



## Association of Connecticut Library Boards Newsletter

The Association of Connecticut Library Boards (ACLB) is Connecticut's library trustee organization representing public library boards throughout the state.

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### **Webinars Focus on Access to Information, Intellectual Freedom**

At a time when access to library resources and information has become a major issue in many areas, ACLB has offered webinars that approach the subject from two different perspectives: Connecticut's Freedom of Information Act, and intellectual freedom as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution.

In June, Russell Blair, Director of Education and Communications for the Connecticut Freedom of Information Commission, presented "A Crash Course in the FOI Act," enacted in 1975. Having served in Congress during the post-Watergate period, Governor Ella Grasso wanted to ensure openness in government in our state. The act passed unanimously in both chambers of the General Assembly.

Mr. Blair cautioned that the law is complex and may or may not apply to libraries, depending on how closely they are connected to their town government. The act grants public access to meetings and records of public agencies, which may include libraries and their boards. The law gives the public the right to attend meetings such as those of library boards although not to speak at them unless invited to do so. The Freedom of Information Commission settles disputes when citizens feel that agencies are not in compliance with the act.

The speaker provided definitions of public agencies and of regular and special meetings as they pertain to the law. Advance notice must be posted for these meetings and minutes must be filed within a specified period of time after they

take place. There are also rules for electronic or remote meetings and executive sessions.

The FOI Act also defines what constitutes public records or files, which are available to members of the public as well. They may inspect this material during regular business hours, copy the contents, or receive copies in accordance with the section of the act that spells out the procedure for doing so. Records may be inspected at no charge, although the agency in question may charge for paper copies and digital storage devices. Agencies are not obligated to do additional research or create records that do not already exist.

Not all public records are subject to this scrutiny, however, and the law spells out which documents are exempt, such as those with privacy concerns or possible security risks. There are procedures for dealing with "vexatious requests," defined as likely to cause a disproportionate or unjustifiable level of disruption, that are not justified under the law.

Penalties for violation of the law are spelled out in the FOI Act. Mr. Blair indicated that when a complaint is filed, the follow-up is not punitive so much as corrective and may involve an order to release the material in question. Fines are possible but rare.

The complete text of Connecticut's Freedom of Information Act is available at:  
[portal.ct.gov/FOI/Quick-Links/The-FOI-Act](https://portal.ct.gov/FOI/Quick-Links/The-FOI-Act)

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## ***Failure Can be a Learning Experience, in Libraries as Elsewhere***

***By State Librarian Deborah Schander***

When was the last time you failed at something? The longer I have lived in my house, the more I have come to dread mowing my awkward lawn, and this summer I had more weeks when it wasn't done than when it was. When I was a teenage driver, I got two tickets in four days, and then I didn't drive at all for awhile because my parents couldn't afford the insurance. As a librarian, I put a lot of effort into creating some programs and initiatives that, in the end, just didn't do all that well.

And that last one, failure in libraries, is something too many of us don't like to talk about. We don't like to admit that a project never got off the ground, or that the money was wasted, or that the old way of doing something—that worked great when it was instituted—may no longer be the best approach. We prefer to sweep our failures under the rug and quietly pretend they never happened.

But how can we learn and grow if we're not willing to assess why those failures occurred? We'll simply be doomed to repeat them in new ventures. I remember a colleague telling me about the conference proposal she'd submitted to talk about this very thing. The program committee loved the idea. They just had one request: not to use the word "failure" in the program title or description. It was a conference program about failure that wasn't allowed to use the word failure. That's how afraid of it we are.

But that can't be our attitude. If we make failure a dirty word, we create an atmosphere of fear in our libraries. We'll have employees who are afraid to admit there's a problem or who are forced to keep putting time and effort into activities that aren't effective, and all that does is lead to more problems and failures. Being willing to recognize that something isn't working, analyze why, and learn from our failures goes a long way to making the next idea stronger.

So the next time your library director tries to talk to you about discontinuing a program or shifting resources in a new direction, listen to them. Failure is going to happen sometimes. It just will. But it's how you deal with that failure—how you take it and "fail better" the next time, as Samuel Beckett suggests—that truly builds a library's staying power.

***Please visit our web site:***

**[aclb.wildapricot.org](http://aclb.wildapricot.org)**

The Association of Connecticut Library Boards web site contains a wealth of information for library board members. From the Home page you can access:

- **ACLB Public Library Trustee Handbook**
- **ACLB membership details**
- **Advocacy information to promote libraries**
- **Links to pertinent trustee resources**
- **Previously published newsletters**



To contact us, write to  
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or email us at [aclbctinfo@gmail.com](mailto:aclbctinfo@gmail.com)

**For information about governance and State Statutes, contact the Division of Library Development at Connecticut State Library at 860-757-6665.**

# Access to Information, Intellectual Freedom ...

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Anyone with questions about the legislation or the Freedom of Information Commission may contact Mr. Blair at [russell.blair@ct.gov](mailto:russell.blair@ct.gov) or phone him at (860) 256-3968.

## Intellectual Freedom

“Intellectual Freedom 101” was the topic of an October presentation by Samantha Lee, co-chair of the Connecticut Library Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee and Privacy Advocate. Intellectual Freedom, she indicated, is “the right to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment,” which states that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the freedom of speech or of the press.”

A corollary to the right to speak freely, Ms. Lee pointed out, is the freedom to *receive* speech, in the public library as well as in the press. Because libraries do not limit access, they are a powerful place to both create and receive free speech.

The American Library’s Association Library Bill of Rights contains several provisions concerning intellectual freedom. Section I asserts that “Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.” Section III maintains that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.” Section VII states that “all people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use. Libraries should advocate for, educate about, and protect people’s privacy, safeguarding all library use data, including personally identifiable information.”

Both the ALA and CLA have issued statements on the freedom to read and opposition to censorship. The CLA statement says that the organization “advocates and educates in defense of intellectual freedom—the rights of library users to read, speak freely, and have unrestricted access to information, as guaranteed by the First Amendment. We are committed to defending the constitutional rights of all individuals, of all ages, to use the resources and services of libraries.”

Ms. Lee explained the difference between challenging and banning books. Challenging is an attempt to remove or restrict materials based on the objections of one person or a group, which would restrict others’ access to the material. Banning is the actual removal of the material. Because of the

commitment of librarians, teachers and other concerned citizens, she noted, most challenges are unsuccessful. A related issue is censorship, defined as the suppression of ideas and information that some consider objectionable or dangerous.

Issues related to intellectual freedom are addressed in the Connecticut General Statutes, such as the definition of what is considered obscene (CGS Sec. 53a-193). The speaker noted that people tend to use “obscenity” without regard for the legal definition, which compromises First Amendment rights. CGS Chapter 190, Section 11-25 covers confidentiality of library records.

In concluding, the speaker recommended several Best Practices in support of intellectual freedom in libraries:

- Trust your librarians.
- Follow established library policies and procedures and update them as needed.
- In response to criticism, send out messaging that is positive and affirmative about library and community values.
- Provide support to the staff and develop a safety plan to deal with instances of abuse or threats.
- Stay current on local trends and legislation.
- Let your readers be your leaders. Regular library users are the best advocates to speak for the library.

Ms. Lee also offered a list of resources helpful to libraries faced with challenges:

- CLA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee
- The ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom
- The Freedom to Read Foundation
- Unite Against Book Bans
- The Comic Books Legal Defense Fund
- The National Coalition Against Censorship
- PEN America
- The National Council of Teachers of English
- The Library Freedom Project

While challenges to library materials have been around for some time, in recent years there has been a marked increase that no one anticipated. Ms. Lee expressed appreciation for the concern of board members in support of intellectual freedom.

**Upcoming webinars have tentatively been scheduled for the following dates:**

**Board Basics: November 29**

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: February 28.**

**See our website ([aclb.wildapricot.org](http://aclb.wildapricot.org)) and Conntech postings for details.**

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**Our Mission**

- Enable member library boards to improve library services in their communities.
- Broaden trustee knowledge of current developments in the library field.
- Improve communication and cooperation among library boards.

**What We Do**

- Provide workshops geared to the needs of trustees across the state.
- Maintain strong liaison with library-related organizations on the state and national levels.
- Provide consultant help to library boards and individual trustees

**Executive Committee**

President: Gail B. Richmond

Vice President: Carol Mikulski

Secretary: Wendy Berlind

Treasurer: Susan Phillips

Membership: Susan Phillips

Newsletter: Denise J. Stankovics

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CT State Library, *ex officio*: Dawn LaValle

Friends of CT Libraries (FOCL), *ex officio*: Barbara Leonard