

BOARD

“As a trustee, you are entrusted by the public to look after its interest. You are also accountable to the public. Trusteeship is a working relationship with the community, library staff and fellow trustees. There is a direct correlation between the quality of library service a community offers and the knowledge, capability and enthusiasm of its Board members.”

— *Trustee Handbook, Montana State Library*

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

You are called a “trustee” for a very good reason: you have been entrusted with other people’s money to provide quality library service for the community. How you fulfill your responsibilities as a trustee reveals your commitment to that trust given to you by your community. Knowing the nine roles of a public library trustee in New York State will make your time on the Board productive and rewarding.

It is important to start out right so we’ve prioritized your number one role to be: **1 | Regularly Plan and Evaluate the library’s service program.** Experience shows that having a long-range plan is one of the most concrete steps to success toward making the library a valuable and respected community institution. Planning helps to create a shared vision for the board. While you may have joined the board for personal reasons so did others; but planning helps you see a path to the common good and will aid in group decision making. Basing the plan on the input of community stakeholders and creating a shared vision will take the library’s potential to a whole new level.

By annually evaluating your plan you can see what progress you have made over the year. As you will see, your plan influences budgeting, policy, even evaluating your director.

A long-range plan is also one of the *New York State Minimum Standards for public libraries*. If your board needs assistance starting the process toward a new long-range plan, give us a call. Planning is one of the On-Demand Consultations available free of charge from the Mid-Hudson Library System (<http://midhudson.org/trustee/consulting.htm>).

Once the board has taken the critical step of hearing from the community through their long-range planning process the second role becomes clear: **2 | Create and develop the Mission for the library.** The library’s mission statement should describe the essence of what your library sees as its core purpose as defined through the feedback you receive from the community.

In order to achieve the goals identified through the long-range planning process you need leadership, which brings us to your third duty as a trustee: **3 | Select and hire a Qualified Library Director.** The board directly hires and evaluates one employee—the director. While the board does not supervise the director in a traditional employee-manager relationship there are levels of accountability on both sides as you work as a team to move the library forward.

The board is a *collective authority*. Specific communication with the director should be funneled through the board president. All management issues should go solely to the director. Staff questions should be referred to the director.

A key part of this role is *annually evaluating the director*. In the Winter 2006 issue of “Across the Board” we laid out a recommended model and form to use for director evaluation. The idea is to tie responsibility for the performance of the organization to the director. Access this issue and all back issues of “Across the Board” online at <http://midhudson.org/trustee/system/atb.php>.

Directors must be full partners in the budget development process. As the manager of the library, the director has the insider’s perspective on library services and costs that trustees, more than likely, do not. However, it does fall to the board to ensure that the fourth duty is being adequately met: **4 | Secure Adequate Funding for the library’s service program.** It is your job as a trustee to insure that the library’s budget is able to meet the needs of the community. Funds are given to the library to provide quality service, and should be based on the needs identified in the long-range plan.

Think of your budget funds in two categories: **Operational vs. Fundraising.** Your primary goal under this role is to find a way to stabilize your operating funds, to have them come through a secure source (tax dollars) and, ideally, to be voted on by the public to ensure

buy-in and accountability on both sides. Operating costs are those items such as paying adequate staff salaries and benefits; upkeep of the facility; utilities; books and other library materials; technology, etc. (Check out the MHLS online resource “**Public Library Vote Toolbox: Know-how for Your Library’s Vote**” at <http://midhudson.org/vote>).

Fundraising is for the “extras.” Your long-range plan will help you identify those items the community would like but that fall into the “would be nice” category, perhaps a special program or collection of materials. To help you decide what to fundraise for, prioritize these items. Ideally, fundraising efforts are funneled through a Friends Group. Prioritizing will help you identify what grants to look for and what to ask your legislators to help fund through member items. Learn more about *Fiscal Responsibility and Friends Groups* in past issues of “Across the Board”: <http://midhudson.org/trustee/system/atb.php>.

With trust comes responsibility. Trustees have ultimate accountability for the funds secured for the operations of the library; the fifth role addresses this responsibility: **5 | Exercise Fiduciary Responsibility for the use of public and private funds.** According to the NYS Board of Regents library trustees must “ensure that assets are properly used, laws and regulations are followed, and the public interest is best served.” Oversight in the use of both the public and private funds given to the library is critical. This is done by the board developing a budget, policies, and procedures that insure compliance with laws and regulations and maintain a solid system of checks and balances.

Once the budget is passed you are authorizing the director to use the funds within the budget categories. If a category needs to be adjusted, the board needs to vote to amend. To learn more about budgeting, check out the Summer and Fall 2007 issues of “Across the Board” on *Fiscal Responsibility* at <http://midhudson.org/trustee/system/atb.php>.

The board should receive, review and understand up-to-date reports on the financial status of the library in relation to the adopted budget. Every library should have an audit or independent financial review done regularly—remember to budget for this expense.

Following the ideals of accountability, transparency, and consistency set forth in your fifth role comes the sixth: **6 | Adopt Policies and Rules regarding library governance and use.** A vital responsibility of the board is to *ensure and protect the reputation of the institution*, best realized through the adoption of clearly written library policies. Written policies provide consistency for patrons and staff, help to resolve misunderstandings, reduce incidents of conflict, and help to protect from litigation.

Policies fall into two broad categories:

- (1) **External** (Collection; Public Space; Meeting Room and Exhibit Space; Internet)
- (2) **Internal** (for example: Personnel; Fiscal; Conflict of Interest; Disaster Plan; Confidentiality of Patron Records)

The library director is responsible for interpreting and carrying out library policies, for informing the board in library matters, and for advising the board in matters of policy making.

The library should carry *Directors and Officers* insurance to cover trustees in the event that they are named in a lawsuit against the library, its governing board of trustees, or themselves individually. This is a rider available through the library’s insurance carrier or through Council Services Plus, Inc. (<http://www.councilservicesplus.com/doins.htm>).

Having written policies is a minimum standard for public libraries in New York State. (Helpful Information for Meeting Minimum Standards can be found at <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/helpful.htm>). Sample policies and policy development tips are available on the MHLS web site at <http://midhudson.org> → Trustee Resources → Policies.

All of your policies address what happens within the library building, creating a service environment that should reflect your community. In that same vein your building should also generate an atmosphere

The Board President ...

“graciously walks a delicate line between front stage and back stage, doing and delegating, silent and speaking, pushing and pulling, persisting and praising, listening and leading.”

— *Massachusetts Public Library Trustee Handbook*

of responsiveness: **7 | Maintain a Facility that meets the library's and community's needs.** To fulfill this responsibility the board must consider: adequate square footage; location; internal arrangement; accessibility for disabled persons; environmental quality; proper maintenance; and intangibles such as ambiance. There are seven broad types of library space (excerpted from “Whole Building Design Guide,” National Institute of Building Sciences):

- 1) Collection space
- 2) Public electronic workstation space
- 3) User seating space
- 4) Staff work space
- 5) Meeting space
- 6) Special use space
- 7) Non-assignable space, including mechanical space

A Word About Minimum Standards for Libraries in NYS: Maintaining a facility to meet community needs is a minimum standard for public libraries in New York State. Helpful Information for Meeting Minimum Standards can be found at <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/helpful.htm>.

Construction and expansion plans must be developed in the context of the library's mission and plan of service. Funding a construction project can be challenging, and your funding options depend on your type of library. To learn more, give us a call: **Josh Cohen**, MHLS Executive Director, 845.471.6060 ext. 17 or jcohen@midhudson.org; **Rebekkah Smith Aldrich**, MHLS Coordinator of Member Information, 845.471.6060 ext. 39 or rsmith@midhudson.org.

After reading the first seven duties you can see that they all address “getting your house in order”: solidifying the foundation for providing quality service to your community. So how will the community know that you are doing such a great job? In the eighth role you will see that it is a trustee's duty to get the word out: **8 | Promote the Library in the local community and in society in general.** Trustees should be strong advocates for their local libraries and libraries in general. Advocacy at the trustee level can take many forms:

- **Learn** about your library and its services and be willing to spread the word.
- **Adequately fund** the library's budget line for publicity and outreach.
- **Make time to talk** to community groups, municipal leaders, and state legislators about your library.
- **Attend conferences and library lobby events.** Be “tuned in” to library funding issues in the region and state, and on the national scene. It is vitally important to communicate with the community.
- Make sure **basic information** about your library is available in print and on the web.
- **Word-of-Mouth** is **THE** most effective way to communicate.
- **Newsletters**—in print and electronic format—are a great way to get the word out. Consistency is key.
- **Present an annual report** to the community on the library's progress in meeting its goals and objectives.
- **Use targeted marketing techniques**, including programming, to reach people not currently using your library. Be sure to regularly communicate with your local, state, and federal legislators; invite them into your library.

Having a written report to the community and printed information about the library are minimum standards in New York State for public libraries. (Helpful Information for Meeting Minimum Standards: <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/libdev/helpful.htm>).

The ninth, and final, duty of a public library trustee does not stand on its own. It is actually one that is infused throughout all of the trustee duties: **9 | Conduct the business of the library in an Open and Ethical manner in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations.** Adopt a **Code of Ethics** for your board. Codes of ethics emphasize three key areas: (1) conflicts of interest, (2) personal benefit, and (3) confidentiality of board business. See the Spring 2007 issue of “Across the Board” for more information about Codes of Ethics.

Attend all board meetings and be fully prepared to participate knowledgeably. **Meeting packets** should be distributed in advance so valuable meeting time is not taken up with reading background documents. Include an agenda (with start and end times listed), minutes from the previous meeting, financial reports, library director's report, and any other documents that pertain to the business of the meeting.

All public libraries in New York, including association libraries, are subject to **Open Meetings Law**. Through this, decisions are made in a public forum and the public can watch the decisions being made. Follow the law when using executive session. See the Spring 2008 issues of “Across the Board” for more information about Open Meetings Law.

Decision making:

- **Question** issues until you understand.
- Decisions are made by the **consensus** of a trustee majority and not necessarily unanimous agreement. “I believe I understand your point of view. I believe you understand my point of view. Even though I prefer another decision, I will commit to this one because it was arrived at in an open and fair way.”
- Under New York State law, a library board has broad authority to manage the affairs of the library, but it is a **collective authority**. Once a decision is made by the board, individual trustees are professionally bound to support the consensus decision publicly, even though they might not necessarily agree with the decision privately. When it comes to library board decisions, all trustees speak with one voice.
- The **library by-laws** establish what determines a quorum (the minimum number of trustees required in attendance necessary to conduct business). No matter how you locally define a quorum, under New York State Education Law section 226, no action can be approved without a “majority of the whole.” Example: With a seven-member board an affirmative vote of four is **always** required for a motion to pass, regardless of the number of trustees in attendance.

Direction in undertaking the nine duties comes from the **Officers of the Board**. The officers provide leadership, accountability, and continuity in the work of the board. We suggest that officer roles be defined in writing as an attachment to the by-laws.

Board President

- Works closely with the director to set the agenda for the board meetings.
- Runs the board meeting; establishes action items; sets committees.
- Ensures that all board members contribute.
- Serves as the chief spokesperson for the board.
- The term of president should be 1–3 years in length to facilitate rotation of leadership responsibilities. This creates a stronger board.

Vice President

- The vice president should be prepared to step into the role of president.

Secretary

- Should be aware of Open Meeting Law requirements, the library's by-laws, and policies, and parliamentary procedure.
- Responsible for taking the minutes of the meeting. Minutes of a board meeting must consist of a record or summary of all motions, proposals, resolutions, and any other matter formally voted upon and the vote thereon. Minutes must be on hand for public inspection within two weeks of the meeting, even if they have yet to be approved.
- Maintains the board archives.

*If a library staff person has been assigned the duties of secretary, their responsibilities need to be clearly laid out in writing. It is not advisable to have the director take minutes during the meeting.

Treasurer

- Understands accounting principles and funding sources. Is aware of all written board-approved fiscal policies and the basic financial procedures used by the library.
- Heads the finance committee.
- Works with the library director to ensure timely reports are generated for the board.
- Reviews the audit.
- Helps the director answer questions other trustees may have about finances or the audit.

TRUSTEE TIP

The treasurer's role varies with the size of the library. In small libraries, the treasurer may keep the books, deposit funds, prepare reports and even write checks or vouchers. In larger libraries, the treasurer is legal officer named to assure that financial operations are being properly handled. By-laws should outline the specific job. (From the Training Resource Kit for Pennsylvania Public Library Trustees)

New Board Consultation Available from MHLS: *Building Your Base*.

Available to all member library boards on-demand. Learn how to maximize contact with targeted segments of your community to build a broader base of support for the library. Contact **Josh Cohen**, MHLS Executive Director at 845.471.6060 x17 or jcohen@midhudson.org.