



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Promoting training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people’s use of libraries.”

-Policy objective #11,
American Library
Association “Library
Services for the Poor”

Although “offensive odor” policies in public libraries have been in the news lately, most libraries already have similar policies. The rules about odor fall under some sort of public conduct or patron behavior policies, usually available in writing or on a library’s website. Sometimes, as in the Albany Library, there is a posted copy on a library bulletin board.

These kinds of policies cover all sorts of situations. The “Patron Behavior Policy” of the Siskiyou County Library lists unacceptable behaviors, including such items as: hitting, running, theft, leaving children under the age of 7 unattended in the library, loud continuous crying or screaming, abusive language, lying in the aisles (I can’t help wondering about the story behind this one), and “extremely offensive odor - to the point it is nauseating, permeates an area, and/or prevents use of needed resources.” They have followed

this particular rule with a link to a note that can be presented – or read, I assume, since not everyone can see and/or read – to the offending patron. This note starts out: “We need to bring an awkward situation to your attention...The library staff has had complaints from patrons, and has determined that your odor is a problem.” It ends with the name and telephone number of the County Librarian.

Another example is the Hillsborough County Public Library in Florida. On their website is a page called: “Your Library...For All to Enjoy” and it includes a list of rules, divided by bold headings into different categories, such as “Personal Belongings,” “Bicycles” and “Offensive Behavior.” That last one is where the odors policy can be found and theirs is simply: “Customers whose body or clothing emit odors so offensive so as to constitute a nuisance or health risk to others will be asked to leave the

library and not return until they have bathed and/or washed their clothing.” The page ends with the words: “If necessary, the authorities will be called.”

My question is: What exactly is the intent of these odor policies? To some, it is a camouflaged attack on homeless people. John Halpin of the National Homeless Civil Rights Organizing Project is quoted on citybeat.com as saying: “We’re disappointed that a public place such as the library...would block access to a group of people based on circumstances that are quite possibly out of their control.” And in Houston, when the City Council passed a library regulation that includes “offensive bodily hygiene,” two of the council members voted against it because of concerns that the homeless population was being targeted.

Overall, I don’t believe these libraries are intentionally

targeting anyone. But I do believe that there may be unintended victims of these policies and that it is up to those who make the rules to look beyond a policy and its consequences and ask themselves why it seems necessary. And ask themselves, too, if they are truly treating everyone equally. If a local celebrity or politician came into the library wearing a strong perfume, would they be asked to leave?

Public libraries were established to serve everyone in the same way. Policies that may – even unintentionally – target a particular group should be closely examined and re-examined. In these days of budget cuts and convenient all-purpose bookstores, library administrators can find themselves constantly considering how to please the tax-paying public. Making a library palatable to the majority of

users can be one choice, but if it leads to the disenfranchisement of a particular group, the price may be too high.