

The Public Library: Democracy's Resource

A Statement of Principles

The public library is unique among our American institutions. Only the public library provides an open and nonjudgmental environment in which individuals and their interests are brought together with the universe of ideas and information. The ideas and information available through the public library span the entire spectrum of knowledge and opinions. The uses made of the ideas and information are as varied as the individuals who seek them. Public libraries freely offer access to their collections and services to all members of the community without regard to race, citizenship, age, education level, economic status, or any other qualification or condition.

Free access to ideas and information, a prerequisite to the existence of a responsible citizenship, is as fundamental to America as are the principles of freedom, equality and individual rights. This access is also fundamental to our social, political and cultural systems. Our founding documents eloquently express the concepts of an open society in which the hopes and aspirations of individuals are best realized in a political system which honors the consent of the governed, the greatest good for the greatest number, and tolerance and acceptance of the diversity of human thought and endeavor.

Access to information and the recorded wisdom and experience of others has long been held a requirement for achieving personal equality, and for improving the quality of life and thought in the daily activities and relationships of individuals. Along with the freedoms of speech, press, and religious expression, and publicly supported schools freely open to all, the public library emerged as one of those "institutions" of American life through which our highest aspirations are expressed. These "institutions" are the visible signs of the nation's abstract beliefs in the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Today, public libraries are integral parts of their communities in the fifty states and territories of the United States.

Public libraries were founded and supported by appropriations from tax revenues for very practical reasons: to provide and conserve books and journals

economically for community use. Today, public libraries continue to provide free access to, and promote the communication of, ideas and information so that individuals on their own behalf, and groups, agencies, organizations and institutions can take active control of their lives and affairs. Public libraries have multiple roles: they serve the entire community as a center for reliable information; they provide opportunity and encouragement for children, young adults, and adults to educate themselves continuously; they create opportunities for recreation and personal enrichment; and they provide a place where inquiring minds may encounter the rich diversity of concepts so necessary for a democratic society whose daily survival depends on the free and competitive flow of ideas.

To perform these varied roles, public libraries assemble, make available, and preserve organized collections of books, related materials and systems in which ideas and information are recorded. Public libraries employ staff with special skills, knowledge, and abilities to help library users find the ideas, information and materials to meet their diverse interests. The public library initiates and promotes information services, program events, exhibits, story hours, film showings, discussion groups and many other activities. Public libraries use assessment and planning processes to determine community needs and interests, often in cooperation with other community agencies and organizations. Libraries develop services to meet those needs and interests.

As the forms in which ideas and information are stored change, and will continue to change, the challenge of making the widest possible range of information accessible to all remains constant. The ideals which brought free public libraries into existence are as vital now as when they were formulated. Public libraries continue to be of enduring importance to the maintenance of our free democratic society. There is no comparable institution in American life.

Public Library Principles Task Force

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