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STAFF REPORT INFORMATION ONLY

Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2025 Annual Report

Date: January 26, 2026
To: Toronto Public Library Board
From: City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the five challenges Toronto Public Library (TPL) received in 2025 regarding library materials and programs.

The volume of formal challenges received relative to the population served is low. This report is before the Toronto Public Library Board at a time when libraries in North America continue to experience targeted challenges when providing access to materials, programs, room bookings and exhibits from customers and governing bodies.

Outside of the formal request for reconsideration process, public service staff respond to customer comments about collections and services via email and in person in accordance with the Library's [Customer Service Standards and Practices](#). Through policy, procedure, and practice, TPL demonstrates leadership and commitment to intellectual freedom (IF) as a fundamental principle in a democratic society and core value of public libraries. This commitment supports access to broad and diverse collections, promotes transparency in IF decision-

making, and provides clear avenues for customers to share comments, compliments and feedback.

In 2025, there were four challenges to titles in the collection and one for programming. All titles were retained. Details about the challenges and the actions taken by the Library are outlined in Attachment 1.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact associated with this report.

The Director, Finance & Chief Financial Officer has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

The 2025 annual report on intellectual freedom challenges is an example of bringing intellectual freedom to life by reflecting the Library's Vision, Mission and Values, specifically that of guaranteeing and facilitating the free exchange of information and ideas in a democratic society, protecting intellectual freedom and respecting individuals' rights to privacy and choice. The report is also aligned with the Strategic Plan priority of being recognized internationally as the centre for social connection, community dialogue and strengthening democratic values.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Equity, diversity, and inclusion are central to the promotion and practice of intellectual freedom. TPL supports this principle by, as stated in the Library's Mission Statement, providing "universal access to a broad range of human knowledge, experience, information and ideas..." through collections, programs and services. Further, TPL's commitment to equity and intellectual freedom as mutually reinforcing principles is reiterated in the Board-approved position statements on equity and intellectual freedom.

DECISION HISTORY

At its September 18, 2023 meeting, the Library Board approved the revised [Community and Event Space Rental Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its June 19, 2023, meeting, the Library Board approved the [Request for Reconsideration and Administrative Updates](#) for the Programming and Library Space for Art Exhibits policies, which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement and incorporates the request for reconsideration process.

At its January 23, 2023, meeting, the Library Board approved the updated [Materials Selection Policy](#), which includes the Intellectual Freedom Statement, and an updated version of the Ontario Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Rights of the Individual.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting, the Library Board approved the [Intellectual Freedom](#) and [Equity Statements](#), two mutually reinforcing statements that recognize TPL's role in supporting these foundational principles.

At its December 5, 2022 meeting, the Library Board approved the [Trends in Intellectual Freedom Challenges](#) report, reaffirmed its commitment to the Canadian Federation of Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Freedom and endorsed the Urban Library Council's Declaration of Democracy.

At its May 8, 2018, meeting, the Library Board received for information the [Intellectual Freedom Challenges – 2017 Annual Report](#), which, for the first time, was broadened to include not only challenges to library materials but also challenges relating to library programming, technology, and library space to provide a more comprehensive view of challenges to intellectual freedom. Subsequent reports continue to reflect this broader view of intellectual freedom challenges.

At its June 25, 2001 meeting, the Library Board received its first annual report on intellectual freedom challenges to library materials: [Materials Selection Policy – Reconsideration of Materials 2000](#). Since then, annual reports on intellectual freedom challenges have been provided to the Board.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Intellectual freedom is a core public library value that is reflected in the Library's Vision, Mission, Values and policies. These policies are based on the following principles:

"The Library believes that a vital society encourages members of its community to actively participate in an open exchange of ideas and opinions, and it offers materials, technology, programs, and services to support this goal. The Library seeks to offer a welcoming, inclusive environment while upholding the principles of freedom of speech and expression.

The content or manner of expressing ideas in material, programs or other activities that are purposely selected to fill the needs of some Library customers may, on occasion, be considered offensive by other Library customers. The Library recognizes the right of any individual or group to reject library material, programs and other activities for personal use but does not accord to any individual or group the right to restrict the freedom of others to make use of that same material, programs or activities."

Intellectual freedom challenges are dealt with in the context of the applicable policy governing the service area. TPL's current processes for handling requests for reconsideration are a public library best practice.

COMMENTS

Outside of the formal request for reconsideration process, public service staff respond to customer comments about collections and services via email and in person in accordance with the Library's [Customer Service Standards and Practices](#). Through policy, procedure, and practice, TPL demonstrates leadership and commitment to intellectual freedom as a fundamental principle in a democratic society and core value of public libraries. This commitment supports access to broad and diverse collections, promotes transparency in IF decision-making, and provides clear avenues for customers to share comments, compliments and feedback.

Intellectual freedom training for staff launched late 2024 and as of December 2025, seventy-five percent of staff have completed IF training at TPL.

Challenges to Library Material

The Library provides a process for members of the public to identify concerns about books and other material in the Library's collection. These customer objections are dealt with in the context of the [Materials Selection Policy](#) and the principles of intellectual freedom.

Library customers who object to materials located in the collection are asked to complete a written request for the reconsideration of the materials. Request forms are available for this purpose at all library branches.

The procedure for the reconsideration of library materials is intended to ensure that the concerns of the customer are dealt with in a timely manner and with sensitivity. Typically, objections are received at the branch level. Staff can then discuss the customer's concerns with them and provide a copy of the Materials Selection Policy. This discussion often satisfies the customer, and no further action is required. Customers wishing to pursue their challenge fill out a form detailing their concerns, which is sent to the Senior Manager, Collection Development, who forwards it to the Materials Review Committee for review and consideration. A letter of acknowledgement is sent to the customer explaining the process.

The Materials Review Committee is chaired by the Senior Manager, Collection Development and is comprised of a group of experienced public service librarians based on the subject of the challenge. These librarians have a mixture of expertise in adult, children's and teen materials in a variety of formats. Other subject matter experts, such as language specialists, may be called upon as needed. The Committee researches the disputed title by considering such elements as reviews, the author's reputation, coverage of the subject in the collection, its popularity, historical importance, etc. all within the context of the [Materials Selection Policy](#). The outcome of the review and decision about the item is communicated in writing by the Director, Collections & Membership Services. If customers wish to dispute the decision, they may appeal to the City Librarian where the final decision is made.

In 2025, there were four challenges to titles in the collection. All titles were retained. Details about the challenges and the actions taken by the Library are listed in Attachment 1.

Challenges to Library Programs

The Library provides a process for members of the public to identify concerns about Library programs. Challenges requesting the cancellation of programs are dealt with in the context of the [Programming Policy](#) and the principles of intellectual freedom.

Library customers who object to programs are asked to complete a written request for the reconsideration of the materials. Access to the digital request form is available upon request.

The procedure for the reconsideration of library programs is intended to ensure that the concerns of the customer are dealt with in a timely manner and with sensitivity. Typically, objections are received at the branch level. Staff can then discuss the customer's concerns with them and provide a copy of the Programming Policy. This discussion often satisfies the customer, and no further action is required. Customers wishing to pursue their challenge further fill out a form detailing their concerns, which is sent to the Chair and Vice Chair of the Programming Committee. A letter of acknowledgement is sent to the customer explaining the process.

The request is reviewed by the Chair and Vice Chair of the Programming Committee in consultation with program managers and staff confirming that all library program standards have been met during program development. The decision on whether to proceed with the program is communicated in writing by the Director, Service Development & Innovation, or the Director, Communications, Programming & Customer Engagement. If customers wish to dispute the decision, they may appeal to the City Librarian where the final decision is made.

In 2025, TPL received one formal challenge to programs. The program proceeded as scheduled.

Reporting Intellectual Freedom Challenges

To support continued leadership in Intellectual Freedom advocacy and awareness the Library reports its Intellectual Freedom Challenges, investigations and responses annually to the Centre for Free Expression's [Canadian Library Challenges Database](#). The database serves as a reference resource for other libraries investigating challenges as well as those researching challenges.

CONCLUSION

The volume of challenges received relative to the population served is low, reflecting the public's appreciation of the breadth of TPL's collection, the importance of public libraries in providing access to public space, programming and technology, and its understanding of the application of intellectual freedom in a library setting. Based on ongoing challenges in the wider library community TPL's focus on Intellectual Freedom advocacy and education continues to be a strategic priority.

CONTACT

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Challenges to Intellectual Freedom 2025 – Library Materials and Programs

Challenges to Intellectual Freedom 2025 – Library Materials and Programs

Date	Title/ Program	Summary of Customer Comments	Investigation and Response to RFR
November 2024	Billy and the Epic Escape / Jamie Oliver	Random House UK ceased selling the book because of concerns that it contained a damaging stereotype of First Nations people and experiences. An internal request for reconsideration was initiated due to the publisher's actions.	Completed an internal review and the committee recognized the Indigenous representation in the book is careless, but found it was not egregious to the point of recommending its withdrawal from the collection. As reinforced by TPL's Materials Selection Policy the library provides the widest possible range of resources. Item Retained
December 2024	Breathe: Journeys to Healthy Binding / Maia Kobabe	Customer requested that the book be withdrawn from the collection because they believe that it didn't fit with the diversity of resources protected by intellectual freedom and that the book could cause physical harm.	Responded to the customer referencing TPL's Materials Selection Policy, that the book was very well reviewed from reputable journals, and that customers can access a title, even when some may find it controversial as per TPL's Intellectual Freedom Statement. Item Retained
July 2025	Hamas: A Beginner's Guide / Khaleb Hroub	Customer requested that the book be withdrawn from the collection because they believe that it seeks to deny and distort the events of the October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, and that there are more accurate	Responded to the customer referencing TPL's Materials Selection Policy, and that while the book offers a perspective that is controversial, the library provides the widest possible range of resources and opinions. This allows customers to have greater context for complex issues.

		depictions of the events in other books.	Item Retained
August 2025	Voices of our Ancestors: Teachings from the Wisdom Fire / Dhyani Ywahoo	Customer requested that the book be classified as New Age instead of Indigenous because they believe that the author is falsely identified as Cherokee.	Responded to the customer referencing the library's labelling of Indigenous material guidelines, which includes adding a label when the author identifies as Indigenous. In the book the author states that she is a member of the traditional Ani Yun Wiwa and Etowah Band of the Eastern Tsaligi (Cherokee). Labelling Retained
August 2025	Drag Queen Storytime	Customer requested that the Library cease offering Drag Queen Storytime programs for children because they believe it normalizes destructive lifestyles.	Responded to the customer referencing TPL's Programming Policy and Intellectual Freedom and Equity Statements, explaining that the content or manner of expressing ideas in programs that is purposely selected to fill the needs of some Library customers, may be considered to be offensive by other Library customers. The Library recognizes the right of any individual to reject library programs for personal use but does not accord to any individual the right to restrict the freedom of others to attend that same program. Drag Queen Storytimes continue as scheduled

Full submissions, investigations and responses are available through the Centre for Free Expression - [Canadian Library Challenges Database](#)