



SEEKING SANCTUARY

Public libraries establish themselves
as book sanctuaries to counter bans

BY Ed Finkel

Illustration: Shane Tolentino

Last year, when states were introducing a raft of legislation that would effectively take books off the shelves, librarians at Harris County (Tex.) Public Library (HCPL) knew they wanted to take a stand.

Texas House Bill 900, which would have restricted materials in school libraries and required vendors to assign book ratings based on so-called appropriateness before selling them to schools, had just been signed by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in June and was set to go into effect September 1, 2023. (On September 19, the bill was temporarily blocked by US District Judge Alan D. Albright. In January, the US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a decision to prohibit the Texas Education Agency from forcing vendors to rate books, but the library standards outlined in the bill—which prohibit school districts from possessing or purchasing books with “harmful material”—remain.)

“Because the mission of public libraries is so much different from the school libraries, we weren’t thinking about being targeted by legislation,” says Edward Melton, HCPL executive director. But staffers were anxious about the climate of censorship, and HCPL itself had seen an uptick in requests for reconsideration of materials—from three requests in 2021 to 24 requests in 2023—and complaints about displays and drag storytimes.

“We knew [the pushback] could potentially lead to something political,” Melton says. “So we said, ‘Let’s go ahead and be proactive about this.’”

The same day H.B. 900 was temporarily blocked, Harris County Commissioners Court (HCCC) passed a resolution declaring HCPL a book sanctuary (bit.ly/HCPL-BookSanc). The resolution stated the county’s support for the library, with the aim of combating censorship, defending intellectual freedom, and protecting the freedom to read.

“HCPL staff are dedicated to the principle of free and equitable access to information and knowledge and deserve to pursue their calling free from harassment and intimidation,” the resolution reads. “Harris County is committed to their protection.”

Though the resolution—written by the library and revised by HCCC policy writers—does not offer legal protection, the unanimous support of commissioners helped ease staffers’ worries, Melton says.

“If any staff doubted that the library and the county would support them, we wanted the resolution to allay those concerns,” he says. “With us being a book sanctuary, it relieves me—and I would speak for my staff—of that concern about retaliation or retribution or legislation that prevents us from doing what we do.”

In response to book banning attempts across the US and Canada, libraries in both nations are joining a larger social campaign to declare themselves *book sanctuaries*, or spaces that collect endangered books and protect the freedom to read. More than 3,300 book sanctuaries have been established so far, with most declarations made by individuals. As of early May, 12 library systems—in both red states and blue states—have joined the movement, including Broward County (Fla.) Library, Dayton (Ohio) Metro Library, Hoboken (N.J.) Public Library, and Northbrook (Ill.) Public Library.

The three public libraries that *American Libraries* spoke with for this article issued their declarations with backing from, or in partnership with, their local governments. While these statements don’t guarantee formal protections, libraries say their sanctuary status and support

from civic partners provide a sense of comfort when threats to intellectual freedom turn potentially dangerous.

WHAT IS A BOOK SANCTUARY?

Libraries have seen a precipitous rise in book banning efforts and attempts to censor programs, displays, and nonbook materials over the past few years. In 2023, ALA tallied 1,247 of these attempts in the US, with a total of 4,240 unique titles challenged. (By comparison, ALA tracked 156 challenges to books and nonbook materials in 2020.)

The book sanctuary movement began in September 2022, when Chicago Public Library (CPL) and the city of Chicago partnered in response to increasing attempts to ban and censor books. CPL declared its 81 branches book sanctuaries.

Book sanctuaries are dedicated to making challenged books broadly accessible, hosting book talks and other events that feature diverse voices from communities that are often restricted (such as authors who are LGBTQ+, Black, Indigenous, and people of color), and educating others on the history of book bans. They can be created by anyone and can exist anywhere, physically or digitally.

When a person or entity establishes a book sanctuary, they are declaring a commitment to protecting intellectual freedom, according to a CPL announcement. The main website for the movement (booksanctuary.org) offers a free, downloadable toolkit with tips on hosting discussions about banned books, donating banned books, and calling on local government to protect intellectual freedom.

"Libraries view this work as central to who we are, to our mission, and I hope that more libraries stake a claim to that critical work we do," says Chris Brown, CPL commissioner.

MAKING THE DECISION

In Stamford, Connecticut, the Ferguson Library (FL) Board of Trustees, alongside Mayor Caroline Simmons, declared the library and city book sanctuaries in January 2023. FL CEO Alice Knapp says the library has an unusually close relationship with its city, including a

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stipulation in the library's charter that the mayor appoints half the board and serves as an ex officio member. The library director and the mayor also meet once a month.

Knapp recalls notifying Simmons of CPL's decision to become a book sanctuary, and that FL was thinking of following its lead: "[Simmons's positive] response was immediate, and she said, 'Let me know as soon as the library board of trustees takes action.'"

Knapp says that while people may think of Connecticut as progressive, libraries in the state faced more than 100 censorship attempts in the first eight months of 2023. FL had not faced any as of March. "Our move was preemptive," she says. "As we were watching the attempts at banning books in our surrounding communities in the suburbs, we felt, as an urban library and the second-largest city in Connecticut, that we could take a stand."

Local government and law enforcement know to send any book challenges they receive to the library, Knapp says. When a community member went straight to a trustee with a complaint about a display, that trustee forwarded the complaint to her, along with the message: "Now, you do what you do."

"If someone objects to a title and follows our procedures, they do so knowing that the governing body has already come out in strong defense against censorship and for titles to remain on the shelf," Knapp says. "It won't stop negative social media, but it sends a clear message."

ACKNOWLEDGING SAFETY CONCERNS

The book sanctuary distinction makes Knapp and FL staffers feel safer, she says, even if the resolution does not provide legal protection.

To date, the majority of complaints and threats at FL have been about drag storytime programs, which are held at the library only a couple of times each year, Knapp says. Some of those complaints come from Stamford residents, but many are from those who live out of town. At a drag storytime held September 2022, protesters were outside the library, and some tried to come in to take photos of performers and attendees.



“It would be silly for me to say I don’t worry about [safety],” Knapp says. “When we had [threats] happen, I felt a wall of support by our police department, by our city, by the board, by the staff. In this day and age, you always have to be worried about it.”

Illinois is considered a leader in the anti-book ban movement. In June 2023, Gov. J. B. Pritzker signed a bill that would withhold state funds from public libraries that remove books for partisan reasons or refuse to adopt ALA’s Library Bill of Rights or similar language. (The state bill, the first of its kind, went into effect January 1.) But CPL’s Brown

Altar for the Unbanned, a public art piece by artist Theaster Gates highlighting banned books, is located at Chicago Public Library’s Harold Washington Library Center.

notes that having top-down support in his state hasn’t stopped regular challenges to inclusive storytimes and programming supportive of LGBTQ+ youth, even at a large urban system like the one in Chicago.

In late 2023, CPL and other Chicago-area libraries experienced a rash of bomb threats. Libraries in other states—such as Yolo County (Calif.) Library and Iowa City Public Library—have also faced them, along with the intimidation and threats of violence that have commonly accompanied this wave of unprecedented censorship attempts these past few years.

Brown says CPL is certainly aware of safety concerns: “It’s something we’re thinking deeply about, how we create safe and supportive spaces for our staff and our public.”

First and foremost, Brown hopes the book sanctuary declaration expresses CPL’s values and vision of every person having access to learning and reading at a time of nationwide challenges and bans. It’s too early to tell if the book sanctuary declaration will put a stop to pushback or threats, he says, but that was not the outcome they had in mind when starting the campaign.

“It was more about expressing where we stand,” he says, “and our commitment to a multiplicity of voices.”

APPEALING TO THE COMMUNITY

To further engage the public on the topic of book bans, CPL has worked with the city’s department of cultural affairs and local visual artist Theaster Gates to install a permanent art display at its downtown Harold Washington Library Center. Titled *Altar for the Unbanned*, the display showcases more than 500 frequently banned books and amplifies marginalized voices. CPL has also increased the number of book clubs it hosts around frequently challenged books.

“It’s incredible to not just have the library championing the freedom to read,” Brown says, “but also our city partners and all of these folks joining us in the book sanctuary movement.”

As part of being a book sanctuary, HCPL hosted a concert and panel themed around

banned books in October 2023 that featured local classical music quartet Apollo Chamber Players. The event's goal was to raise community awareness about the issue through discussion.

HCPL also hosts read-aloud events during Banned Books Week, during which anyone can present an excerpt from their favorite frequently challenged book to a live audience. These events began in 2021 and have been continued after the book sanctuary declaration was made.

Back in Connecticut, FL has held its Teen Banned Book Discussions since becoming a book sanctuary. At one of its meetings in January, students in grades 6–12 discussed *Ana on the Edge* by A. J. Sass. The book, which features a 12-year-old figure skater who navigates gender identity in youth competitive sports, has been broadly challenged at schools and libraries across the US.

“We are providing a space, a home, a place of belonging for those who are marginalized,” Knapp says of the discussions.

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION

For libraries looking to partner with their local governments on a book sanctuary declaration, Melton suggests finding common values and taking time to build relationships.

“I wouldn’t recommend just cold calling and thinking that you’re going to be able to have a conversation with a politician and they’re going to just jump on the bandwagon,” Melton says. Instead, he advises meeting in person and educating potential stakeholders on what libraries do.

For Knapp, keeping local leaders in the loop of what’s going on at the library is key. Take opportunities to initiate conversations when you see them, she says, “so that when you hit into a crisis, it’s not the first time they’re hearing it from you.”

HCPL’s declaration was positively received by those inside and outside the community, Melton says. The library uploaded an announcement on Instagram featuring its popular Curbside Larry character, which has received nearly 77,000 likes and



Harris County (Tex.) Public Library posted a video to Instagram announcing its book sanctuary distinction. The video, featuring the library’s viral character Curbside Larry, received nearly 77,000 likes.

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ALICE KNAPP, CEO of Ferguson Library in Stamford, Connecticut

1,900 comments. Shortly after, the video was reposted by actor and author Jamie Lee Curtis, receiving more than 90,000 likes.

“Patrons walking through our doors may not notice much of a difference—we’ve operated with this mission for many years,” Melton says. “But many have been met with a LIBRARY FOR ALL banner as a friendly reminder that our library embraces diversity.”

While Knapp does not believe that her library in one corner of Connecticut is going to change the national conversation on its own, becoming part of the larger campaign with Chicago, Harris County, and other places is where the power lies, she says.

“There have been brave leaders who have suffered through social media attacks, who have lost their jobs,” Knapp says. “Anything we can do to support them, to counteract these challenges, is what, as library folks, we should be doing.” [AL](#)



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