Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way: Budget Challenges Professional Development and Continuing Education

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The longer I work in administration, the more I’m convinced that success begins with a clear problem statement. What’s the issue, and why is it important? This month, our contributors address the question of “getting it right.”

The first essay, “Lessons Learned: Service Dogs in the Library,” by Brooke Pederson, describes the painful process of dealing with a troubled and toxic patron. I wish we had more, equally candid recounts of such case studies. Part of me can’t help but wonder if the problem statement could have been clearer: was the issue really the presence of a dog in the library? Why? But anyone who has ever struggled to balance “following the law” and “striving to maintain a welcoming and safe library environment” knows how completely disheartening that can be sometimes. This was a new director’s baptism by fire. Her lessons will benefit others.

“What’s Next? Getting Programming Right,” is by Aimee Newberry, director of McLean County (KY) Public Library (MCPL), and Angela Smith, MCPL’s outreach coordinator. Here the problem statement was a little more quantitative: “In 2011, we ranked at or near the bottom of every category of services as surveyed in our statewide ‘Statistical Report of Kentucky Public Libraries.’” (The library ghost, on the other hand, is apparently not a problem.) MCPL, like many other libraries, turned to creative programming to find new energy and community connection.

Finally, in “Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way: Budget Challenges, Professional Development, and Continuing Education,” Thomas Ivie, Karen Kitchens, and Chris Van Burgh grapple with another specific problem, this time all about the money. A big state library association conference was about to go bust. In just six weeks, Wyoming invented a hybrid model of interest to all of us. The Wyoming State Library has long been a prodigious provider of high-quality continuing education content. Now, they’ve pointed the way to a more sustainable style of library education.

Do you have a story about what your library needs to get right in the next five to ten years? Email me and share your insights.

**Lessons Learned: Service Dogs in the Library**

Brooke Pederson, Library Director, Upper Skagit Library, Concrete (WA), bpederson@upperskagit.lib.wa.us

“My dog being a pet is a secondary issue, and you have absolutely no effing right to know my medical history!” he shouted at me with his finger pointed in my face.

“You’re right; I don’t need to know your medical history. What I would like to know is the specific task that your dog does for you as a service animal,” I replied, shaking in my boots.

“To tell you that, you’d effing need to know all about my medical history! I don’t need to tell you what my dog does for me. Eff your policies. I know the laws. You’re an effing fascist and discriminating against me! You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

We never did hear from his lawyer, but we sure did need to establish a relationship with ours. The following is a timeline of our library’s year-long experience with this patron and his dog:
• Patron comes to library for years leaving his pet, a big black lab, in his truck in the parking lot.
• February: Patron brings a prescription note into the library that says patient needs an emotional support animal and shows a staff member. Library director was not present at the time.
• February: Library director walks into library soon after and wonders why patron has his dog in the library. Asks patron: “Why is your dog in the library?” Response: “She’s my service dog.” Director asks: “What does your dog do for you?” Patron had no answer besides, “because!” Director did not ask for either patron or dog to leave.
• February/March: Director reads up on service dogs in libraries, state and federal laws, etc. She learns that emotional therapy dogs are not considered service dogs and can be excluded from the library. Board approves a new Animals in the Library Policy.
• March: Patron returns to library without dog for a couple of weeks then one day comes in with his dog. The director and a staff member ask to talk to him outside the library. They ask the patron if his dog is a pet, and what task his dog does for him. The above dialogue was a small piece of that conversation.
  o Director calls and asks a board member to come and speak to the patron about the issue. Board member wants to create a win-win situation by trying to understand where the patron is coming from, while explaining to him the rules and policies of the library. Patron immediately blows up at board member, enough so that she feels threatened and asks a staff member to call 911.
  o Patron calms down and talks with police officers. Patron is never asked to leave the library, only to remain calm and refrain from shouting and threatening library staff. Law enforcement tells library staff that service dog issues are very sensitive and that we should consult a lawyer.
• April: In the coming weeks, patron starts writing inflammatory emails to library board members and county commissioners calling for the director to be fired and the board member who called 911 to step down.
• April: Director gets in touch with lawyer through the library’s insurance company. Lawyer drafts response letter to patron regarding his emails, and asks patron to send all communication and complaints to her. Director wonders about banning patron from library due to his threatening behavior, but lawyer advises against it because it will be seen as discrimination due to his service animal.
• May: The dog is not on a leash and sprawls out in the library walkways. Director asks patron to keep the dog out of library walkways. Patron asks that director not address him in any way.
• May: Patron continues to email lawyer about the incompetence and unpredictability of the library director. Lawyer advises director not to engage patron in any way. Lawyer also advises patron to keep his dog on a leash.
• June: Patron walks into library with his dog, makes a show of taking off his belt and putting it around his dog’s neck as a leash. Sometimes the dog is wearing a flotation life vest. Sometimes the dog is wearing a piece of thread around her neck, the other end of which is almost never in the patron’s hand or attached to anything else.
• June–December: Patron continues to spend long days at the library, sometimes with his dog and sometimes without. Patron complains to all who will listen about the morons who run the library.
• November: Patron now claims that his dog is exempt from wearing a leash because of her tasks as his service dog.
• November: Patron files a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) that we have violated Title II of the ADA by discriminating against him.
• December: The Office for Civil Rights conducts phone interviews with all staff regarding patron and his complaints.
• December–January: Library receives three written complaints about patron’s behavior in the library. Library board decides to give patron a warning letter based on complaints that if he does not follow the library’s code of conduct that all patrons are held to, he will be barred from the library.
• December–January: Patron’s arrogance increases when he knows that the library is under investigation by the OCR. His behavior deteriorates and his disregard for library policies increases. He openly starts to harass all staff members and even volunteers. The environment gets so toxic that staff members contemplate retiring or finding work elsewhere if the situation continues.
• January: The Office for Civil Rights finds that the library did not violate Title II of the ADA. The patron takes out his anger on staff by publicly calling them liars, fascists, psychopaths, and white trash.
• January: Library Director meets with local law enforcement and neighbor organizations to set up a safety plan on the occasion that patron is warned and reacts unpredictably. The board requests a civil stand-by from law enforcement when patron is served his warning.
• February: Patron is served warning letter with local law enforce-
February: Based on patron’s disruptive behavior in the library and his treatment of library staff, the library board decides to ban patron from the library for one year. Lawyer agrees with this action. Patron is served an official no-trespass letter by law enforcement.

March: Patron files a second complaint with the Office for Civil Rights, claiming that the library retaliated against him for filing the first complaint. We experienced over one year’s worth of a hostile work environment for staff and patrons alike. You never knew what might set the patron off, or when he would turn on the charm in order to get something that he needed from a staff member or fellow patron (like a bowl of water for his dog, or a ride home). Any action that the library took to follow policy and curtail his disruptive behavior was interpreted as discrimination, and the library’s lawyer advised the library to sit tight, and to continue to funnel all communication with the patron through her. The crux of her advice was that any action we took to bar him from the library would be seen as retaliation and discrimination against him and his service dog.

As the library director, I felt that my hands were tied on so many levels. As the patron repeatedly talked under his breath or more directly to his neighbors about the incompetence of the library director, I was advised not to respond in any way. He would say things to my staff, like, “At least there’s someone here who knows what they’re doing,” and endless variations of the same. Add in the sensitivities of living in a small town and working in a very small library (4,600 square feet); when this patron called me “it,” or “psychologically immature” when talking to teammates, everyone in the library could hear and it was easy to start letting it affect me. I bought a large bouquet of fake flowers for my desk so that I wouldn’t need to see the patron staring at me. I felt that as a director, it was all I could do to focus on maintaining the everyday tasks of running the library. I felt that I wasn’t able to protect my staff, and they were left to be the front line with this patron. How best to enable them to navigate these waters? They did so famously, and I am so thankful for how professional and consistent they were in interacting with this patron and his constant demands.

The number one question that I have asked myself over and over again is, “Could I have nipped this in the bud?” Was there any other course of action? We followed the advice of our lawyer every step of the way. (Was she more invested in protecting the insurance company or the library?)

There is no reasoning with someone who is mentally ill. From me leaning down to quietly ask this patron why his dog was in the library, to me getting in his face and inciting him to violence, the story this patron told himself was the one he believed. We learned to document every encounter, complete with dialog and photos when needed.

Lessons Learned

Could we have taken a firm line in the beginning to not allow his emotional therapy/companion dog in the library? Perhaps if we had had our Animals in the Library Policy firmly in place, we could have. We know he still would have complained to the board and the County Commissioners and the Office for Civil Rights, but we could have gone through the OCR process a lot sooner than ten months down the road. That was ten months of dreading going to work and watching the door every time it opened, bracing ourselves for this patron’s entrance and his day-long toxic presence in the library. (I also wonder, however, if we had gone down that road, would he still be using the library? We may not have had the grounds to ban him from the library at that time. His dog may not have been allowed in the library, but we would still be putting up with his hostile presence.)

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We needed to write and revise some key library policies. We did not have an Animals in the Library Policy and needed to write one. In the tradition of great librarians before me, I borrowed and adapted from a larger library district in our state. We also needed to update our Patrons Policy, which previously had some blanket statements about respecting fellow patrons. Again, we borrowed and adapted from other libraries to really flesh out our Library Standards of Patron Behavior. Most importantly, we needed to have clear consequences set out for violating the policy.

We were in an abusive relationship with a narcissist/bully. We did not truly realize how much we were all affected by the situation until this patron was barred from the library. It was a weight lifted, in more ways than one. Reading up on narcissistic behavior habits was enlightening: this patron was feeding off our emotional responses to his barbs, and reveling in all the negative attention he garnered. After his trespass, staff noticed that in addition to ourselves being more relaxed, regular patrons were happier and spending more time in the library.

There is a point at which you can give someone too much grace. We went out of our way to serve this patron over the years. We gave him special privileges, cups of coffee, etc., and yet he continued to demand more, for example giving his dog a bowl of water or food inside the library. We finally agreed as a staff to give this patron no extra leeway, to treat him the same and demand the same behavior as any other patron.

Service dog issues are very sensitive issues. There are currently so many grey areas, that to us, it seemed that this patron could really call the shots in this situation. As I mentioned previously, it felt like our hands were tied. Having clearer state laws and requirements would really help in these types of situations.

A supportive library board was critical. Board member support on some of the tougher days was critical to my own mental health. Having board members that came to the library and took on some of the weight of interacting with this
patron and trying to problem-solve the sensitive issues made me feel supported and that library staff weren’t alone. We were all telling him the same story, being consistent as an entity. This helped me not to get too disheartened with this patron’s personal attacks towards me.

**This patron wanted money.** This patron ultimately wanted the library to settle this matter in an out-of-court settlement. When the library and the library’s lawyer responded consistently and evenly to all his complaints and claims, his complaints and claims grew larger and more outrageous. He started to look for other ways to extort money from the library. He started baiting the staff with other community and library issues to have a cause for a lawsuit. Eventually, the only thing left for him to do was to take us to court. As of this writing, he has not done so.

**Conclusion**

We did everything in our power to be gracious to this patron and to follow the law, all while striving to maintain a welcoming and safe library environment. What I have realized as a new director, with my temperament and personality, is that I personally could not have done anything differently. I was relying on the lawyer’s advice, the advice of my library board, fellow library directors, and local law enforcement. Based on this, I made decisions to the best of my ability. I believe that all of us now, myself, staff, and board members, have learned some lessons and have new understandings of service dogs in public libraries. We have solid policies in place now to help us navigate these types of situations (with legal recourse when necessary).

When asking staff what we could have done differently, one staff member wishes that she had had more training on how to deal with difficult people in the library. We did have one training last year in cooperation with the nonprofit Community Action, called “Responding to Escalating Individuals and a Practical Approach to Mitigating the Risk of Violence.” But given that we work with the full range of the public, making such training annual would be a good idea. (I believe that the major issue we were dealing with all along was less about the service dog, and more about dealing with a mentally unstable individual. The service dog issue was an opportunistic situation for this patron.)

When reviewing the previous year both for the Strategic Plan update and my annual review, I realized (anew) that this situation took up a lot of my and my staff’s time and energy: in essence, public resources. And then when we go to celebrate library milestones, great programs, and increased statistics, the whole service dog situation just sits behind those things, like an ominous cloud. It took up so much of our time, and yet it appears in no newsletters, no library updates, no milestones reached. The question we deal with now is how to make peace with this use of public resources.

**What’s Next? Getting Programming Right**

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McLean County is located in western Kentucky, with a population of 94,000. Livermore is the most populous town in the county, but not the county seat. Livermore is home to the McLean County Public Library (MCPL).

MCPL was the last public library to be created in the state of Kentucky. This May, we celebrated our sixth anniversary. Our library is housed in a thirteen-year-old two-story brick building that has seen several businesses come and go: a barber shop, a TV repair shop, the telephone exchange, a post office, and a general store. The building was once converted to apartments, and it’s from that incarnation that we have gained our resident ghost, Frank. The first floor contains our collection, all 23,000 volumes. We currently have fourteen public access computers and provide Wi-Fi for our patrons. We recently converted an area of the library into maker spaces, which have been drawing patrons of all ages to get creative and have some fun. Upstairs, we have a large art gallery, with works hung by local artists. We also house the Kentucky Adult Education program for the county on our second floor.

Currently, over one-third of the county population possesses a library card, and we add patrons every day. McLean County Public Library is not only the county library, but also serves as a community center for all McLean Countians. People come in and check out books, but they also search for jobs, fill out online applications, read magazines or the local paper, and just “hang out.” Our library is used for various community meetings during the week, both during and after hours. We feel that in order to be successful going forward, we must continue to promote ourselves as a community center, providing services far outside the “usual and customary” library services.

Programming is the key to our rapid growth and success. In 2011, we ranked at or near the bottom of every category of services as surveyed in our statewide “Statistical Report of Kentucky Public Libraries.” In the most recently published report, we ranked first in per capita programming and thirty-eighth in total programming in the state, out of 120 libraries. Quite an improvement in five short years! Our programming is geared to all ages, from birth to a hundred years young, with many programs being multi-generational. We have a wonderful Senior Bingo program twice a month and a monthly Family Bingo Night. Ladies DIY Night is also a great success. Programs like these tend to bring in people that don’t have a library card . . . yet. The end result is usually a new patron before the event is over. Excitement is key. If your programs or story-times are just so-so, you are not giving it the 110 percent that is required to be a success. Excitement starts with the presenters, so make sure they are on board with what is expected of them and their programs. Library programs should always take the patron on an adventure and leave them wanting more.

Our theme for Summer Reading this year, with many other libraries, was “Build a Better World.” We took that to heart...
McLean County Public Library’s “Build a Better World” summer reading program included a construction zone art gallery.

and in June, we transformed our art gallery into a construction zone, complete with cardboard backhoes, bulldozers, and a wrecking ball on a string. The cardboard construction equipment provided a great photo op for the many parents and children that attended our month-long program. The mayor of Livermore assisted our promotional efforts by sending a real backhoe and some “Men at Work” signage to add a touch of realism to the “goin’ on” at the library. We had several folks stop in and ask if we really were under construction.

We were fortunate to secure Home Depot as our corporate sponsor this year. They provided building kits for the older kids and sent employees to lead the sessions. They furnished each child with an official “Home Depot” nail apron and the library provided plastic hard hats and safety glasses. I wish we had remembered the ear plugs when over thirty-five children began to hammer, all at different times and rhythms. Holy smoke! The children, most of whom had never even held a hammer, were so excited to be building things. The parents and community volunteers had the privilege of holding the nails, particularly for the younger folks. Some of the projects might have been a little off plumb, but the smiles of satisfaction of each child as they completed the project were the best reward anyone could receive. Everyone left with a smile and maybe a few sore fingers, but everyone wanted to know “what’s next?”—two words every director and programmer want to hear!

Not only children participated in Summer Reading at MCPL. We also had thirty-nine adults join in the fun. McLean County Public Library partnered with the McLean County Family and Consumer Sciences agent Amanda Dame to host “Building Better Recipes” during the last two weeks of Summer Reading. Each recipe involved building or layering and all were quite tasty. It’s a great feeling to see people that have never stepped through the library doors show up for an event and ask, “What’s next?”

Maybe that should be the theme for libraries in the future: make sure the patrons are asking “what’s next?” Whether it’s the latest book, movie, technologically advance, or community venture, the library should be at the forefront, saying, “Hey, this is what’s next, and it’s here!!”

**Where There’s a Will, There’s a Way: Budget Challenges, Professional Development, and Continuing Education**

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A conference is a formal meeting of an organization that is meant to be an opportunity to connect to others in the same field to discuss challenges, innovations, and new trends. It is a very important platform for generating ideas and learning from one’s peers and colleagues through both formal presentations and informal interactions and casual conversations. Additionally, conferences offer invaluable networking opportunities throughout the organization and with attendees and industry vendors.

Organizing a conference entails a great deal of planning. There are many things to consider, depending on the conference format. The traditional, face-to-face conference requires selecting and coordinating all of the following: venue, catering for meals and snacks, a keynote speaker, additional presenters, and a host of other duties. All of these require contracts for negotiated fees and timelines of payments or deposits. An online conference still has many of the same issues, but is dependent on technology. However, technology presents an additional set of concerns. These can include issues such as software selection, formats for files, user knowledge of technologies employed, and how to disseminate the conference to online attendees. A somewhat new conference type, a hybrid, is a combination of the face-to-face and online formats. It allows for more flexibility to the organization to employ any combination of live-streamed, onsite face-to-face, and previously recorded presentations.

All of Wyoming’s public libraries are county libraries whose budgets are set by their respective county commissioners. In 2016, with a few exceptions, all of Wyoming’s public libraries were dealt some measure of budgetary cuts, some as high as 45%. As expected with such drastic reductions, continuing education and travel funds were slashed.

Because the planning process for an annual conference typically starts a year out, contracts were already in place for the Wyoming Library Association (WLA) Conference’s face-to-face venue. Many Wyoming libraries that normally send staff to the annual conference had voiced that they could not do so for 2016. Knowing that attendance was expected to be drastically down, the WLA was going to face a huge loss. Hotel rooms set aside specifically for the conference would go unfilled; filled or not, the association
would be obligated to pay for the rooms if the conference went forward as planned. If the conference were canceled, the association would only lose the down payment. Clearly the association stood to lose much more money if the conference was held versus canceling. Sadly, Wyoming’s annual library conference was officially canceled on June 17, 2016. As the planning was to start for the 2017 conference last fall, the executive board of the WLA added to the agenda of its September 1 meeting the idea of a 2016 virtual conference.

After much discussion during this September meeting it was decided that the association had to find a way to maintain our sense of community while fostering continuing education opportunities, supporting vendor contacts, and preserving the value of the association to Wyoming librarians. The executive board came to the conclusion that while having value, a complete virtual conference could not ultimately meet these objectives. After some discussion, it was decided that the best format for the conference would be a hybrid conference that incorporated live streaming, face-to-face, and a mix of prerecorded sessions that each regional site (as well as individuals) could pick and choose from in order to customize their conference experience. Once this core decision was made, the Wyoming State Library was able to provide staff for what seemed to be an insurmountable task of putting together a conference in about six weeks. Additionally, the decision was made that this conference would be offered at no charge.

The planning process was fast and furious. A call was put out to libraries, inviting them to participate as a regional host site. In the end, there were nine host sites around the state of Wyoming. The site requirements were simple. Each needed to have a room for attendees to gather, an internet connection, a computer, a projector, and speakers. As the sites were being determined, a small committee searched for an opening and closing speaker. These speakers would be at two host sites and live-streamed to the other sites. The committee was able to secure the news director for Wyoming Public Radio, Bob Beck, and the Poet Laureate of Wyoming, Gene Gagliano, as well as the Wyoming Library Association President, Sid Stanfill.

Each site could schedule their own face-to-face sessions that could be run independently from the rest of the conference and some did choose to do so. The committee contacted those who had submitted program proposals for the canceled face-to-face conference to see if they would be willing to do a prerecorded session on their topic. A few were able to do so on short notice. To recruit more programs, a call for proposals was sent out statewide. Many were submitted and all of them were put into a playlist on the Wyoming State Library’s YouTube channel, http://bit.ly/2tWCmFT. A program list with links to the videos was posted on the WLA conference page. These prerecorded sessions gave the host sites flexibility in that they could also choose from various prerecorded sessions to customize their conference experience.

Another staff member contacted vendors and arranged for them to provide swag to the host sites. In addition, the vendors provided short recordings of the products they had to offer. Links to the recordings (or ads) were provided on the WLA conference page and were played during intermissions and before live streams. Also, the annual basket drawings continued at each site and the funds raised went to the Wyoming Library Leadership Institute. It was decided to use the Wyoming State Library’s GoToWebinar account to distribute the live stream throughout the state. The State Library had to make sure each of the host sites knew how to use it so they could log in and participate.

As with any endeavor, the conference had its challenges. First and foremost was the short deadline. Six weeks is a tough timeframe to pull something like this off.

Feedback from the program presenters was that they wished they had more time to put together their programs, whether face-to-face or prerecorded. Secondly, the prerecorded aspect of this hybrid conference certainly had a different dynamic and feel to it than a face-to-face session. Not that it is bad, but there was no opportunity for the presenter to interact with the audience.

Lastly, technology is your friend. However, as much as the studio crew practiced for each scenario, they still encountered a couple of glitches. One was a mystery echo during the rehearsal recording. The initial recording picked up an echo, which was soon determined to come from an extra microphone picking up the sound. The big takeaway, when it comes to technology, is to not panic. Practicing ahead of time and problem solving definitely helped alleviate a great deal of the panic factor.

Going into the 2016 virtual conference, it was not known what could be expected or how it would turn out. What we learned is that despite budget cuts experienced by libraries across the state, the hybrid format allowed Wyoming librarians the opportunity to experience their community and gain the professional development of conference attendance with limited budget expenditure. While it was acknowledged by participants that a face-to-face conference is optimal, it is not always feasible or economically possible. The host sites created a conference environment, providing lunch, breaks, swag bags, door prizes, and printed programs. Providing the option for participants to attend virtually or attend at a host site greatly broadened the scope of attendees. More than 230 attended in person at host sites. Downloads of the sixteen YouTube sessions were more than 700. This certainly meets attendance statistics from previous conferences and is a testament to the success of the 2016 Wyoming Library Association Conference.
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