

# Looking for Library Advocates In All the Right Places

STANDING TOGETHER FOR INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM



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Robyn is currently reading *Fight Night* by Miriam Toews.

# When she hears from libraries facing intellectual freedom challenges, Lisa Varga, Executive Director of the Virginia Library Association, assures them of one thing, “You are not alone.”



Lisa Varga

As someone who speaks tirelessly at town meetings, Varga knows that the volume of challenges is unprecedented, and that they are often difficult to navigate and overwhelming. She also knows that library directors must activate their networks, because there are plenty of allies who will join with them to defend the First Amendment.

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Last spring, when a resident asked the sheriff’s office to investigate Adrienne Pettinelli, library director at the Henrietta Public Library, Rochester, NY, for allegedly distributing pornography with the book *Making a Baby* by Rachel Greener, the board came swiftly to her defense.

But it was five years earlier, with nary a book challenge in sight, that her trust in the board was cemented. A new library facility was going to public vote before residents who had never approved a bond for a project of that magnitude. At the same time, a leading candidate for town supervisor opposed it. The library board, Friends, and foundation groups put enormous effort into educating others about the value a new building would bring. An outpouring of library support grew, changed the candidate’s mind, and the project proceeded.

Pettinelli had found allies, a chorus of voices laying the (literal) foundation for a more robust library, stronger town-wide relationships, and the freedom to read.

“Adrienne establishes a level of trust, so everyone understands what the library is doing for the community and we have the support when it’s needed,” says Tina Thompson, board secretary and a former Board President.

When this challenge escalated in 2022, with threats and attempts at slander and public humiliation multiplying, it was an extremely difficult time for Pettinelli and her staff, but they were buoyed by the strong support from the board and local community members who wanted to ensure a diverse library collection. The hullabaloo, amplified by social media, as is commonly the case these days, eventually died down.

## UNPRECEDENTED NUMBERS

But hullabaloo continues in both blue states and red. The American Library Association reported more than 729 attempted bans of 1,597 individual books in 2021 alone, and the rate of book challenges in 2022 has already exceeded the 2021 record.<sup>1</sup>

## GROUNDWELL OF SUPPORT

For Madison County (MS) Library System (MCLS) a challenge began in October 2021 and dragged on for nine months. A few people voiced displeasure with *Julian is a Mermaid* and *Grandad’s Camper* in the children’s section, and *The Queer Bible*, by Jack Guinness, in a display of new nonfiction adult titles. Formal complaints were made, not to the library but to city officials, who threatened to withhold funding for the library’s Ridgeland branch.



Tonja Johnson

“We knew our collection and reconsideration policies were strong,” says Tonja Johnson, library director, “and we stood behind them. It was important that people came to understand what a library is, and that we were here to serve the entire community.”

In fact, they did. The board was especially supportive, patrons spoke out, and the Friends of the Ridgeland Public Library raised \$112,000 for use in the event that city funding was withdrawn.

“ALA, OIF, the Mississippi Library Association (MLA), the Mississippi Library Commission (MLC), and others helped us get our ducks in a row,” Johnson acknowledges appreciatively. “Plus, we developed a network of advocates by reaching out to local business and faith leaders.”

After months of debate, the funding was approved. And, so as not to lose the spirit in which the money was donated to the Friends group, the library started a well-received Freedom to Read series featuring materials and speakers highlighting marginalized voices.

“We did what boards are supposed to do,” says Connie Machado, board Vice President, MCLS, who was raised across the street from a library and



Connie Machado

whose mother encouraged her to read whatever books she liked. “There are people who don’t agree politically, but they didn’t let personal views or affiliations get in the way of their job and duty as board members. People should have the right to read what they want.”

## CHALLENGE FROM WITHIN

In 17 years with the Keene Memorial Library, Fremont, NE, Laura England-Biggs has seen only three challenges, and she was admittedly surprised that one was raised by a board member. This member was concerned that *My Mom’s Having a Baby* by

## ABCs of Public Library Collaboration

**Anticipate What’s Ahead, Bridge to Deliver an Effective Response, Converse Techniques**

### ANTICIPATE. DISCUSS AND PLAN AHEAD.

- Know your library’s selection (or collection) and reconsideration policies, how to find them, and how to put them into your own words.
- Monitor local social media (Facebook / Twitter), your library’s pages, TV/radio news to inform your team about what’s happening around the country and locally.
- Develop content ahead of time that includes responses to easy and difficult questions.
- Practice with colleagues, friends, and professional staff to feel comfortable with message points if you’re a spokesperson.
- Gather “What Public Access Has Meant to Me” quotes from this article or elsewhere for inclusion in e-blasts, newsletters, social media, slides, etc.

### BRIDGE. WHEN FACED WITH A BOOK CHALLENGE, BEGIN WITH ONE OF THESE RESPECTFUL RESPONSES.

- My experience is...
- What I can tell you is...
- I hadn’t heard that. I’ll have to check. What I do know is...
- I respect your views. May I give you another perspective...
- In our library the policy is...
- We share your concern for children. Our approach is...

### CONVERSE. BE AN ADVOCATE! USE THE FOLLOWING COMMUNICATION POINTERS.

- Pause and breathe before talking. Take a moment to gather your thoughts.
- “Drive the car.” Choose your message points carefully. Practice.
  - Feel confident in the freedom of speech and in your convictions.
  - Take proud ownership of your words.
- Keep answers to the point. It’s ok not to know.
  - Provide accurate information only. Otherwise you can say, “I hadn’t heard that. I’ll have to check,” or “What I do know is...”
  - No need to volunteer more info than asked
- Don’t assume what you say is off the record.
  - Your words can be repeated and recorded.
  - Avoid saying “no comment.”
- Check your attitude at the door.
  - Maintain a friendly demeanor. It’s ok to feel nervous and unsure of how to respond at first. Don’t overreact. Avoid crossed arms and tapping feet.
  - Be mindful to not criticize your library’s official decisions, policies, and guidelines.
  - Listen. Take the high road. Do not judge. Try to identify and address the real concern or issue being addressed. Don’t criticize or get personal. Stay focused on key messages (see the “Four Key Messages” sidebar).

Dori Hillestad Butler was “grooming children for the sex act.”



Laura England-Biggs

England-Biggs, library director since May 2021, had a conversation with her, and they agreed that not every book is for everyone, but they need to be available to everyone to read. “What I’ve learned is not to argue about the content,”

she says. “You won’t change people’s minds. Focus on the policy and the freedom to read.”

## STAYING READY

Many libraries have found it’s valuable to review policies and procedures regularly to make sure that staff and board stay centered in them.

In good times and bad, one of Tonja Johnson’s priorities is keeping the board informed. She uses training tools from the MS State Library Commission and United For Libraries to discuss intellectual freedom. It’s important to her that board members aren’t blindsided by questions.



Amy Mikel

At Brooklyn Public Library, they are not only testing their policies, but they’re also testing themselves. In 2020, Amy Mikel, director of customer experience, started an Intellectual Freedom Committee, which meets

bimonthly. If the library doesn’t have a challenge of its own, they “practice” by creating prompts from current events or those being debated within the profession, reading and discussing books like *The Real Anthony Fauci* by Robert Kennedy and *Irreversible Damage* by Abigail Shrier.

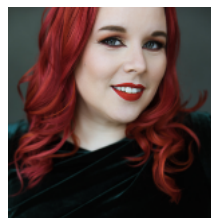
## REPRESENTATION

“We need to fight for intellectual freedom today so we can protect it for the future,” Lance Werner, Executive Director, Kent District Library (MI), says firmly. “If we don’t fight today, it will be gone tomorrow.”

Nicole Lintemuth is committed to making sure it won’t happen on her watch. She’s a Kent District

## Four Key Messages

1. Our library exists to provide materials and information for *all* members of our community. Our library presents points of view that reflect a variety of ideas, information, stories, and experiences.
  - Library resources help readers learn about the cultures, perspectives, and experiences of a variety of people—as well as their own.
2. Every individual has the right to make their own decisions about what they read and believe, regardless of the content or viewpoint.
  - We’re not always going to agree with everyone’s reading choices—politically, socially, or morally.
  - Library materials are for personal selection; they are not required reading.
3. Our librarians are trained to develop our collection and reconsideration policies. These include such criteria as authenticity, demand, interest, content, and usage.
  - For young readers, librarians consider age, social and emotional development, reading level, and interest.
  - Our library also has a reconsideration policy to ensure that objections are handled in a responsive and consistent manner.
4. Parents have the right to guide their children’s reading, but not to make decisions for other parents’ children.



Nicole Lintemuth

Library board member, and the owner of Bettie’s Pages bookstore, who distinctly keeps the two roles separate. “It’s all about protecting children and saying their lives matter,” she says, speaking as the owner of the

bookstore. Growing up in the 90s she read every book in her high school library. It wasn’t until her mid-30s that she finally saw herself in books, like *Red, White and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston and *Brown Sisters Trilogy* by Talia Hibbert.

Now, she’s making sure every kid has the opportunity to see themselves, and the wider world, in the books found on her shop’s shelves. “Kids are passionate and aware. They know the importance of what books mean,” Lintemuth says, reflecting on

## Tips from Librarians & Library Advocates Across The Country

### BUILD ADVOCACY AND DEI INTO LIBRARY MATERIALS

***“To reinforce your library’s values, add “supporting the freedom to read” and language about DEI values in job descriptions and onto your website. Recruit board members who understand library values and who will champion intellectual freedom.”*** –ADRIENNE

PETTINELLI, LIBRARY DIRECTOR, HENRIETTA PUBLIC LIBRARY, ROCHESTER, NY

***“It’s important that the Board is not blindsided by strange calls. I inform them about what’s happening and our plans to make sure we’re on the same page every step of the way.”*** –TONJA JOHNSON, MADISON (MS)

COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM (MCLS)

### BE READY

***“Our Library Director gathers the facts and presents them to us. Her advance prep makes us feel more comfortable.”*** –CONNIE MACHADO, MCLS BOARD VICE

PRESIDENT

***“Make sure your collections and reconsideration policies are airtight so your process isn’t questioned.”***

–LISA VARGA, BOARD MEMBER, VIRGINIA BEACH (VA) PUBLIC LIBRARY, AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, VIRGINIA LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

***“Talk before there’s a challenge, tie in advocacy and continuing ed, so that the Board understands their role is not just advocacy for the library but also the principle of the freedom to read.”*** –LAURA ENGLAND-

BIGGS, LIBRARY DIRECTOR, KEENE MEMORIAL LIBRARY, FREMONT, NE

### MAINTAIN GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH TOWN REPS

***“If you have input into board selection, be more intentional about searching for members, and share a list of criteria and duties. Let them know the library is looking for people who support the ideals of the library, and would be willing to take that position with a friend.”*** –LAURA ENGLAND-BIGGS, LIBRARY DIRECTOR,

KEENE MEMORIAL LIBRARY, FREMONT, NE

***“Our director and several board members attend town meetings and have ongoing relationships with municipal representatives. Reciprocally, the Town Board liaison attends library meetings, sees how the Board discusses policies, and takes that info back to the town Board. We have established a level of trust.”***

–TINA THOMPSON, BOARD SECRETARY, HENRIETTA (NY) PUBLIC LIBRARY

### KNOW YOUR COLLECTION

***“Know the books, read them, love them. They matter to kids who see themselves in them. Books have that power.”*** –NICOLE LINTEMUTH, OWNER OF BETTIE’S PAGES

AND A BOARD MEMBER AT KENT (MI) DISTRICT LIBRARY

### COMMUNICATE WITH PATRONS

***“Don’t get angry with patrons. Speak their language as best you can, and keep circling back to the fact that we stand for freedom. Never defend the title, defend the premise.”*** –LANCE WERNER, LIBRARY DIRECTOR, KENT DISTRICT LIBRARY

her experience working with children through the Michigan Interscholastic Press Association. “We don’t listen to them nearly enough. They, and what they’re experiencing in their lives, are often left out of the conversation.”

### A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS

Finding voices of all ages outside the library can be helpful, especially at a time when staff members are concerned for their jobs and personal safety.

Lisa Varga, who is also a board member for the Virginia Beach Public Library, says, “I’ve been able to go to meetings and defend library policies

without the risk of losing my job. Academic librarians and library staff have also reached out to ask how they can advocate for their public library colleagues, and they too are jumping at the opportunity to attend critical meetings to speak up about the value of intellectual freedom.”

In addition, she points to Book Résumés, a database created by Virginia Library Association (VLA) volunteers for association members. The database includes a list of challenged titles along with objections, articles, and awards. Over the last eight months, 75 book résumés have been added. VLA is happy to share the information with library

advocates across the country, who may find it helpful if their own book challenges arise.

## NOVEL APPROACHES

Many libraries are looking at new ways to underscore each person's right to decide what they want to read.



Richard E. Ashby Jr.

When a transgender teen commented, “I don’t see any books for me here,” Richard E. Ashby Jr., library director at the Sharon Hill (PA) Public Library, was surprised. “What books should we have?” he asked. From that conversation, Books on Demand was born, a program encouraging patrons at this library outside Philadelphia to suggest titles. As budget allows, the library selects one or two a month to purchase, helping to further ensure a diversity of materials.

In lieu of 2023 Banned Books Week, Norfolk (NE) Public Library will celebrate Independence Day, by tying in the Constitution, freedom of speech, and the freedom to read. Library Director Jessica Chamberlain heard the idea at an Association for Rural and Small Libraries conference. “People who have a distrust in libraries won’t be swayed by Banned Books displays, so we’ll talk about intellectual freedom as a protected right we have as citizens,” she says. “Maybe we’ll reach a new audience.”

During Banned Books Week 2022, the Henrietta Public Library (Rochester, NY) joined with a non-profit focused on community connection and anti-racism education called 540 WMain, as well as with area libraries, readers, writers, and booksellers, to host banned books read-alouds. In April, they’ll host the event again.

“We ask the community what they’d like to see and what they’d like to know, and incorporate that into our social media,” says Mychal Threets, Supervising Librarian, Solano County Library (CA). “You can meet young people where they are, like with TikTok. You can bridge the generation gap and show them books that look like them.” Threets finds fun ways to engage community

## RESOURCES

- American Library Association Office for Intellectual Freedom—<https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/oif>
- Fighting Book Bans and Censorship: How Trustees, Friends, and Foundations Can Support Their Library: An interactive toolkit from United for Libraries—<https://www.ala.org/united/fightingbookbans>
- National Coalition Against Censorship—<https://ncac.org/>
- PEN America Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Ban Books—[bit.ly/40l4F2U](https://bit.ly/40l4F2U)
- Public Library Association—<https://www.ala.org/pla/>
- United for Libraries—<https://www.ala.org/united/>
- Your State Library Association

partners on TikTok to draw attention to titles like *Frizzy* by Claribel A. Ortega.

## ALLIANCE BUILDING

Finding new partners is top of mind for many libraries, and sometimes allies can be found in unique places. Laura England-Biggs tells a story of their “small but mighty Friends group.”

A former Friends Board President approached Jeff Rise, the owner of Dave’s Drive-In Liquor, about getting involved with the library. Jeff was so enthusiastic that he built floor to ceiling bookshelves in his store that he stocks with thousands of used books and puzzles. The money he raises is donated to the Friends of Keene Memorial Library, helping fund snacks for children’s programming, author visits, and computer software.

## STANDING OUR GROUND

“We need regular conversation and public discourse,” says Varga. This is especially true at a time when the voices of those who want to undermine intellectual freedom can feel the loudest.

“Our stories are all different, and they all deserve to be told,” concurs Johnson. “I think of people whose lives those books reflect, and I could never

tell them their reality is not legitimate.” She goes on to say, “I’m fighting for people. When you’re trying to erase someone’s story, you’re erasing their humanity. That is not acceptable to me.”

Here is where Board, Friends, foundations, cardholders, and community partners can harmonize on the freedom to read, and join in on the refrain to uphold public access to the books and materials in our public library collections.

Like Varga says with certainty, we are not alone. Let’s work together to change the narrative. [PL](#)

## REFERENCE

1. Unite Against Book Bans, American Library Association, <https://uniteagainstbookbans.org/>.

# PublicLibraries

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## Feature Article Contest

Each year the Public Libraries Advisory Committee chooses the best article written by a public librarian or public library worker and published in the previous volume year. Two prizes are awarded each year. The winner receives \$500 and the article chosen for honorable mention receives \$300. Criteria include:

- Author(s) must be a public library employee(s) at the time the manuscript is submitted.
- Articles must have been submitted or published in the volume year.
- Articles must be feature length. Verso and Perspectives contributions will not be considered.



Congratulations to our 2023 recipients for articles published in 2022!

**Winner:** “When First Amendment Auditors Visit Your Library” (<http://bit.ly/3lXQAbP>) by Jennifer Brown, Executive Director, and Nora Mulligan, Head of Adult Services, The Field Library, Peekskill, New York.

**Honorable Mention:** “Strengthening Communities—Outreach Services to Persons Who Are Incarcerated and Those Re-Entering Society” (<https://bit.ly/3Er2sK1>) by Jenn McKague, Outreach Services Librarian, Salt Lake County (UT) Library. [PL](#)