

Chapter 2: Five Primary Roles of Public Library Boards

Virginia Young, in *The Library Trustee*,² states, “Since a public library belongs to its entire community, library boards have been created by law to act as citizen control or governing body of the library. Library trustees accordingly are public officials and servants of the public, and the powers delegated to library boards are a public trust.” You are therefore referred to as a **trustee**.

Even though the board delegates the actual day-to-day operation of the library to the director, **the board never gives up ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the library.** To assume that responsibility, the board has five primary roles:

1. Advocate for the library in the community and advocate for the community.

To be a library advocate is to work to make sure the community has the best possible library service. Advocacy includes working to obtain adequate funding for the library; pursuing opportunities to meet and speak with community groups; getting to know the mayor and city council; making sure the community’s needs and interests are paramount when making board decisions.

2. Plan for the future of the library.

Planning is one of the most important trusts that the community gives to the library board. Planning is deciding what is going to happen with library services over the next few years. It is taking charge of the library’s future and creating it to be responsive to what the community needs.

3. Monitor and evaluate the overall effectiveness of the library.

The community puts its trust in the library board to make sure the library is operating the way it should. For example, the library board is familiar with the library’s budget - where the money is coming from and how it will be spent. The board monitors monthly financial reports and approves the bills so they can be paid. The board also helps determine whether the community is satisfied with library service.

4. Adopt library policies.

The library board spends much of its time on policy issues - developing policies and monitoring the effectiveness of those policies. (Policy is a carefully designed, broadly stated, written guideline for actions and decision of the library.) Once adopted by the board, library staff carries out the policies on a day-to-day basis.

5. Hire and evaluate the library director.

The board hires a qualified director to manage the day-to-day operations of the library and works with the director, carefully respecting each other’s roles. The board also regularly

²Young, Virginia, *The Library Trustee: A Practical Guide*, American Library Association, Chicago, 1995: 10

evaluates the director to make sure the library operates well and in the best interest of those the library serves.

There are more complete discussions of these topics in the following chapters: advocacy – Chapter 15; planning – Chapter 19; monitoring and evaluating – Chapter 16; policies – Chapter 18; hire and evaluate the library director – Chapters 12 and 13.