flaws, library staff at Crook County seemed more receptive to concepts of compassionate enforcement when they were presented by the author, Ryan Dowd. In rural Oregon, "authority" often looks more like a guy like Dowd (masculine, physically large, confident) than like Buzzy and Jane (who are basically what happens if NPR tote bags could walk, talk, and get master's degrees).

Avoid Blanket Bans on Behaviors that Don't Hurt Anyone

Don't punish people for doing what they need to do to stay alive. Sleeping, eating, drinking, and yes, even bathing do not cause problems in and of themselves. Rules banning these behaviors, rather than their harmful causes or effects (such as doing drugs or making messes), are ripe for abuse by the privileged against the underprivileged. They're also guaranteed to be inconsistently enforced. (Consider, would you prohibit a baby from doing any of these activities? How about a senior adult?)

Instead of a Policy, Write a Statement

What kind of grief might we have avoided if, instead of banning sleeping for all library users, we trained staff how to safely wake people while simultaneously asserting patrons' right to sleep? It might go something like this: "Sleeping is an activity that harms no one, essential for the health and well-being of all people. Recently, people having medical emergencies have appeared to fall asleep and have been unable to wake up. For this reason, library staff may choose to wake you up if you fall asleep. However, there is no rule prohibiting sleeping at Crook County Library. If you suspect someone is having a medical emergency, call 911 and alert library staff immediately." Such a statement outlines both patron and staff rights and responsibilities while explicitly affirming that library staff, and not patrons, enforce rules.

Make It an Offense for Library Users to Enforce Policies on Their Own

If your behavioral policy defines harassment, make the malicious enforcement of library rules by non-library staff a part of that.

Policies that make some people feel secure—especially people who may not perceive the past or present levels of inequity in their community—don't necessarily make all of your patrons safer. Instead, those policies can become weapons that some in your community wield against those they feel don't belong, just like when a Wild West posse rode strangers out of town on a rail. Libraries alone cannot solve the underlying tensions that cause conflict within their communities. But they can be cognizant and careful of how those tensions can play out when changes are made in the name of safety, just as we learned in Crook County, where the Old West meets Big Data.

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