

Library Computer Use and Internet Safety Policies



Libraries have become a significant source of technology and internet service in many communities, a gateway to the digital world. The growing demand for these services, in tandem with federal requirements attached to their funding, assert the responsibility of libraries to create policies that firmly describe the library's mission as it relates to technology. Furthermore, compliance with federal guidelines must be addressed within these policies for the library to be eligible for E-rate discounts or LSTA funding.

Mission Statement

Detailing the role of the library mission in the context of technology services can be helpful for setting the parameters of acceptable use. This is also where a library can express how it interprets and shapes its mission to conform to the community it serves. The mission can also inform any subsequent proceedings within that library for which the specifics of the policy are inadequate. For example, a statement of intent to comply with federal regulations, or recognition of the library's mandate to preserve intellectual freedom, can serve to guide any future interpretation of the policy toward that end.

It can also be helpful to establish context for the library's mission, particularly with regard to the Internet or the library's own technology resources. This creates a foundation for detailing an acceptable use policy and an internet safety policy. Other statements that clarify specific issues addressed by the policies, especially for those not already familiar with issues like the quality of information found on the Internet, content filtering, or legal responsibilities of the library to its users, its community and its government, can guide the expectations of any user of the library's technology services.

If the library provides resources for the education of patrons in internet use and safety, the mission statement is a good place to mention them. Try not to be specific in describing what programming exists, as in an audit situation, your library may be called upon to provide further documentation of events in support of your stated mission.

Examples of mission statements:

Alfred Dickey (ND) Public Library

<http://www.adpl.org/Policies.php#Internet>

Albany (OR) Public Library

<http://library.ci.albany.or.us/services/iaup.php>

Newark (NJ) Public Library

http://www.npl.org/pages/aboutlibrary/internet_use.html

Keene (NH) Public Library

<http://keenepubliclibrary.org/library/internet-acceptable-use-policy>

Acceptable Use Policy

Once the mission has been spelled out, establishing the path for a visitor or member to use the library's technology resources is necessary. A good starting point is to detail what resources are available to the public: how many workstations, what popular software is available on each (including operating system and version), and any supporting devices (such as printers or scanners).

Further distinctions can be made if the technology resources are grouped by forms of access (computers limited to children or adults, computers with differing session lengths). Any cost or requirement of use (fees for printing, or additional requirements for a library that check out equipment) can be described here.

Stating any requirements for or restrictions on access (signing up, library card in good standing, accompaniment by an adult) and the entitlements of access, including session length or limitations on the number of sessions per day, provides a clear set of terms for acceptable use of the service.

It can be helpful to describe the limitations of the service and of the library's ability to support the service. Specifics should include the security and privacy of online transactions, and the denial of liability to the library for the content accessed through its computers or the Internet. It must include a formal statement on any filtering measures employed by the library and how a patron may lawfully request to bypass them.

It is very important to include a statement specific to minors utilizing the library's services. Minors, according to Maine Law, are persons who have not reached the age of 18 years. Any instructions or special requirements, especially with regard to the responsibility of the parents or guardians for the minor's use of the library resources, should be clearly stated here. Further documentation, such as a permission form for parents or guardians to enable access to minors in their care, should be mentioned here.

Unacceptable uses should also be outlined under the AUP. Specific examples that are descriptive but not all-inclusive are common, such as:

- A formal observance of any library rules of conduct, with additional amendments with respect to the designated space given to the resources and any special care for the resources themselves (no more than two to a computer, no food or drink around the computer, conversational volume or other sources of noise mindful of neighboring users)
- Proper use of computer and network resources, especially with intent to circumvent any measures in place regulating or securing their use (bypassing filters or time management filters without staff permission, installing personal software or hardware, damaging or stealing library property)
- Deliberate disruption of the privacy or access privileges of library staff or other users (such as through accessing a previous user's email, downloading a file of sufficient size to significantly impact connectivity across the network, or monitoring library computers or network traffic to learn sensitive information)
- Use of library resources to violate local, state or federal laws. Noteworthy examples include software licenses or copyright laws; online harassment, bullying, or defamation; viewing or displaying of obscene or pornographic material (especially obscene works involving children), deliberate propagation of malware or unsolicited "spam" email; falsification of one's age or identity to gain access to gated sites or misrepresent another; unauthorized use of computer accounts, passwords or other identification

The procedure for enforcing library computer use policy, and repercussions for those in violation should be formally described, as should any appeal process for individuals found to be in transgression.

Examples of acceptable use policies:

Mishawaka – Penn - Harris (IN) Public Library

http://www.mphpl.org/newSite/AdultServices/adult_computer_policy.html

Oldham County (KY) Public Library

<http://www.oldhampl.org/inetinfo.htm>

Kalamazoo (MI) Public Library

<http://www.kpl.gov/policies/internet-computer-use.aspx>

Milton (MA) Public Library

<http://www.miltonlibrary.org/documents/MPLComputerUsePolicy.pdf>

Internet Safety Policy

The Internet Safety Policy is a formal statement by the library meant to address responsible use of and behaviors while using the library's resources to access the Internet. For libraries receiving E-rate or LSTA funding, there are several specific topics that also must be covered in the policy; another requirement is that the Internet Safety Policy, prior to its adoption, be an agenda item and open for discussion at a public hearing or meeting with reasonable public notice. The topics are:

- Access by minors to inappropriate matter on the Internet and World Wide Web
- The safety and security of minors when using electronic mail, chat rooms, and other forms of direct electronic communications
- Unauthorized access including "hacking" and other unlawful activities by minors online
- Unauthorized disclosure, use, and dissemination of personal information regarding minors
- Measures designed to restrict minors' access to materials harmful to minors

Though there may be special provisions where minors are concerned, the policy as a whole should be applicable to all users of the library's technological resources. Furthermore, a description of all technology protection measures is needed for full compliance.

Adult users are entitled to request that any filtering measures be unblocked for their computer session, so long as it is for "bona fide research or other lawful purpose," with the discrimination of such purposes left to the library staff. There are currently no standards in place for the type or effectiveness of filtering solutions, and the understanding communicated by this policy should be a firm recognition that no current solution is completely effective in restricting all undesirable content.

Specific aspects of internet safety should include:

- Downloading of licensed material, particularly through peer-to-peer resources
- Plagiarism and copyright
- Harassment and defamation
- Sharing of personal information, especially that which could be used to identify or locate an individual
- Objectionable material, such as graphic pornography or violence, or bigoted and hateful speech

The policy should advise as to courses of action when encountering these materials, and reiterate consequences for deliberately engaging in unsafe behaviors online. Further guidance should be offered, particularly with regard to minors, and perhaps addressed in a separate document intended to raise the awareness of parents or guardians. Such a document could also be used to explicitly shift responsibility to the parent or guardian for a minor's behaviors or actions when accessing the Internet through the library.

Examples of Internet safety policies:

Baraboo (WI) Public Library

<http://www.baraboopubliclibrary.org/about/policies/internet.html>

New York (NY) Public Library

<http://www.nypl.org/help/computers-internet-and-wireless-access/a-safety-net-for-the-internet>

Fairhope (AL) Public Library

<http://www.fairhopelibrary.org/Fairhope%20Public%20Library%20Computer%20and%20Internet%20Policy.pdf>

Follow-up

Many libraries choose to create policies that refer to formal documents or definitions. Acknowledging the ALA's application of the First Amendment with regard to filters can help shape any implementation of content filtering, and citing specific definitions of ambiguous terms could address policy challenges or questions about filtered material.

Examples of citations:

Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA):

MINOR. The term "minor" means any individual who has not attained the age of 17 years.

HARMFUL TO MINORS. The term "harmful to minors" means any picture, image, graphic image file, or other visual depiction that:

1. Taken as a whole and with respect to minors, appeals to a prurient interest in nudity, sex, or excretion;
2. Depicts, describes, or represents, in a patently offensive way with respect to what is suitable for minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact, actual or simulated normal or perverted sexual acts, or a lewd exhibition of the genitals; and
3. Taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value as to minors.

FCC Consumer Facts about the Children's Internet Protection Act:

<http://transition.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/cipa.pdf>

American Library Association Library Bill of Rights:

<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>

Other resources

American Library Association Guidelines and Considerations for Developing a Public Library Internet Use Policy

<http://www.ala.org/template.cfm?section=otherpolicies&template=/contentmanagement/contentdisplay.cfm&contentid=13098>

Computers in Libraries June 2002 : Molding Effective Internet Policies

<http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/jun02/richey.htm>