

# Challenges Are Escalating

## How to Prepare for Program Challenges

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**B**ook bans have garnered national attention this past year with a surge of challenges in both school and public libraries. But books aren't the only front in the so-called culture wars. Library staff increasingly need to respond to challenges to programming, as well.

The number of program challenges reported to ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) has grown over the past ten years from one or none each year to a peak of sixty-nine challenges in 2019. And these are just the instances that have been reported to the OIF. Most challenges go unreported.<sup>1</sup>

Programs related to LGBTQ+ themes are the most likely to be challenged. Of the forty-two reported challenges in 2022, 81 percent were in response to LGBTQ+ events.<sup>2</sup>

I had some first-hand experience when the library branch where I worked at the time held a Drag Story Hour.<sup>3</sup> After a local news station reported on the upcoming event, several groups spoke out against it and community members received phone calls encouraging them to join planned protests. Fortunately, the local community was overwhelmingly in favor of the program; the opposition mostly came from outside the community, and we had at least four times as many people come out to demonstrate in support of the program as we had people demonstrating against it.

Many other libraries are not so fortunate. Protestors may harass children and families, attempt to prevent or disrupt programs, and threaten library staff members.

As with challenges to materials, library staff need to be prepared to respond to challenges to programs. For its 2022–23 term, ALSC's School-Age Programs and Services (SAPS) committee was charged with creating a toolkit to help libraries prepare for and respond to program challenges.

### Books vs. Programs

Challenges to programs have a lot in common with challenges to books and other materials. The hot-button issues are often the same—gender, sexuality, race, and religion. And would-be censors may use the same arguments; they want to “protect” children from inappropriate content, reinforce the “moral standards” of the community, and ensure that public funds are being used “appropriately.”

Challenges to programs, however, can have some important differences. Challenges to programs are more likely to threaten the physical safety of participants, library staff, and presenters. Although some current book banning efforts have elevated the vitriol to include threatening library staff, challenges to programs more frequently put families, staff, and presenters directly in contact with protestors.

Libraries are often less prepared to respond to challenges to programs. While almost all libraries have a collection development policy, including a procedure

for handling challenges, many do not have a written program policy, official procedures for challenges, or training for staff.

The toolkit developed by the SAPS committee is designed to address these needs by identifying specific steps that library staff can take before, during, and after a program challenge, as well as by providing templates for creating your own program policies and procedures.

## Before the Challenge

The adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” is never truer than with program planning. As a children’s librarian, I put a lot of work into planning my programs. I think about the purpose, the logistics, and the appeal factor for any programs that I provide. And because I work with children, I also think about what could go wrong. *Are there any safety concerns? How big of a mess will this create? What is my backup plan if the presenter is late or doesn’t show up at all?*

The toolkit identifies additional areas to consider when planning a program that could attract negative attention. For example, you may want to strictly enforce age requirements, limit or prohibit photography and recording devices, or work with community groups to create a “safe passage” corridor for participants and performers. You may also want to conduct additional training for frontline staff on how to respond to hostile customers, protestors, and the media.

Clear, consistent communication is perhaps the most important preventative measure. By involving internal and external partners early on—including library leadership and staff, board members, security personnel, and community partners—you can establish much-needed support while putting a damper on misinformation campaigns.

To help library staff with the planning process, we’ve included templates for a library program policy and a program proposal form that you can adapt to your situation.

## During the Challenge

When a program challenge does arise, we emphasize de-escalation, documentation, and communication. Although most library staff members probably already know that you can’t outshout an angry customer, we all can get agitated in the moment.

## References

1. Sukrit Goswami and Amanda Vazquez, “Preparing for Program Challenges at Your Public Library,” ALA Public Programs Office, webinar, May 31, 2023, [https://programming.librarian.org/sites/default/files/preparing\\_for\\_program\\_challenges\\_at\\_your\\_public\\_library\\_ala\\_ppo\\_pl\\_webinar\\_2023-05-31.pdf](https://programming.librarian.org/sites/default/files/preparing_for_program_challenges_at_your_public_library_ala_ppo_pl_webinar_2023-05-31.pdf).

The toolkit can serve as a sort of flight safety card by reminding staff of best practices for de-escalating a situation without caving to the protestors’ demands. As with the planning process, the toolkit includes templates and samples for public comment forms, complaint tracking, and response letters that you can adapt to your library’s needs.

One area the toolkit addresses—one I hadn’t given any thought to before being on the SAPS committee—is the impact of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) rules on communications among library staff members. Depending on the FOIA rules in your state, your planning documents, emails, and even private text messages with coworkers could be subject to public scrutiny, which makes it essential for all library staff to adhere to best practices in documentation and communication.

We, of course, always prioritize the safety of library staff members and program participants, so the toolkit also offers ideas for how to continue serving your community in the event that you do have to cancel a planned program.

## After the Challenge

Regardless of whether you had a smashing success, were forced to cancel the program, or experienced something in the middle, we recommend taking time to regroup and assess. *What worked well, and what needed improvement? Do you need to revisit and revise any of your policies, procedures, or communications tools? Where do you go from here?*

Two crucial to-do items after a program challenge—check on the library staff’s well-being and thank key supporters. After a difficult program, it can be tempting to put it in the rearview mirror and move forward. But be mindful that staff members may have ongoing feelings of trauma as a result of the program challenge, especially if they are members of a minoritized group targeted by the protestors.

In developing this toolkit, we were fortunate to have many terrific resources to inform our work. ALA, ALSC, and other professional organizations, as well as individual libraries and community groups, have created toolkits, guidelines, and templates for challenges to materials and for specific programs (particularly Drag Story Hour) that we drew on and adapted for this toolkit. On behalf of the committee, thanks to all who have generously shared their experience and knowledge. &

2. Goswami and Vazquez, “Preparing for Program Challenges at Your Public Library.”
3. Although the term “drag queen” is commonly used in the title of library programs, the national organization behind many of these events has begun using Drag Story Hour to be more inclusive of various gender identities.