

# REPORT

## Oakville Public Library Board

**Meeting Date: September 18, 2024**

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**FROM:** Oakville Public Library

**DATE:** September 9, 2024

**SUBJECT: Intellectual Freedom Policy – September 18, 2024**

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### **RECOMMENDATION:**

That the Intellectual Freedom Policy (Appendix A) be received for feedback.

### **KEY FACTS:**

The following are key points for consideration with respect to this report:

- The current Intellectual Freedom Policy (Appendix B), approved on August 27, 2020, is out-of-date and required updating.
- The scope of the existing policy did not provide a suitable framework to address the current frequency and variety of intellectual freedom challenges that the Oakville Public Library (OPL) is experiencing.
- OPL has updated the Intellectual Freedom Policy (Appendix A) to better address contemporary challenges and ensure the library remains a place where all individuals can explore diverse ideas and perspectives within a safe, accessible, and inclusive environment.
- The new policy introduces clearer guidelines on the application of intellectual freedom in various library services and incorporates recent developments in social discourse.
- Significant revisions have been made to the scope and policy statements to address emerging issues in digital spaces, program development, and community engagement.

### **BACKGROUND:**

OPL is dedicated to upholding intellectual freedom by providing access to resources that foster individual curiosity, learning, and the exploration of diverse perspectives. However, these principles are increasingly under threat due to a growing movement aimed at restricting access to information in libraries. This trend, particularly evident in the United States, is characterized by rising book challenges and restrictive legislative mandates that significantly impact library operations. Additionally, challenges to library programming and the use of library space have become more

frequent across North America, highlighting the need for a clearer and more robust intellectual freedom policies within libraries.

In recent years, OPL has seen a notable increase in formal Requests for Reconsideration of library materials. These Requests, which require an OPL cardholder to submit a form with supporting documentation, reflect growing community concerns. However, this increase does not fully capture the significant rise in informal queries directed at library staff, questioning the inclusion of specific materials and programs. This trend mirrors similar developments in the United States, where the American Library Association reported a 65% increase in unique title challenges from 2022 to 2023. The table below illustrates the rise in formal Requests for Reconsideration at OPL since 2020, which require substantial time and resources to address.

Year	# of Requests for Reconsideration
2020	0
2021	0
2022	3
2023	3

Those submitting informal queries or formal Requests for Reconsideration typically cite concerns that fall into one of the following categories:

- *Audience Appropriateness:* Content deemed inappropriate for a specific audience, often children, or for use in a public library.
- *Outdated or Culturally Insensitive Content:* Inappropriate depictions of minority groups or the use of outdated language.
- *Content of a Controversial Nature:* Works or creators expressing controversial perspectives or opinions, particularly those that may be considered offensive.

Recognizing the importance of intellectual freedom as a fundamental cornerstone of library operations, OPL approved its previous policy in August 2020. However, with rapid technological advancements, evolving societal norms, and increasing challenges to free expression, an update to the policy became necessary. This review and revision ensure that the policy remains relevant, robust, and effective in supporting OPL's role as a defender of intellectual freedom.

In addition to updating the Intellectual Freedom Policy, OPL is reviewing related policies, such as the Program Development Policy and the Collection Development Policy, to ensure they align with intellectual freedom principles. Furthermore, OPL is developing comprehensive intellectual freedom training for all staff to deepen their understanding of this foundational library value and to equip them to respond

effectively to customer queries. Finally, OPL will provide annual reporting on challenges to its collections and services to the board starting in January 2025.

### **COMMENT/OPTIONS:**

The revision of the Intellectual Freedom Policy was undertaken following a thorough review of current practices at OPL and an analysis of policies from other public libraries. This updated policy adjusts the scope to more clearly articulate OPL's commitment to supporting intellectual freedom across all its services, including collections, programs, display spaces, public computers/technology, and meeting rooms.

Key updates in the new policy include:

- *Requests for Reconsideration:* The revised policy provides clearer guidelines for Oakville residents and OPL cardholders. This process now includes a formalized option to appeal decisions, ensuring a consistent and transparent approach to addressing concerns.
- *Endorsements:* In addition to reaffirming support for existing Canadian statements on intellectual freedom, the policy now endorses the Urban Library Council's Declaration of Democracy. This endorsement underscores the critical role libraries play in fostering intellectual freedom as a cornerstone of democracy.

Specific changes introduced in the updated policy (Appendix A) compared to the previous version (Appendix B) include:

- *Expanded Scope:* The policy now explicitly covers digital and virtual spaces, ensuring that intellectual freedom is protected across all platforms where OPL operates. This includes a wider array of materials and services, such as e-resources, public computer usage, and online programs.
- *Clarification of Roles:* The updated policy provides clearer guidance on the responsibilities of library staff, volunteers, and governing bodies in upholding intellectual freedom, particularly in the face of challenges or requests for reconsideration.
- *Formalized Appeal Process:* The policy establishes a more detailed appeal process for library cardholders wishing to challenge the inclusion or exclusion of specific materials or programs. This process ensures that all concerns are addressed in a fair and transparent manner.
- *Alignment with Current Industry Positions:* The policy aligns more closely with positions expressed by key industry groups, including the Canadian Federation of Library Associations' Statement on Intellectual Freedom and Libraries, the Ontario Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Freedom and the Intellectual Rights of the Individual, and the Urban Library Council's

Declaration of Democracy. These endorsements reinforce OPL's commitment to upholding the highest standards of intellectual freedom.

These updates are vital to maintaining OPL's leadership in promoting intellectual freedom and ensuring that the library continues to be a space where ideas can be freely explored and expressed.

**APPENDICES:**

Appendix A - Intellectual Freedom Policy (2024)

Appendix B - Intellectual Freedom Policy (2020)

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