

TRUSTEE DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES



The Big Picture

If legions of jobseekers were vying for trustee positions on library boards, a want ad for the job might read as above.

Of course, service on a library board is pro bono public service, so you will not have arrived here by dazzling a job interviewer. As a library user and supporter, you may have campaigned for an elected trustee position, or perhaps you hesitantly accepted appointment. Either way, you have a most important job to do.

A public library might be defined as a repository of information available to all in the community. This public resource addresses and meets a wide variety of needs. For some members of the community, the library is the chief or only source for recreational reading. For others, it is a valuable professional resource. Young children discover the wide world of ideas in the library. People of all ages use computers and the Internet at libraries to prepare themselves to function in the modern digital world. Disabled people find resources in public libraries that may not be available elsewhere. You, as a trustee, represent all of these people.

A public library, even of relatively small size, is a complex operation that requires informed and skillful administration and management. You, along with the other trustees on the library board, oversee performance of these roles by library staff.

The Board of Trustees

Library trustees do their work collectively on the library board. Though the board has broad powers—it is answerable only to the governing body that has oversight over the library or, if elected, to the voters—those powers are exercised collectively. No individual trustee can speak or act for the board, or for the library, unless specifically empowered to do so by board action or adopted bylaws.

The board's crucial partner in administering the library is the library director. This professional has been hired by the board and serves at the board's pleasure. The board depends heavily on the professional judgment and experience of the director. For example, the board of trustees can draft an annual budget for the library, but specific input about what moneys are needed for which purposes comes mainly from the director. As a trained professional, he or she is employed to assess needs such as acquisitions, staff coverage, and public services.

The remainder of this chapter details duties of the board of trustees, both those assisted and unassisted by the library director; responsibilities of individual trustees; and basic rules of ethics for trustees.

Duties

Broadly speaking, the board of trustees establishes library policies, and the library director implements those policies in the day-to-day operations of the library. However, these roles are interdependent and require careful distinction of responsibility and authority.

The degree to which the board relies on the librarian's professional knowledge and experience will, of course, vary with the situation. In every case, however, cooperation is the key to a smoothly run, successful library. A library in which all the players work cooperatively toward the common goal will inevitably deliver greater benefits to the community than one in which trustees and librarian work competitively, at odds with each other. The following lists detail duties carried out collectively by boards of trustees in public libraries.

Duties of the Board Assisted by Input from the Director...

- Write and maintain an official mission statement for the library.
- Develop long-range plans to address anticipated community needs.
- Establish and support library policies. Examples of such policies include
 - ♦ levels of service (for example, open hours).
 - ♦ registration and circulation policies and other rules directly affecting patron use.
 - ♦ types of service (in addition to circulation and informational services, will the library provide special programs for children? the disabled? the visually impaired? or literacy training?).
 - ♦ confidentiality and privacy policies.
 - ♦ patron access to the Internet.
 - ♦ collection development policy.
- Authorize salary and benefits plans for library staff.
- Assess maintenance of library grounds and buildings, and authorize purchase of lands or construction of new buildings when necessary and appropriate.
- Develop an annual budget.
- Review monthly financial reports to ensure accountability to budget goals.
- Provide financial information and an independent audit as required by Illinois law.
- Advocate for funding necessary to meet community library needs.
- Engage in other fundraising activities as necessary and appropriate.
- Promote the library in the community.

Duties of the Board, Exclusively...

- Hire a qualified library director.
- Evaluate director's performance periodically, at least annually.
- Establish policies for the functioning of the board. Such policies include
 - ♦ by-laws governing meetings, quorums, selection of officers and the length of their terms as officers; and other matters relating to handling the business of the board.
 - ♦ finance policies (for example, how funds will be dispersed or invested, or who will be authorized to write checks).
 - ♦ trustee's code of ethics.

For more information about division of duties between the board of trustees and the library director, go online to the Illinois State Library Administrative Ready Reference Menu, http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/library/what_we_have/readyref/index.htm: select **Policy Model**; select **Division of Responsibility**....

You, Personally

For the library machine to hum smoothly, every participant—trustee and staff—must shoulder a fair and proper load. To carry out the trustee duties which you have accepted, you will need to make a substantial commitment of time and effort.

Your Duties as a Trustee...

- Attend board meetings.
- Preview agenda, minutes, and documents before each board meeting.
- Participate in discussion and decision making at board meetings.
- Stand by decisions made by the board.
- Serve on committees as assigned by chair.
- Commit time outside of board meetings for the work of the board, as necessary and appropriate.
- Participate in activities sanctioned by the board, such as fundraising or public relations in the community.
- Represent the library at community events—be visible and accessible to those you represent.
- Become informed about library issues through participation in the regional library system, ILA, and ALA.
- Become informed about state laws that govern public libraries in Illinois.
- Become an advocate for the library community.

As with any position of responsibility and accountability, library trusteeship calls for adherence to high standards of ethical behavior.

Your Ethical Responsibilities...

- If you have a conflict of interest in a matter taken up by the board, you must remove yourself from consideration and voting on that matter. For example, your financial stake in a firm with which the board does or intends to do business would constitute a conflict of interest. (For more information about conflicts of interest, see Chapter 4, “Legal Responsibilities and Liability.”)
- Respect the opinions and contributions of other trustees; refrain from dogmatic or bullying behavior at board meetings. Work toward acceptable compromise on contentious issues.
- Do not voice opposition to board decisions in public; limit criticism to debates within board meetings.
- Respect confidential information: do not reveal content of closed session board discussions.
- Refer patron/public requests for information to the library director.
- Refer staff grievances or problems to the library director, who has full responsibility for managing staff; refrain from becoming involved in controversy or conflict among staff.
- Refer complaints from the public to the library director.
- Do not initiate or participate in ad hoc board meetings called without advance notice and knowledge of all participants. Conform to the Open Meetings Act in posting required meeting notices for the public and the press.
- Assume full responsibility as a board member. Attend board meetings regularly and perform all assigned committee work in a timely manner. If you are unable to fulfill your duties, consider resigning so that someone else can better serve.
- Support open access to information and resist moves toward censorship.

Finally, consider the benefits you will derive from serving as a library trustee. You will make new acquaintances and friendships with people who are passionate about, and dedicated to, values of public service. Some of these people will become personal friends; others will remain good professional associates. Whether you are a worker in a trade, a professional, a homemaker, an independent businessperson, or are engaged in some other life activity, the people network you establish during your tenure of trusteeship will likely prove to be of great benefit to you.

Then, of course, there is the obvious: you will be making an important contribution to the people in your community and to your community's future. A public library is one of the most universal and accessible institutions in our society. Your contribution as a public library trustee will help bring opportunity to all the people, irrespective of all the differences that sometimes divide communities in other spheres. Don't underestimate the satisfaction you will derive from this endeavor.

Resources

- Duca, Diane J. *Nonprofit Boards: Roles, Responsibilities, and Performance*. New York: Wiley, 1996.
- Gale, Robert L. *Board Source, Governance Series Booklets, #9: Leadership Roles in Nonprofit Governance*. Washington, D.C.: Board Source, 2003.
- Grace, Kay Sprinkel. *Board Source, Governance Series Booklets, #6: The Nonprofit Board's Role in Setting and Advancing the Mission*. Washington, D.C.: Board Source, 2003.
- Ingram, Richard T. *Board Source, Governance Series Booklets, #1: Ten Basic Responsibilities of Nonprofit Boards*, revised ed. Washington, D.C.: Board Source, 2003.
- O'Connell, Brian. *The Board Member's Book: Making a Difference in Voluntary Organizations*. New York: Foundation Center, 2003.