

Chapter 15: Advocating for the Library

A library advocate is someone who understands the value and importance of public library service and who communicates that value and importance to the community, government leaders, and other decision-makers. As a volunteer leader of the library, you can be a good advocate for the organization because your motivation is service to the community. Board members are also community leaders and influential in the community, prime qualities for an advocate.

When you advocate for better public library services, you are promoting a better quality of life for the people of your community today and in the future. Advocacy is a primary role of a library trustee because you have statutory responsibility for your library's governance and are expected to better its services. You serve as the connection between the local community and its public library and are in a unique position to promote the library and see that it meets the needs of the community.

Your advocacy efforts will generally be part of a planned board effort. The board must speak with one voice. You, as an individual board member, can speak about the board's official position on issues and can also promote the interests of the library at any time. Your advocacy for the library may include establishing a relationship with the mayor, city council, and county board of supervisors; communicating to the taxpayers the needs and plans of the library; and carrying out public relations activities for the library.

As a library advocate, one of the main responsibilities of the library board is to obtain adequate financing for the library.

As a representative of the general public, you can make a more effective case on the importance of adequate funding for the library than the librarian director who may be viewed as having a vested interest in a larger budget.

Effective advocacy requires:

- a deep personal commitment to your library and the services it provides
- willingness to go out into your community on behalf of the library
- a sense of what the community needs the library to be in the future
- willingness to work to help move the library forward

Telling the Library Story

Don't wait for a budget presentation to make a case for needed funding or to describe library programs and services. To make sure the library is seen as an essential community service, tell the library story all year. Invite officials to library programs and activities. Ask the library director to provide reference services and assistance to city departments and officials. Share your successes with your city and county. Awards, record numbers at summer library programs, staff accomplishments and news articles should be part of regular reporting about the library to the city council.

As you carry out your advocacy role, make use of *Telling the Library Story*, an online toolkit for assisting Iowa libraries in explaining and demonstrating the value of their services, <http://www.statelibraryofiowa.org/ld/tell-library-story>.

In your community there are people who use the library and people who pay taxes to support the library but do not use it. Embrace all community members and be prepared to work with groups as well as individuals. This means not just waiting for an invitation, but initiating opportunities to meet with community groups such as Rotary, Kiwanis, school parent-teacher groups, Chamber of Commerce. Learn about community issues, interests and concerns. Work with the library director and other board members to communicate how the library can meet the needs of the community.

A successful advocate can bring new users and new revenues into the library, and increased awareness of library services. Legislators have been known to change their view of libraries after speaking to a trustee advocate. Or the people to whom you speak may be so enthused that they will write a bequest to the library in their wills, ask their employer to make a donation to the library, or speak to state or federal legislators on behalf of libraries.

Advocacy Includes Defending Intellectual Freedom

Finally, as a trustee advocate, you will be a defender of intellectual freedom defined by the American Library Association as the *“the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction..* Once the board has established a collection development policy and library resources are purchased which respond to community needs, the trustee as advocate must recognize an inviolable responsibility to permit people access to those materials. One of the most frequent questions asked of library trustee advocates (usually in front of an audience) is whether a particular book or other item should be in the library's collection. The response must be unequivocal in defense of the community's intellectual freedom. See Chapter 17 for more information on intellectual freedom.