

MEETING ROOMS

An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS

Many libraries provide meeting rooms for individuals and groups as part of a program of service. Article VI of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS states that such facilities should be made available to the public served by the given library "on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use."

Libraries maintaining meeting room facilities should develop and publish policy statements governing use. These statements can properly define time, place, or manner of use; such qualifications should not pertain to the content of a meeting or to the beliefs or affiliations of the sponsors. These statements should be made available in any commonly used language within the community served.

If meeting rooms in libraries supported by public funds are made available to the general public for non-library sponsored events, the library may not exclude any group based on the subject matter to be discussed or based on the ideas that the group advocates. For example, if a library allows charities and sports clubs to discuss their activities in library meeting rooms, then the library should not exclude partisan political or religious groups from discussing their activities in the same facilities. If a library opens its meeting rooms to a wide variety of civic organizations, then the library may not deny access to a religious organization. Libraries may wish to post a permanent notice near the meeting room stating that the library does not advocate or endorse the viewpoints of meetings or meeting room users.

Written policies for meeting room use should be stated in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. For example, a policy that the library's facilities are open "to organizations engaged in educational, cultural, intellectual, or charitable activities" is an inclusive statement of the limited uses to which the facilities may be put. This defined limitation would permit religious groups to use the facilities because they engage in intellectual activities, but would exclude most commercial uses of the facility.

A publicly supported library may limit use of its meeting rooms to strictly "library-related" activities, provided that the limitation is clearly circumscribed and is viewpoint neutral.

Written policies may include limitations on frequency of use, and whether or not meetings held in library meeting rooms must be open to the public. If state and local laws permit private as well as public sessions of meetings in libraries, libraries may choose to offer both options. The same standard should be applicable to all.

If meetings are open to the public, libraries should include in their meeting room policy statement a section which addresses admission fees. If admission fees are permitted, libraries shall seek to make it possible that these fees do not limit access to individuals who may be unable to pay, but who wish to attend the meeting. Article V of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS states that "a person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views." It is inconsistent with Article V to restrict indirectly access to library meeting rooms based on an individual's or group's ability to pay for that access.

Adopted July 2, 1991, by the ALA Council.
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EXHIBIT SPACES AND MEETING ROOMS

An Interpretation of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS

As part of their program of service, many libraries provide meeting rooms and exhibit spaces for individuals and groups. Article VI of the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS states that such facilities should be made available to the public served by the given library "on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use."

In formulating this position, the American Library Association sought to accommodate the broad range of practices among public, academic, school and other libraries, while upholding a standard of fairness. Libraries maintaining exhibit and meeting room facilities for outside groups and individuals should develop and publish policy statements governing their use. These statements can properly define and restrict eligibility for use as long as the qualifications do not pertain to the content of a meeting or exhibit or to the beliefs or affiliations of the sponsors.

It is appropriate for a library to limit access to meeting rooms or exhibit space to members of the specific community served by the library or to groups of a specific category. The library may properly limit the use of its meeting rooms to meetings which are open to the public, or it may make space available for both public and private sessions. It is not proper to apply such limitations in ways which favor points of view or organizations advocating certain viewpoints.

Exhibits and meetings sponsored by the library itself should be organized in a manner consistent with the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS, especially Article II which states that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view." However, in granting meeting or exhibit space to outside individuals and groups, the library should make no effort to censor or amend the content of the exhibit or meeting. Those who object to or disagree with the content of any exhibit or meeting held at the library should be entitled to submit their own exhibit or meeting proposals which should be judged according to the policies established by the library.

Adopted February 4, 1981. Amended June 26, 1990, by the ALA Council.

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It is appropriate for a library to limit access to meeting rooms or exhibit space to members of the specific community served by the library or to groups of a specific category. It is not proper to apply such limitations in ways which favor points of view or organizations advocating certain viewpoints. For example, some libraries permit religious groups to use meeting facilities, while others do not. According to Article VI, both policies are acceptable as long as all religious groups are treated in the same way, irrespective of their doctrines.

Exhibits and meetings sponsored by the library itself should be organized in a manner consistent with the LIBRARY BILL OF RIGHTS, especially Article II which states that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view." However, in granting meeting or exhibit space to outside individuals and groups, the library should make no effort to censor or amend the content of the exhibit or meeting. Those who object to or disagree with the content of any exhibit or meeting held at the library should be entitled to submit their own exhibit or meeting proposals which should be judged according to the policies established by the library.

The library may properly limit the use of its meeting rooms to meetings which are open to the public, or it may make space available for both public and private sessions. Again, however, the same standard should be applicable to all.

Adopted February 4, 1981 by the ALA Council.

HISTORY

Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards

Use of library exhibit spaces and meeting rooms became a subject of developing controversy in the 1970s. These years saw several publicized efforts to deny access to such facilities to controversial groups or exhibitors. In North Carolina, for example, an exhibit sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan at a public library sparked a violent confrontation with protesters. At the University of California library at Berkeley, Turkish students protested the one-sidedness of an exhibit on the early-twentieth-century massacre of Armenians by Turks, which had been placed in the library by students of Armenian ancestry. In several places, attempts were made to deny use of such facilities to certain groups on the grounds either that the groups themselves were advocates of violence or that the threat of violence associated with their meetings—including threats made against these meetings by the groups' opponents—posed a danger to library employees and patrons or to library property. At the same time, exhibits mounted by libraries themselves sometimes came under fire. In Virginia, for instance, an exhibit of books about homosexuality in a public library collection was accused of promoting this practice and of obscenity. All these efforts to censor library exhibits were in violation of Article VI of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

The 1970s were also marked by some confusion within ALA about the applicability of Article VI as it was formulated in the 1967 version of the *Library Bill of Rights*. In particular, academic and school libraries pointed out that the provision was written to apply in reality only to public libraries, and public librarians noted that it

was not flexible enough to accommodate the varying situations of public libraries.

The 1980 revision of the *Library Bill of Rights* took account of these objections, and the revision of Article VI in that year successfully remedied its major defects. (See part 2, section 1, "*Library Bill of Rights: History*.") At the 1980 Annual Conference in New York however, the IFC, with Frances C. Dean as chair, decided that, given both the increasing number of incidents and the admitted complexity of applying even the revised article in practice, a written policy interpreting the article would be desirable.

The Intellectual Freedom Committee agreed that the key to applying the article was the need to maintain flexibility while upholding a standard of fairness. On this basis a policy was prepared and, at the 1981 Midwinter Meeting in Washington, D.C., presented to the Council, which adopted it as an ALA policy on February 4, 1981. It read as follows:

As part of their program of service, many libraries provide meeting rooms and exhibit spaces for individuals and groups. Article VI of the *Library Bill of Rights* states that such facilities should be made available to the public served by the given library "on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use."

In formulating this position, the American Library Association sought to accommodate the broad range of practices among public, academic, school and other libraries, while upholding a standard of fairness. Libraries maintaining exhibit and meeting room facilities for outside groups and individuals should develop and publish policy statements governing their use. These statements can properly define and restrict eligibility for use as long as the qualifications do not pertain to the content of a meeting or exhibit or to the beliefs or affiliations of the sponsors.

It is appropriate for a library to limit access to meeting rooms or exhibit space to members of the specific community served by the library or to groups of a specific category. It is not proper to apply such limitations in

This is taken from the *Intellectual Freedom Manual*

ways which favor points of view or organizations advocating certain viewpoints. For example, some libraries permit religious groups to use meeting facilities, while others do not. According to Article VI, both policies are acceptable as long as all religious groups are treated in the same way, irrespective of their doctrines.

Exhibits and meetings sponsored by the library itself should be organized in a manner consistent with the *Library Bill of Rights*, especially Article II which states that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view." However, in granting meeting or exhibit space to outside individuals and groups, the library should make no effort to censor or amend the content of the exhibit or meeting. Those who object to or disagree with the content of any exhibit or meeting held at the library should be entitled to submit their own exhibit or meeting proposals which should be judged according to the policies established by the library.

The library may properly limit the use of its meeting rooms to meetings which are open to the public, or it may make space available for both public and private sessions. Again, however, the same standard should be applicable to all.

In 1989, revisions were undertaken to reflect nondiscrimination on the basis of language or economic status. Discussion on appropriate changes in the Interpretation continued through June 26, 1990, at which time the Committee voted to rescind two sentences of the Interpretation as an interim measure:

For example, some libraries permit religious groups to use meeting facilities, while others do not. According to Article VI, both policies are acceptable as long as all religious groups are treated in the same way, irrespective of their doctrines.

The sentences were rescinded in light of a recent court decision in favor of a religious organization that had been denied use of a library meeting room¹ (see part 4, section 1, "Public Libraries and the Public Forum Doctrine").

Following adoption of the interim language, continuing concerns about the meaning of viewpoint-neutral restrictions, the rules governing designated public forums, and commercial uses of library meeting rooms led to a consensus decision to rewrite the policy totally.

In January 1991, two separate Interpretations—"Meeting Rooms" and "Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards"—were introduced. Recent court decisions supporting the right of religious groups to have access to public forums for their meetings raised questions that were best dealt with in a discrete meeting-room policy. After additional discussion about fees, commercial uses, and disclaimers to clarify the library's position as a neutral host and not an advocate of particular meetings or exhibits, the Committee voted to adopt the two Interpretations for circulation to all ALA units, the Council, and the Executive Board for comment.

The two policies were adopted as revised on July 2, 1991, at the Annual Conference. (For the policy "Meeting Rooms," see part 2, section 2.15.)

No changes in "Exhibit Spaces and Bulletin Boards" were recommended as part of the 1999–2000 periodic review of all Interpretations by the IFC.

As part of the 2004–5 review of Interpretations the IFC recommended revising one sentence for clarity. The sentence

A publicly supported library may designate use of exhibit space for strictly library-related activities, provided that the limitation is clearly circumscribed and is viewpoint neutral.

was changed to:

A publicly supported library may designate use of exhibit space for strictly library-related activities, provided that this limitation is viewpoint neutral and clearly defined.

Council approved the revised Interpretation on June 30, 2004.

NOTE

1. *Concerned Women for America, Inc. v. Lafayette County*, 883 F.2d 32, 34 (5th Cir. 1989).