

# Between Us

## Library Security = Eyes Wide Open

by John Zika

**F**rom my perspective as a public library director, keeping our eyes open is the key to meeting our constant challenges with security, general safety, and well-being in our places of employment. Regardless of what type of library we are in — special, academic, public, or school — we are well served by keeping a high level of awareness of what is going on around us.

One of my favorite “awareness is important” incidents: I had worked all one Saturday afternoon registering voters for the 1992 election. The library closed; I was the last one in the building. I decided to check the bathrooms one last time before leaving. Lo and behold, there was an arm slightly visible under the bathroom stall in the men’s room. A startling discovery — and rather unnerving. A man had fallen off the commode and was passed out on the floor. The individual had been overlooked by a co-worker who had left before me, in a hurry to get on with the weekend. I was tempted to help the man immediately. It seemed like overkill to call the police, much less 911. But the 911 option won out in my mind, and call I did. The police who arrived helped the gentleman (he was inebriated) and told me that I had done the right thing in calling 911. They said that if I had tried to help the man, and he had been injured in the process, the library and I may have been liable. It was the “last look around” which led to the situation being handled, rather than the man waking up several hours later in a dark restroom, inside a locked building.

After other incidents when we have needed to call 911, I realized that the public should know that in an emergency they can also call 911. In our building, however, a phone call requires dialing an outside line. Can you imagine an emergency in which a library patron is trying to dial 911, and cannot figure out how to get an outside line? A simple sign letting them know how can be a lifesaver.

Certain situations seem so innocent, and actually are accidents waiting to happen. Children sitting in a library are a welcome sight, but if they are unaccompanied by an adult, it could mean they are being dropped off and left unattended for hours at a time. This scenario occurred in a library where I worked, and led to the formation of a “Safe Child Policy.” The policy stated what was and was not considered appropriate behavior on the part of children in the library, as well as stating our policy about parents leaving their children in the library.

Having our eyes wide open also should include the real-

ization that the law enforcement community is a tremendous resource in dealing with safety and security. Taking some time to meet the resource officer at your school, the campus police, or the community police officers in the neighborhood can be time extremely well spent. Personnel in law enforcement can offer mini-courses in personal safety, and help us to fine-tune our awareness of what to do in situations involving security. I have found the local juvenile justice personnel and the law enforcement community to be very supportive educational resources in dealing with adolescent and adult problem patrons in the public library.

A little prevention can stave off a situation that might become a nightmare. Awareness of the library environment is a baseline requirement of our jobs.

Several years ago, a visitor to the library slipped on a puddle of water that was left when a maintenance worker repaired a leaky drinking fountain. The repair was made, but the puddle was not cleaned up. An “eyes wide open” approach to the repair could have prevented the accident. As it was, the accident resulted in an out-of-court settlement.

Consider these threats:

- 1) A small puddle of water left in the lobby can result in a big lawsuit.
- 2) A too-tall shrub can be a hiding place for a would-be assailant.
- 3) Drop (extension) cords and /or space heaters used anywhere in the building can trip people or cause fires.

These are loaded weapons that can backfire in a library, wasting valuable time and causing needless hardship for librarians who would rather be giving good public service than dealing with lawsuits, injuries, irate customers, and damage to their facilities.

We can look the other way when problems exist, but they rarely go away. In the matter of library security and safety, we should engage in proactive troubleshooting to insure that employees and visitors to our libraries will be safe and secure.

EYES WIDE SHUT? This might work well as a movie title, but in the realm of library security, we need to have EYES WIDE OPEN. Over the course of about 15 years in the library profession, I have found that keeping the library safe depends on staff keeping their eyes open to what is going on in and around our facilities.

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