



SAFETY DIRECTOR BULLETIN



LIBRARY BEST PRACTICES

Libraries are not automatically safe workplaces. Today's libraries are no longer just a storage space for lending books to residents. The library service now includes exterior book drop boxes, digital media, computer access, online services, hosting special events, and potentially dealing with angrier, possibly violent, patrons. Historically, library leaders concentrated on controlling slip, trip, and lifting hazards. They are still the most significant causes of injuries to staff and patrons. However, with the added services come new hazards that leaders must consider. This bulletin will discuss traditional and emerging exposures in the library setting.

Slip – Trip – Fall Prevention

Slips and trips that result in falls were, and continue to be, the most common cause of library staff and patron injuries. Prevention strategies must be the starting point for a comprehensive injury prevention program.

The library's written policies should include guidance on proper footwear. No open toes. No flip-flops. Low heels only. Policies should allow for seasonal situations such as snow and ice.

The library should have a written schedule of periodic inspections. A staff member should walk around the facility daily, looking for slip or trip hazards. This walk-through does not need to be documented. However, a staff member should conduct a more thorough inspection using a checklist weekly or monthly. The checklist should include common factors contributing to falls: lighting, condition of stair treads, loose carpeting, and secure handrails. Many slips occur in parking lots and on sidewalks. If needed, please use the [MSI Library Hazard Identification Inspection Checklist](#).

Consider slip-prevention controls such as walk-off mats and umbrella stands, or sleeves. Have a snow and ice control plan. Coordinate with facilities for large-scale snow removal, but ensure the staff can treat spot snow and ice immediately to address reported trouble spots.

Library leaders should not assume workers and volunteers know slip or trip prevention best practices. Make it a habit to talk with staff about slip and trip awareness. Call out and recognize good behaviors. Short, frequent talks are extremely effective in shaping desirable behaviors. Encourage workers to view the MSI Video, [Smart Moves to Avoid Falling Down](#), also available in [Spanish](#).

Sprain & Strain Prevention

Sprain and strain injuries are musculoskeletal injuries when lifting or carrying loads. Handling and shelving books is the most obvious cause of many sprain or strain injuries. Reaching for large items on the top shelf is a risky act.

Library leaders should ensure that sufficient dollies, carts, and other lifting and moving equipment are readily available and strategically located around the library. It's human nature to 'just do something' because the right tool is not nearby. Conduct a job analysis, identify areas where handling quantities of books occurs, and position the proper material handling equipment there.

Training is needed. Leaders must stress that they want employees to ask for help. Employers and employees must realize that everyone has good days and bad days. Recognize your limitations. They can change daily. Library leaders need to tell their staff that "It's okay to ask for help on your bad days".

Consider requiring staff to view the MSI video, [Stop and Think to Prevent Back Pain](#), also available in [Spanish](#).

Infection Control

In this post-COVID era, there is a heightened awareness of infectious pathogens in work and public spaces. The two most significant transmission modes are blood and respiratory droplets. Many librarians can relate stories of sick or injured patrons or co-workers. Library workers are highly community-focused and will help sick and injured visitors. First aid kits and AEDs are available in many libraries. Leaders should consider two scenarios: cross-infection when providing first aid and cross-infection through contaminated surfaces.

Consider sponsoring CPR/AED and Basic First Aid training for staff, both include basic infection control protection. Also, provide time for staff to attend an annually required MSI NOW Bloodborne Pathogen Refresher class, available in the [MSI LMS](#) on demand.

Institute a comprehensive cleaning schedule based on the current infectious disease threat assessment. Cleaning and disinfecting tools, strategies, and chemicals are evolving. Work with facilities managers to stay abreast of threats and cleaning methods. For example, far ultraviolet C light (Far UVC) holds promise for disinfecting public spaces.

Chemical Safety

Many libraries use only household chemicals and in household quantities. Libraries must maintain a Hazard Communication program, chemical inventory (New Jersey Right to Know Survey), and a Safety Data Sheet (SDS) file. Leaders still must conduct Hazard Communication/New Jersey Right to Know training on the safe use of chemicals initially, with a biennial refresher. It can be dangerous to assume staff, especially young volunteers, know not to mix certain chemicals, such as bleach and ammonia, or to wear rubber gloves when using caustic cleaners. Review the SDS with them before assigning them a task that includes the use of chemicals.

Emergency Action Plan & Staff Training

Emergency planning for libraries presents several challenges: a rapidly changing and wide range of patrons, a high turnover of staff and volunteers, and a changing threat landscape. Public facilities must have a written plan for responding to natural and man-made disasters, including fires, earthquakes, inclement weather, chemical spills, lost/missing children, and active shooter & hostile events. FEMA, NJ Department of Homeland Security, your local Office of Emergency Management, and local law enforcement agencies can assist with planning templates and tools. [MSI Model Policies](#) has a [Library Emergency Action Plan](#) to get you started.

Plans must be brought to life through education and training. While PEOSH only requires initial education on the employer's Emergency Action Plan, true readiness requires both refresher education and practical training. Ensure staff know the plan. The alternative is for each staff member to respond with their own plan. Review plans periodically and certainly before a forecasted event, such as a major snowstorm or hurricane.

But being ready means also going through the motions of putting the plan into action. Hold fire drills that require staff to assist patrons leaving. Practice locking down the library on the first report of a missing child. Set time benchmarks for achieving the procedure. Drills can be simulated, [functional](#), or [tabletopped](#) so as not to disrupt operations.

New Employee & Volunteer Onboarding

Welcoming a new employee or volunteer into the library family is exciting. It starts their journey to becoming a valuable team member, beginning with a comprehensive onboarding program. Before letting the new person out on the floor to interact with patrons, they must be prepared to represent the library in the best light. This means they must be trained and educated on library policies, safety regulations, emergency procedures, and the workplace culture.

Library leaders should have a written lesson plan of what policies, regulations, and procedures are necessary before the new person is ready to be a fully contributing member of the library team. The lesson plan would include one-on-one introductions, a documented policy review, emergency procedure walk-throughs, and videos. The [MSI NOW Catalog](#) offers dozens of videos on employment practices, safety regulations, customer service, and other library best practices, or take advantage of technology and make your own onboarding videos.

Mentor programs offer many benefits to both the mentor and the new employee. But choose mentors wisely based on desirable skills, knowledge, and attitudes that you wish to bestow on the new person.

Incident Response and Documentation

Unfortunately, injuries and accidents will occur. After library staff respond to the incident, it is essential from a risk control perspective to then document and investigate the incident. Library leaders should ensure every staff member is educated to take pictures of the scene, collect witness statements, and complete incident reports. They should also be trained on what not to say to persons involved or the press. The library should have a written procedure with forms and a defined process for collecting information about the incident, reporting it to the municipality and the Joint Insurance Fund claims administrator, and participating in a post-incident analysis.

Workplace Violence Prevention

Unfortunately, workplace violence has become a recognized hazard for workplaces. Library leaders must establish risk control strategies for various potentially violent situations. A [Code of Conduct](#) would be predominantly posted.

According to Gallup's Global Emotions report, negative emotions remained at their highest level in 2023 (tied with 2022). Anger is a piece of this data and remains near an all-time high. Angry patrons are becoming more common. De-escalation and resiliency training should be on every library leader's agenda.

Many resources can be used. The monthly MSI LIVE class, Dealing with Difficult People and De-Escalation, is a good starting point. Check the [MSI LIVE Schedule](#) of classes for offerings. There are also many TED talks, reputable podcasts, and YouTube videos that can augment training. Leaders may consider resiliency strategies like periodic visits with therapy dogs.

New Jersey ranks among the most diverse States in the nation in terms of racial and ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, and birthplace diversity. In addition to that, the broad age range of patrons makes it easy to see the challenges facing library leaders and staff. Misunderstandings can easily develop and must be handled delicately. Here, too, training is the key. Facing the challenge starts with awareness. The MSI LIVE class, Implicit Bias in the Workplace, is offered monthly. Check the [MSI LIVE Schedule](#) of classes for offerings.

Children's sections and activities are a common part of every library, which makes libraries a potential target for child predators. Every library must have a [Missing or Lost Child Policy and Procedure](#). In case of a missing child in a library, staff should immediately activate a "Code Adam" or similar protocol, which involves a thorough search, contacting parents/guardians, and potentially involving law enforcement.

Homelessness is a growing concern across the nation. A large percentage of people experiencing homelessness have mental, behavioral, or emotional challenges. Libraries are becoming a refuge for this population. Leaders will need to implement policies on the use of restrooms, access to computers, the internet, and information for information about social services, healthcare, and job opportunities. Communication with staff and patrons, who may have negative perceptions of homeless individuals, will be key. Train staff on the policy and strategies to deal compassionately with emotionally- or behaviorally-challenged people while maintaining their personal safety.

As a highly visible public building, libraries are an attractive target for First Amendment Audits. Libraries around the State have been audited. Leaders must train their staff and volunteers to respond properly if an auditor announces their presence. For more information, refer to the [MSI Safety Director Bulletin First Amendment Audits Best Practices](#).

Hosting Special & Cultural Events

The evolution of the public library includes acting as a host to many special and cultural events. As discussed earlier in the Bulletin, New Jersey ranks among the most diverse States in the nation in terms of racial and ethnic diversity. Libraries are not only hosting book or baked goods sales and scout meetings, but also cultural and religious ceremonies. The Safety Director has fielded questions on fireworks, open and cooking fires, food trucks, and airborne clouds of colored dyes. The [MSI Safety Director Bulletin Special Events Best Practices](#) discusses the risks and controls necessary for such diverse special events. Librarians should consider attending the MSI LIVE *Special Event Management* class. Your Loss Control Consultant and Risk Managers are also good resources for information.

Cyber Security

Public access to computers and the internet exposes the library to multiple cyber risks. Libraries are increasingly vulnerable to cybersecurity threats due to their reliance on digital systems and the sensitive patron data they hold. Open access to computers and the internet can be a significant entry point for malicious actors. Libraries must implement robust cybersecurity measures, including regular audits, staff training, and up-to-date technology and security software. Staff should be educated about cybersecurity threats like [phishing, spear phishing, and smishing](#), and the importance of following security protocols on library and personal devices.

Accessibility

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and associated regulations require access to the library and its services for patrons with special needs.

Accessibility and architectural barriers inside and outside the library: Access to services by people with disabilities is a fundamental goal of the ADA. The ADA requires local governmental agencies to make their facilities, programs, and services accessible to persons with disabilities. This requirement extends to physical access at government facilities, programs. Governmental entities must make policy and facility changes to ensure that all people with disabilities can participate in and benefit from the programs and services of local governments. ([2020, ADA.gov](#))

Communication challenges: The ADA requires that governmental agencies ensure that communications with individuals with disabilities are as effective as communications with others. Libraries must provide appropriate auxiliary aids and services for people with disabilities (e.g., qualified interpreters, notetakers, computer-aided transcription services, assistive listening systems, written materials, audio recordings, large print, and Brailled materials) to ensure that individuals with disabilities will be able to participate in the range of city services and programs. ([2020, ADA.gov](#),)

Website: If a local public entity receives Federal funding, the Americans with Disability Act generally requires the entity to provide qualified individuals with disabilities equal access to their programs, services, or activities unless doing so would fundamentally alter the nature of their programs or impose an undue burden. One way to help meet these requirements is to ensure the website has accessible features for people with disabilities. The internet is changing the way libraries serve the public. Many libraries are using the web to offer services to the community. For more information, read the [MSI Safety Director Bulletin ADA-Accessible Websites for Public Entities Best Practices](#).

Service animals: The U.S. Department of Justice defines service animals as “dogs that are individually trained to do work or perform tasks for people with disabilities.” Dogs or other animals whose sole function is to provide comfort or emotional support do not qualify as service animals under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) or New Jersey’s service animal law. Generally, libraries must permit service animals to accompany people with disabilities in all areas where members of the public are allowed to go. For more information, read the [MSI Safety Director Bulletin Service Animals in Public Settings Best Practices](#) and the [MSI Infographic Service Dogs in Public Settings](#).