

## FEATURE



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RIGHT:  
*Deborah  
Caldwell-  
Stone, Nanette  
Perez, Barbara  
Jones, and  
Kristin Pekoll.*

# ALA OFFICE FOR INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM



# Who We Are and How We Help Librarians

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“Good Morning, Office for Intellectual Freedom. This is Kristin.”

—silence—

“Hello?”

“Oh, I’m sorry; I just expected to get a recording.”

This response brings a smile to my face. First, because I love that I’m able to provide a human connection to our callers. Second, because I would have thought the same thing before I started to work for this incredible organization. The American Library Association (ALA) seemed so much bigger and more powerful than “little ol’ me everyday librarian.” But now that I’m working here, I get to see all the people with diverse backgrounds, intelligence, and passion working to provide resources and advocate for librarians.

ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) strives to educate librarians and the public about the nature and importance of intellectual freedom in libraries,

and it will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 2017.

Libraries are a forum for information and ideas (under the First Amendment), and librarians are responsible for making sure that every person has equitable and unrestricted access. At OIF, our first priority is to make sure that all librarians, educators, and users know this. Our second priority is to fight any attempts to limit or remove access.

Anyone can call us with questions or to report a challenge. A person does not have to be a member of ALA to inquire about best library practices for 3-D printers or get advice on how to communicate with a coworker who doesn’t understand censorship. We try to ensure someone is in the office during all business hours to answer the phone, and we are available by e-mail. We follow many electronic discussion lists in case a thread arises regarding intellectual freedom issues about which we can help. Among the discussion lists we follow are those of the Young Adult Library Services Association (yalsa-bk), American Association of School Librarians forum (aaslforum), School Library Media & Network Communications (lm-net), and

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National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE Connected Community). We monitor not only our own social-media pages but also ALA Think Tank and other librarian-saturated sites.

As an office, we educate. OIF staff write articles and books, and speak at conferences. We facilitate annual events like Banned Books Week (September) and Choose Privacy Week (May). OIF gathers resources and answers questions about labeling books, filtering the Internet, developing policies, managing meeting rooms and display spaces, requiring permission slips, and defining a challenge. Members of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee and OIF staff have created interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights that were approved by ALA Council. These interpretations help guide decisions made on the front lines. In addition to the interpretations, tool kits, Q&As, and white papers are all available (for free) to help librarians, other educators, journalists, and other interested

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parties decipher the different facets of complex issues related to intellectual freedom. For example, in 2014 OIF with the Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) published a report on Internet accessibility. “Fencing Out Knowledge” addresses the impact of the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) in schools and public libraries. This report is a great tool to help educate administrators and school boards

to develop policies that allow the broadest online information access allowed by law. (*KQ editor’s note: An article by researcher Kristen Batch “Filtering beyond CIPA: Consequences of and Alternatives to Overfiltering in Schools” begins on page 60 in this issue.*)

Our office also has made communication with librarians in each state a priority. We host quarterly Web meetings

to discuss ideas and report happenings around the country. Most state library associations have an intellectual freedom committee or roundtable. Some states have two intellectual freedom representatives: one for their state association and a separate voice for school librarians. A significant majority of the challenges that are reported to OIF happen in school libraries and classrooms. School librarians typically have a policy structure and order of command—different from those for public and academic libraries—that affect how challenges are handled. It’s incredibly important to hear school librarians’ viewpoints at the “State of the States” Web meetings.

As a professional association designed to support librarians, we follow the lead of the people we are working with. In some situations publicly aligning with outside advocates may not be the best course of action for a librarian in a tenuous environment. Without permission, we will *never reveal* who contacts our office or why.

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**Kristin Pekoll** is the assistant director for the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom in Chicago. She wrote the September 2014

article “Why Gay Characters Matter” for Huffington Post and the September 2014 article “Book Challenge Procedures” for the International Literacy Association.