

MEETING ROOMS

An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Many libraries provide meeting rooms and other spaces designated for use by the public for meetings and other events as a service to their communities. Article VI of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, “Libraries which make ... meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use.” Libraries do not advocate for or endorse the viewpoints expressed in meetings by meeting room users, just as they do not endorse the viewpoints of works in their collections. The presence and activities of some groups in public spaces, while constitutionally protected, can cause fear and discomfort in some library users and staff. Libraries should adopt and enforce user behavior policies that protect library users and staff from harassment while maintaining their historic support for the freedom of speech.¹ This interpretation provides general guidelines regarding meeting rooms and other spaces for public gatherings, and it does not constitute legal advice.

Publicly funded libraries are not obligated to provide meeting room space to the public. If libraries choose to do so, such spaces are considered designated public forums², and legal precedent holds that libraries may not exclude any group based on the subject matter to be discussed or the ideas for which the group advocates.^{3, 4} However, if a group's actions during a meeting disrupt or harass others in the library, library policies regarding acceptable behavior may apply. If libraries adopt policies that are perceived to restrict potentially controversial groups' access to meeting rooms, they may face legal and financial consequences. Allowing religious groups to use library meeting rooms and spaces does not constitute a breach of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause.⁵

Libraries offering meeting rooms and spaces should develop and publish policies governing use after consultation with legal counsel. These policies should properly define time, place, or manner of use; such restrictions should not pertain to the content of a meeting or to the beliefs or affiliations of the sponsors. Policies should be regularly reviewed with staff and made available to the public in all of the commonly used languages within the community served.

Libraries should write policies in inclusive rather than exclusive terms. A policy that the library's facilities are open “to organizations engaged in educational, cultural, intellectual, charitable, advocacy, civic, religious, or political activities” is an inclusive statement of the limited uses of the facilities. 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.

Written policies may also include limitations on frequency of use and require adherence to the library's behavior policy.⁶ The meeting room policy should also state whether meetings held in library spaces must be open to the public or if the library allows private events. Libraries may choose to offer space for public or private events unless restricted by state or local laws. The same standards and policies should apply to all meeting room uses. Library users should have a process through which they may appeal the denial of meeting room use.

If meeting rooms and spaces are open to the public, libraries should include a section in their policy that addresses fees. Charging fees does not change the status of meeting rooms and spaces as designated public forums. Library governing bodies that decide to charge fees for use of library spaces should consider local and state laws, the ALA's *Code of Ethics*, and the *Library Bill of Rights*. Charging fees for the use of library meeting rooms or facilities may abridge or deny access for some community members.⁷

Article V of the *Library Bill of Rights* states, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views." This applies with equal force to the library's meeting rooms and spaces designated for public use as it does to the library's collections and services.

¹ "Resolution on Libraries as Responsible Spaces," Committee on Diversity, adopted June 26, 2017 by the ALA Council.

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

³ *Hale v. Schaumburg Township District Library, et al.*, 01-cv-2220 (N.D. Ill. 2001); *Hale, et al., v. Schell and the Martin Library Board of Directors*, 1:02-cv-1156 (M.D. Pa. 2002).

⁴ "White Supremacist Wins Library Venue in Schaumburg," *American Libraries Magazine*, August 20, 2001; "White Supremacists to Meet after Library Changes Policy," *Library Journal* staff, *Library Journal*, November 25, 2002.

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

⁶ "Guidelines for the Development of Policies and Procedures Regarding User Behavior and Library Usage," adopted January 24, 1993 by the Intellectual Freedom Committee; revised November 17, 2000; January 19, 2005; and March 29, 2014.

⁷ "Economic Barriers to Information Access: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*," adopted June 30, 1993, by the ALA Council and amended June 25, 2019.

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