

LIBRARIES ATTRACT MORE THAN READERS: INVESTING IN LIBRARY SAFETY

by Bruce A. Canal, CPP



It's 9 p.m. and Susan, an experienced librarian, escorts the last patron, Mrs. Wilson, to the exit. Susan locks the door behind her and is left inside alone. Before gathering her personal things to leave, Susan decides to make one last trip through the facility to pick-up the forgotten few books and periodicals left behind by hasty readers, when she is startled to find a man—asleep—between two bookshelves in the farthest corner of the building.

Due to her astonishment, Susan gasps for air and the sound awakens the man. Equally surprised and disoriented, the disheveled man slowly rises from the floor with his face hidden by the rolled bill of a baseball cap. His hands are deep inside the dirty trench coat. He raises his head and his face is emotionless and eerie.

Susan panics from fear. She orders the man while pointing her finger, "Out, get out, immediately. Get out!" He slowly grins and stares at Susan, but he does not move. His inaction only proves to heighten Susan's fear. She toughens her posture, clinches her fists and shouts, "I'm calling the police!"

As she turns and stomps away with her back to the man, she repeats, "I'm calling the police and you're going to jail!" The man's grin fades to a frown, he pulls his hands from his coat, begins to run, and . . .

Confrontations like this real-life scenario occur more often than library staff members across the country want to admit. Many times, the patron leaves peacefully and, except for a short experienced adrenaline rush and a few more gray hairs, the staff member just has another story to tell about life in a library. Unfortunately, there are countless stories about violent or aggressive acts occurring in libraries across the country which result in injury and trauma.

To avoid these types of situations and other security related anomalies, librarians across the country are starting to take a hard look at the latest technology in electronic security and training available to protect staff, patrons and assets.

More libraries are installing closed circuit television and alarm systems, as well as positioning shelves and furniture for better visibility. Many libraries have instituted security policies and have chosen the proactive approach of training staff on how to diffuse volatile situations in an effort to reduce liability and protect their most valuable asset—human life.

Security consultants have recognized that libraries are no longer the safe

havens they once were. Libraries, small college campuses and rural towns have always been thought of as safe and immune from crime or violence. Recent FBI reports on crime have indicated that all three locations have experienced alarming increases in crime, especially crimes committed by youthful offenders. Subsequently, consultants have been requested to assist libraries across the country with mounting security breaches and how to prevent aggression.

What has proved to exacerbate the growing aggression in the library workplaces of the 90s is the wide range of new learning tools available that attract a greater number and diversity of people. What was once perceived to be a repository for books and periodicals, has emerged as an electronic information resource, an audio-visual distribution center, a traveling bookmobile and generally, a place where everyone can find something to do. The "catch 22" of broadening the services libraries provide is that the potential that more problems may occur from greater numbers of people.

PHYSICAL SECURITY

Two of the most cost effective tools and the fastest growing security measures to hit society are electronic surveillance and alarm systems. It was once believed that closed circuit television and motion sensors were too expensive for the smaller organizations; these devices were believed to be better suited for large corporations with big budgets. However, with emerging technology comes competition, and with competition come more affordable prices. Both of these measures are capital investments that can be depreciated over several years and have now become financially feasible for many organizations.

While some people feel closed circuit television is too invasive and violates a person's right to privacy, it has become an accepted fixture in many public buildings and parking areas. Once the emotional hurdle of privacy is overcome, CCTV proves invaluable by protecting staff and patrons from physical harm and the library board from civil liability. Fact in point, a quality videotape is accepted in every court across the land as bona fide evidence. It is objective, unprejudiced and the camera never blinks, missing nothing in its lens.

Many security consultants are suggesting CCTV

cameras be installed at least at the circulation desk, reference desk, audio/visual center, and the surface parking lot. Additional cameras located at the entrances/exits, the periodical section, and throughout the aisles would provide greater coverage and reduce potential liability.

Couple closed circuit television with a monitored alarm system, and security at any library increases immeasurably. A few words of caution to the decision makers choosing an alarm company: 1) Choose a local (statewide) monitoring company. Smaller firms have typically been more familiar with local public safety officials, which has a positive impact on response times when emergency needs arise. Do not contract a company several states away from your building. 2) Do not over-purchase an alarm system. Install motion sensors throughout the walking paths of the facility and electronic contacts at each door. Sound sensors, window contacts and extra motion sensors are not necessary and are an added burden to the financial budget. Be frugal, and be just as secure.

Construct as much outside lighting as financially possible. While flood lights, walkway lights and wall lights are a proactive deterrent for criminal and aggressive behavior, they also are seemingly non-intrusive. However, many libraries overlook other security measures that may cost considerably less money and may prove to be an excellent deterrent to criminal and/or aggressive activity.

Trim trees and landscaping to eliminate blind spots and hiding places for persons acting with inappropriate behavior. Shrubs and plants should not exceed two feet in height while trees should be trimmed "up" to keep branches from hanging low. Utilize only one entrance/exit, if possible, to reduce the possibility of foul play or inappropriate behavior.

A physical security assessment by a qualified professional can delineate a facility's weaknesses and vulnerabilities while outlining its strengths.

TRAINING

Although improving the physical security of any facility dramatically reduces the chance of criminal activity, it does not preclude the face-to-face confrontations that occur between employees and patrons, or between patrons.

For this reason, many library boards and directors are choosing to train their staffs with the skills necessary to diffuse volatile situations. They are teaching staff members how to read the behavior of patrons and how to use verbal tactics when confronting an aggressive situation. Do not be mistaken to think staff members are trained to be security guards; staff are trained to read and manipulate stressful situations that may protect their life or the lives of their patrons.

The obvious benefits from training are that employees feel more confident and they feel empowered to take control. This confidence is not mistaken for omnipotence, but enables staff to quash volatile situations before they escalate into injury and a law suit. Staff can learn to read a patron's non-verbal cues and put into practice the theory of "responding" and not "reacting." Many times a staff member's reaction to a volatile situation can precipitate further aggression, whereas, qualified training would teach staff members to diffuse potentially explosive encounters.

Library boards across the country must make an effort to protect their staff and their patrons.

An added benefit to training is that staff members learn to control their panic and fear. Studies have concluded that even the most prepared person may experience an adrenaline rush during stressful situations, but training enables the individual to channel the rush experience into something positive and productive.

A lesson taught during violence-in-the-workplace training includes learning to deflect the anger of an aggressive or violent individual. Library staff must be taught that in most situations, the angry patron is verbally (or physically) attacking a library employee and not the individual person. Staff members involved in a confrontation learn how to reject and not psychologically bury the patron's anger. This technique is a must for a complete emotional and unified recovery after an incident.

NON-THREATENING INTERVENTION

How often do we find police cars parked in front of our favorite restaurant? More importantly, how often does that restaurant experience a robbery with a police car sitting in the parking lot? Simply stated, the restaurant has utilized non-threatening intervention to prevent criminal activity or aberrant behavior by customers in the dining room.

Library boards and staffs should invite local, county, or state law enforcement officers to utilize community meeting rooms for "squad" meetings, parties or training sessions. The law officers can be trusted not to abuse this privilege and library staff will receive free security guards while officers are attending their meeting. Offer the local FOP or Law Enforcement Explorer Scouts the same perk; law enforcement officers may not be "on duty" but a parked police car is a deterrent in itself.

Regardless of the depth of preventive measures taken, preparation and planning are key to reducing criminal activity in the library workplace. Library boards across the country must make an effort to protect their staff and their patrons. In a litigious society, courts typically examine an organization's response to its due diligence requirement. Every organization has an ethical and legal responsi-

bility to provide the safest facility within reason. Doing nothing to reduce aggression and potential violence is no longer accepted in the judicial system.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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