

DT: May 3, 2021
TO: Cape Elizabeth Town Council
FR: Rachel Davis, Library Director
RE: Library policy revisions
CC: Matthew Sturgis, Debra Lane

At their April meeting, the Thomas Memorial Library Committee voted to recommend Town Council approval of the attached four key library policies:

1. General Use Policy
2. Food & Beverage Policy
3. Computer Use & Internet Policy
4. Safe Child & Vulnerable Adults Policy

Existing library policies are outdated and only tangentially address some of the issues the library encounters on a daily basis. The new policies have been rewritten to address “gray areas,” and to ensure consistent, equitable, safe, and appropriate use of library resources. Existing policies that address some of the issues detailed in the policy revisions are also attached, with relevant changes highlighted or crossed out.

Issues Addressed

We are gratified that the library has seen greatly increased use since the new library building opened. Along with that increased use, issues related to appropriate use of the library have been amplified, but not addressed at a policy level. Here are some anecdotes that reveal the kinds challenges staff have faced on a daily basis:

A second grade boy walks over to the library after school on a regular basis; he breaks down in tears frequently because he doesn't know who is supposed to pick him up or when. Library staff attempt to locate a parent. The first time this happens, staff need to do some detective work to figure out who to contact, since we do not have any way of keeping track of children's contact information.

An adult has an extended cell phone conversation with a therapist while using a computer, unaware or unconcerned that others are in the vicinity and trying to concentrate on their own tasks; children are also within earshot of the discussion of sensitive information.

A group of adults with developmental disabilities regularly visits the library with a caregiver. The caregiver settles down at a computer and plays video games, while the group of adults wander throughout the library. One one such occasion, an adult male becomes enthralled with a sixth-grade girl at one of the adult computers and asks her to tell him her name. He grabs her wrist as he tries to talk to her. The girl's friend urges her to tell someone about this incident, but by the time staff are alerted to the situation, the group of adults is gone.

A grandfather calls the library looking for his grandson, and is annoyed that library staff do not know his grandchild or where he is. This is a daily occurrence--parents call looking for their children and staff scour the building trying to locate someone whom they often do not know.

A group of eleven and twelve year olds drop their backpacks and musical instruments off at the library and leave to go to Cumberland Farms. They return with bags of chips and candy and large containers of soda or slushy drinks. They leave candy wrappers, crumbs, and garbage between the bookshelves; sometimes they spill their drinks and leave the mess without telling anyone.

An eleven year boy has been at the library for hours by himself playing computer games. At closing, there is no one to pick him up. It is winter and is already dark; it is also very cold. He insists he will walk home, but he reveals that his home is more than two miles away.

An author is presenting an interactive program on her new novel about a group of tween cryptid hunters in the library's Community Room. Two children show up to attend, yet the library is full of tweens playing computer games. I attempt to get children to stop what they are doing and attend this special program. One girl tells me she doesn't want to attend because, "This is my only chance to have screen time."

Perception versus Reality

Many of the issues library staff encounter are the result of the fact that the Thomas Memorial Library is a public building, and are rooted in a lack of awareness of what that means, particularly with regard to children. Unlike the teachers in school settings, library staff do not act *in loco parentis*. Our building is much more akin to Target than it is to a school. Our building is accessible to anyone, whether they live in Cape Elizabeth or surrounding communities. We do not keep track of who enters or leaves the building, nor do we know every person that visits the library by name or sight. Yet many in our community perceive the library as a "safe place" for their children to visit unattended, assuming that they will receive some kind of supervision or oversight. In addition, many parents who may have strict guidelines about sugar consumption or screen time at home, are unaware that their children encounter no such limits when left unattended at the library.

We received a recent email from a parent wanting to plan for the fall and to know what kind of childcare the library offers. She mentioned in a follow-up email that her son told her that some of his friends regularly came to the library after school so she thought that we provided some kind of after school program. We referred her to Community Services.

A Community Issue

In developing the attached revised policies, Megan Smith, my Assistant Director/Family Engagement Manager (formerly titled Youth Services Librarian) had a meeting with Kathy Raftice, Donna Wolfram, Troy Eastman (CEMS Middle School Principal,) SRO David Galvan, and Kim Sturgeon (CEMS social worker, with whom I have had many conversations in the past regarding issues related to after school use of the library, particularly in regards to vulnerable children, and instances of bullying.) In our meeting it became clear that:

- Children perceive the library as a fun place to go after school because they have no supervision.
- Tweens would rather go to the library than to Community Services after care for the above reason.
- Many fifth and sixth graders decline to participate in after school activities offered at the middle school because they would rather hang out at the library instead.

All at the meeting were in support of a new policy that matches the developmental maturity of children and tweens, and all agreed to help spread the word not only about the new policies, but also about other more appropriate after school options in Town. It is hoped that, in the absence of the library as free-for-all after school, the supervised activities offered by Community Services and the schools will be more appropriately utilized. In publicizing the new policy guidelines, we hope to have a unified message about the opportunities available in Town as well as the appropriate role of the public library.

Policy Implementation

These policies are meant to provide clarity and consistency for the public, as well as instill a measure of confidence for library staff in handling common situations fairly, compassionately, and equitably. In the absence of clear direction, staff have often been left unsure of how to intervene or respond. It is our hope that clear, fair, and detailed policy guidelines will make the library a more pleasant place for all ages, and that library is better able to fulfill its mission of providing free access to resources and services for the community.