Approaching the Library Behavior Policy with Justice and Access at the Forefront

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During the COVID pandemic and the overlapping racial reckoning, the inequalities of resources and the disparities of the impact on our country and our communities have been exposed more than ever. Like most libraries, at Sherwood Public Library, we had tangible restrictions to our operations, were temporarily limited to curbside and virtual services, and reopened our doors to a community navigating multiple traumas and injustices. As we prepared to welcome our patrons back inside, our existing Behavior Policy (Sherwood Public Library, 2022) was inadequate, lacking the conviction of antiracism and trauma-informed customer service that we knew we needed.

This article explains why and how we worked through procedural and policy changes designed to preserve access to library services to the maximum extent possible, with tiered restrictions that now encompass continued access to curbside and virtual services. The process was made simpler by working in stages, alignment through training, and a cycle of evaluation and improvement. Our new behavior policy and procedures support consistent and appropriate enforcement, reduce biases, and foster more engagement with our patrons and community partners.

Background

Sherwood Public Library (SPL) is a member library of Washington County Cooperative Library Services and a department of the City of Sherwood. Our local policies are developed internally by SPL leadership, reviewed by our city's legal counsel, and evaluated and approved by the City of Sherwood Library Advisory Board. SPL staff develop and approve procedures, with legal review as needed. As policies and procedures are reviewed, we incorporate best practices from the OLA *Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, & Antiracism Toolkit* (2020) and other similar calls to action to make systemic change.

The SPL Behavior Policy (2022) is a tool for staff to "provide a welcoming environment where all are equally and safely entitled to use of the facility and to give staff support for consistently enforcing proper behavior," to quote from the policy's purpose statement. We are lucky in Sherwood to have had few issues at the library with drugs, violence, or other illegal activity. That said, we also evaluate public behavior against this policy on a daily basis and our comparatively quiet surburban status does not make us exempt from needing a fair and just policy.

Pre-pandemic, we mostly used the Behavior Policy with young teens for rowdiness, messes, theft, vandalism, bullying, and disregard of staff direction. The process of enforcement for violations such as rowdiness that was unlikely to cause or threaten harm followed this common pattern:

1. Check in with the offending patron(s), let them know the expectations, and ask for cooperation.
2. If the behavior continues, give the patron(s) violating the rules a warning that continuing the behavior will lead to being asked to leave for the day.
3. If the behavior continues, they are asked to leave for the day and may try again tomorrow.
4. If this is a repeating issue and we've already asked the patron(s) to leave previously, then we may exclude the patron(s) for a week or longer.

Violations that caused or threatened harm to others, or for other illegal behavior, called for immediate exclusion for at least one week, up to permanent trespass, and local police were likely involved.

Behavior issues were escalating in those pre-pandemic "before-times" and it was challenging to be consistent about the duration of our exclusions. We struggled to keep up with documenting and sharing the incidents right away so everyone on staff knew the stage of enforcement to use (whether the next time should be a warning, or a week out, etc.). This challenge led to inconsistent enforcement and a situation that was vulnerable to biased decisions.

Incremental Improvements

In 2019 and early 2020, I began personalizing the exclusion letters I wrote to excluded patrons (and minors' parents) with positive statements to better illustrate specific pathways to returning to the library. I made more phone calls and sent emails to try to reach parents and approach situations collaboratively. This wasn't fully restorative justice, but that's the concept that was prompting questions such as "What role does a public library have in encouraging socially and mentally healthy communities? What impact will our behavior policy enforcement have, if any, years down the road for some of these teens who were still learning who they are and how their choices begin to define them? Can we have a positive impact in how we enforce behavior?"

Together with lead staff, I began codifying revamped procedures to include a progression of enforcement based on the level of behavior infraction and the number of infractions. This concept is not new, though for us it was critical to empower lead staff to make quick assessments of what the next step should be and why. I was also working on a policy draft with new language about relationship-building just as the pandemic hit. While the work paused, the ideas kept simmering.

Silver Linings of Accelerated Change

Since COVID and the killing of George Floyd, our community, like so many, became polarized. Customer service was complicated by masks, safety, and the shifting moods of the community and our nation. Life and work were strained. As we reopened our building in the spring of 2021 during the statewide mask mandate, mask compliance at the library was our top concern to protect staff and the public, and allowed us to keep our doors open with a small staff. For those patrons who did not want to wear a mask, we continued to offer the new pandemic-era alternatives of curbside service, expanded virtual services, Chromebooks, and hotspots. A small percentage of interactions about the mask requirement led to arguments and sometimes threats from patrons. We asked some to leave for the day, and, for repeating issues, even longer.

We started using our newly updated procedure and exclusion progression, resulting in more objective consistency (see sidebar). The process had previously been punitive and subtractive (taking away library rights, i.e. access to the library). A new option before us was to continue to offer choices even in the face of excluding patrons from the facility. They could choose to stay and comply, or leave for the day and still have access to curbside service, check out a hotspot and Chromebook, or otherwise participate virtually—silver linings the pandemic brought us.

Revised Progression for Behavior Infractions

The following is an excerpt from our revised behavior procedures, which are included in the new policy document (Sherwood Public Library, 2022).

An example exclusion progression for behavior that is disruptive, disorderly, or unsafe is below. This example is for relatively minor infractions. More serious or repeat infractions will have a compressed progression.

- *1st infraction—Request from staff to discontinue behavior; staff will make efforts to offer an alternative way to use library services, as available (e.g. curbside only or virtual services).*
- *2nd infraction—Request to discontinue and warning that behavior can lead to an exclusion; alternative way to use library services, if available, may be required for the day.*
- *3rd infraction—Asked to leave for the day; staff will offer alternative methods of library use, if available.*
- *4th infraction—Exclusion for one week. Alternative methods of library use that do not require the facility or physical property will be allowed as relevant for the infraction (e.g. if behavior only presents inside the building, then using curbside and/or virtual services will still be allowed).*
- *5th infraction—Exclusion for one month. Alternative methods of service may be allowed. See above.*
- *6th infraction—Exclusion for three months. Alternative methods of service may be allowed. See above.*

> - *7th infraction—Exclusion for six months. Alternative methods of service may be allowed. See above.*
>
> *Example of exclusion progression for behavior that is threatening, harassing, harmful, or violating the rights of library users and/or staff:*
>
> - *1st infraction—Exclusion for one week minimum, up to a permanent trespass, depending on severity of the situation.*
> - *2nd infraction—Exclusion for longer period, up to a permanent trespass, depending on the severity of the situation.*
>
> *Offering alternative use of library services during the exclusion may not be applicable, depending on the severity of the violation. Staff and public safety and rights will be considered.*

The next pressing issue for us was easy and timely communication among staff about behavior enforcement. We were also working on restoring all open hours and still had staff working from home part of the time. We had little available bandwidth and whatever came next had to be easy and reliable. We were looking for a pilot that was "good enough" and embraced our new appreciation (requirement?) for slow librarianship—which was another silver lining concept brought to our attention by Meredith Farkas (2021) and helped move us from theory to operationalization without getting bogged down by perfection.

A New Tool

New questions were emerging: "How can we use trauma-informed customer service principles at this policy level? How can we assume the best and preserve dignity? How can we preserve a person's constitutional right to use a public library to the maximum extent possible, while still having a safe and welcoming library? How can we make tools that are effective and simple? How can we do better to combat bullying, microaggressions, and harassment? Are our values of equity, diversity, inclusion, and antiracism (EDIA) evident?"

A pivotal change to our enforcement was to create and implement a new behavior tracking and staff communication tool using the cloud-based Microsoft Office 365, which our city's technology department implemented at the beginning of the pandemic to facilitate working from home. This online Behavior Log now guides staff through enforcement procedures and documenting details. It includes multiple-choice prompts such as "What level of behavior enforcement occurred" and "What alternative methods of service did staff offer?" (see Figure 1). The form populates a cloud-based Excel spreadsheet that is viewable and searchable by all library staff.

In addition, we use a dedicated Microsoft Teams chat to capture smaller issues and generally share updates about behavior and safety-related concerns. Training on unbiased descriptions and confidentiality was part of onboarding the new Behavior Log. This new tool helps to document behavior issues, ensure consistency, and to work quickly as a team—even when our team members are in multiple locations.

> **What alternative methods of service did staff offer?**
>
> ☐ None
>
> ☐ Curbside
>
> ☐ Electronic resources (e.g. e-books or e-resources)
>
> ☐ Call or email for library services
>
> ☐ Checkout of materials for use offsite (e.g. Chromebook, hotspot, other)
>
> ☐ Other

Figure 1: A new question from the Behavior Logs is embedded into the enforcement process.

After an infraction, supervisors and lead staff often anticipate next actions and share pre-scripted wording for staff to use should another transgression happen or to start a conversation to team-solve a situation. We script out choices for the patron and a clear path to returning to full use of the library.

Alignment through Training

Until Oregon's mask mandate was lifted in March 2022, we were weary from enforcement and the escalated tensions. We knew our patrons were, too. The Ryan Dowd COVID training (2020) got us started, and we also needed longer term solutions. The need for a revised Behavior Policy was becoming more urgent, and so was the need to learn new skills.

On Working with Local Police

Calling police for enforcement can be a trigger for those who have experienced trauma; for Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC); for LGBTQIA+; and for other marginalized individuals. Real biases can have dire consequences. While our own experiences with local law enforcement were helpful, we were aware of problematic repercussions. Indeed, the concept of reducing police presence in libraries has gained much traction as part of equity work (Mueller et al., 2022).

In addition, we needed a refresher on when to call for police backup and emergency response. We partnered with Sherwood Police for a staff training, with additional customized trainings to come. A local officer who is a member of a mental health response team shared tips from mental health trainings for police officers and deescalation techniques applicable in the library setting.

We also learned we are empowered to ask the police to leave if they are making a library situation worse or if they are deviating from our policy and mission—a subtle and new option in our enforcement toolkit.

On Mental Health Support

Our role in creating safe spaces and building relationships was galvanized by the pandemic. I wanted to look at behavior issues and our social service referral skills holistically as patrons were reentering public gathering spaces. Mental health continued to be a top priority to support our community and our team as the pandemic moved past the two-year mark.

We used GetTrainedToHelp.com (https://gettrainedtohelp.com), the training portal for Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties. Several librarian staff members attended the full-day Mental Health First Aid trainings, choosing adult or youth versions to match their areas of focus. All staff were invited to a QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training on suicide prevention scheduled for our team, in addition to a customized training from our Employee Assistance Program, Canopy (https://canopywell.com/Employee-Assistance), on navigating change during uncertain times. Both have helped normalize conversations and activities about mental health, self-care, and collective care.

On Bystander Training

Following a path laid out in our strategic focus areas, we contracted Tai Harden-Moore (http://www.moore-consultants.com/) to present *From Ally to Accomplice* training for SPL staff, which inspired us take a stronger stance with our EDIA approach to foster a safe library. We are in early stages of developing library-specific scripts for interrupting racism and microaggressions.

For example, if we overhear a racist remark directed at a patron, we can insert ourselves into the conversation and say, "I overheard [XYZ] and I'm checking in on you. Do you need any support?" We can say to the speaker, "This library is a safe space for everyone and those words are hurtful. I need you to help us make the library welcoming and safe for everyone." This is a new level of proactive enforcement for all of us, and while it might be uncomfortable, it is our duty to uphold the values of the library and our stronger policy backs us up.

Enforcing with Empathy

I've been approaching this work with the following questions, guideposts, and assumptions rooted in empathy and research:

- How can we create physical, psychological, social, and moral safety for all of us (Tolley, 2022)?
- We are doing this work with reduced capacity. Do we have enough staff in today? Are we stretched too thin to do the new work before us? Do we have the mental and emotional stamina to handle another behavior policy infraction or other urgent matter, let alone do the work we were hired to do?
- We are working with patrons and staff who are struggling (Urban Libraries Unite, 2022, and Infopeople, 2022).
- Our colleagues and our communities are exposed to new traumas (e.g. emergencies, loss of a loved one, or anything that threatens one's security and rights) and are expected to cope with the compounded effects of the new trauma (Barski-Carrow, 2018) on top of the effects of the pandemic.
- Assume we all need things to be easier, more just, more holistic, and to extend grace more often.
- Assume the loss of library access has negative impacts beyond that day or that week. There can be shame and loss of trust. There can be financial, educational, and social

ramifications to losing access to our resources.
- A policy needs to be fair, enforceable, and supported with the training and tools to use it with empathy and consistency.
- Punitive behavior doesn't solve problems without deeper work and engagement.

Next Steps and Conclusion

This set of changes is part of our culture of continuous improvement as a learning organization. I anticipate there will be future revisions to this policy, because the work is never done. As of this writing, our new Behavior Policy is in the final stages of review and approval. It begins with this statement: "Our intention with our enforcement is to be fair and to build relationships that lead to improved behavior and continued access to our services and facility." Among many changes, it has new language about hate speech and racism. I expect to look at the policy with fresh eyes and see a dozen ways it could be better. And there are always more policies to review, revise, and sometimes to add. All SPL policies are located at https://www.sherwoodoregon.gov/library/policies (2022). I welcome suggestions and questions.

A library's behavior policy is a tool for a safe and welcoming library, and is also a litmus test for some of our most difficult circumstances where we are called upon to build relationships even as we may be removing access. The behavior policy strenthens our role as protector to counter hate speech, bullying, harassment, and microaggressions. Part of creating a library that is welcoming for everyone is looking for ways to build bridges, repair past distrust, and prioritize making just and equitable systemic change. The vestiges of the early stages of the pandemic—curbside and virtual services—are part of the accelerated change that made us stronger and more just.

To all those who are involved in policy work, I'm sure you can relate that policy work is satisfying when it's done and positive change is made. Policy work can also be daunting. It's laborious. Perfection feels out of reach, which can cause inaction. There are so many layers: working with all levels of staff, the board, legal counsel, and others in a cycle of revisions. There are also real and perceived obstacles to doing the work:
- Time to dive deep into the research.
- Patience and courage to sit with uncomfortable thoughts.
- Isolation in the actual writing and rewriting and finding direction when there's no manual applicable to this era we're in.
- Commitment to go through all the steps.
- Effort and skill-building to develop and test new methods.
- Time and resources to implement and train

In spite of these obstacles, I come back to this: Our library policies are the core structure of what we do. They hold us accountable and they shield us. They set us in motion to demonstrate our values and convictions. We must also be ever watchful for any unfortunate mismatch between the values in a policy and the EDIA goals we are trying to accomplish.

My call to action, then, is to take the time to reevaluate policies with an equity lens. Choose one and make it better. Then repeat the cycle. We must examine and adjust our policies frequently as a process, not merely to create static products. Systemic change happens one small step at a time and together we are moving libraries in a positive direction.

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