



# Keeping Our Libraries Safe and Accessible

***By City Attorney Mara W. Elliott***

Whether we were chasing *Curious George*, discovering *Where the Wild Things Are*, or devouring *Green Eggs and Ham*, trips to the library with my two boys were always an adventure. Like most parents, I cherish those moments, especially now that they're teenagers. I can hardly wait until our libraries are wide open again, buzzing with patrons.

Families throughout San Diego have their own treasured library routines. With more than 5.3 million books available at no charge, and limitless educational programming, our 36 City libraries are the true gems of our neighborhoods.

Throughout the pandemic, our library employees have devised creative solutions to ensure our libraries remain hubs for enrichment and education. From setting up outdoor computer labs to making free internet hot spots and laptops available for check-out to developing dynamic digital programming for kids, our libraries have played a critical role in keeping communities connected during COVID.

I'm proud of the behind-the-scenes work the City Attorney's Office does to support our libraries and make them accessible and safe. Attorneys in our office provide legal advice for day-to-day operations. We advise on issues ranging from the First Amendment to accessibility under the Americans with Disabilities Act to intellectual property. We assist in negotiating and implementing contracts associated with technology, publications, security, parking, maintenance, and much more.

And the work performed by our library personnel often involves keen observation skills, knowledge of the criminal justice system, and the ability to tap into a network of resources who can readily assist depending on the issue at hand. For instance, library employees, who are trusted by the patrons they serve, are on the front lines in identifying and helping children who may be experiencing abuse or exploitation. They endure assaults, racial slurs, profanities, aggressive behavior, and intoxicated patrons. Our Office has intervened in unsafe situations to obtain restraining orders to keep dangerous patrons off premises and protect library employees. Since 2009, the City Attorney's Office has obtained restraining orders against 19 individuals who posed a threat of harm to library employees and patrons.

Prior to pandemic closures, a courageous library employee stepped up in a big way to protect her branch. She noticed a man lingering in the children's section, which she found odd because he didn't have children with him and didn't appear to be selecting any books. She quietly observed him for a while and knew something wasn't right.

When the employee lost sight of him, her intuition told her to go look for him. She found him using his cell phone to secretly film up the skirt of an unsuspecting pregnant woman who was there with her three-year-old child. The employee quickly confronted the man, and used her

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phone to record him, while directing a colleague to call 911.

The man ran off, but due to her quick actions and the evidence she captured, police quickly caught up with him.

As it turned out, this was not the man's first time committing crimes like this. He'd been caught before taking pictures up the skirts of other women at a supermarket and a department store. His criminal history suggested he posed an even greater threat.

Because of this employee's quick thinking and dedication to protecting the public, our Office was able to successfully prosecute this case, which ultimately led to a conviction and sex offender registration. While these incidents are troubling, the vast majority of library patrons are there to read, learn, and connect with their neighbors.

As we return to the activities we enjoy, including visits to our local libraries, we want to thank our librarians for continuing to provide free, safe, and accessible services in all of our communities despite pandemic challenges. My Office is grateful for their partnership and their commitment to keeping their patrons safe and engaged.

*Mara W. Elliott is the President of the Law Library Board of Trustees.*

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