

Bridging the Gap: My Experience with National Library Legislative Day 2018

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People use to remark that libraries are neutral spaces because we don't get involved in politics. Those days are long gone and now you will often hear it said that libraries are *not* neutral spaces. Neutrality implies that we are uninvolved in politics; that we do not hold positions. Yet, our own Library Bill of Rights is itself a position statement, validating that we as librarians agree to uphold certain principles.

The American Library Association (ALA) acknowledges eleven core values of librarianship: access, confidentiality/privacy, democracy, diversity, education/lifelong learning, intellectual freedom, the public good, preservation, professionalism, service, and social responsibility. Whether we like it or not, these values are political issues.

However, political does not mean partisan. In order to effectively advocate for our communities and our patrons we must take positions on library values, but taking positions on librarianship and therefore setting aside neutrality is not equivalent to participating in partisan politics. Our libraries' values might be political, but they are not automatically liberal or conservative in nature. No matter whether you are Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, or other, the value of libraries and the values libraries uphold are clear. This is why it is critical that librarians, like any other United States citizen, participate in our political process and share our values with our state and federal legislators; no matter which side of the aisle each of us reside on.

That's why I volunteered for the American Librarian Association (ALA) Policy Corps; and it's why I spent Tuesday, May 8th at our nation's capital speaking with Alaska's federal legislators along with three of my Alaskan colleagues: Patience Frederiksen, Alaska State Librarian; Mary Jo Joiner, Library Director of Kenai Public Library; and Katie Baxter, Kodiak resident and Alaska Library Association Legislative Committee member.

The ALA Policy Corps is a pilot program designed to take on-the-ground librarians from all types of libraries and geographical areas and develop policy experts who can speak to a variety of issues. This year, we attended a two-day training in March that involved a deep dive into ALA's main legislative priorities: Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) & Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funding; network neutrality; and e-rate and broadband connectivity. These issues span all types of libraries and are critical no matter where you live or what you do for libraries. In May, we reconvened in Washington, DC for National Library Legislative Day (NLLD) where we joined more than 450 other librarians and library advocates from around the country to speak with our legislators. Party politics were irrelevant. The only thing that mattered was that you lived or worked in the legislator's district and that you care about libraries.

The first day of NLLD is called briefing day. During this day, the ALA Washington Office staff pre-

pared us by reviewing ALA's legislative priorities, providing tips for how to talk to your legislators and their staff, giving us time to plan with the other librarians from our state, and engaging us with in depth Q&A from seasoned pros. ALA went over the things they wanted us to cover. First was IMLS & LSTA funding, which provides a large chunk of library funding to each state. Each state then matches the funds by 1/3, helping to stretch the federal dollar and ensuring state funding to libraries. Secondly, we discussed the reauthorization of the Museum and Library Services Act (MSLA), which comes up every five years. This year, the re-authorization expands the authority of IMLS to respond to use funds for emergency response when libraries are part of declared disaster areas. Finally, we talked about e-rate and the Tribal Connect Act; asking Congress to leave e-rate alone and support the Tribal Connect Act, which makes tribal libraries eligible for e-rate funding.

Day two was National Library Legislative Day itself, where each participant visits their Senators and Representatives. It's important that groups from larger states divide and conquer. Not only is it important to have a constituent in the room - some legislators will not schedule meetings without a member of their district being present - meetings are often about 15 minutes and including more than three or four people makes it difficult to ensure everyone has a chance to speak. Additionally, congressional offices are not large!

However, I'm from Alaska and in Alaska we only have one Representative. Therefore, as a member of the Alaska delegation, the other three Alaskans and I visited all three of our federal legislators. We were able to speak to different types of libraries (statewide, public, and school) and all had varying levels of experience with NLLD and advocacy in general.

Our NLLD coordinator, Patience Frederiksen, did a fabulous job of scheduling our appointments and creating one-page flyers for us to share. We began the day by visit Representative Young's office, where we met with his staff member in charge of libraries, Eleanor-Gray Mullen. In the afternoon, we visited with Senator Murkowski and her staff, Karen McCarthy. Our last appointment of the day was with Senator Sullivan and his staff, Joseph Hopp and Amanda Coyne. Although we had made our final appointment with a different staff member, this type of change is not uncommon.

One of the important messages we received during NLLD was about doing your research and tailoring your message to your legislator's priorities. We know that, as a former teacher, Congressman Young cares about education, that Senator Murkowski cares about equal access to services, and that Senator Sullivan focuses much of his attention on veterans and military families.

Therefore, during our 20 minutes in Congressman Young's office we explained how IMLS and e-rate funding are critical to Alaska's libraries, shared some of the programs and services they fund and I told a story of a student who overcame social anxiety to share her love of books with others during Battle of the Books. Our facts and statistics were important but the most impact we had was the sharing of personal stories about our libraries. We ended by asking the Representative to support funding for IMLS & LSTA, and sign the MSLA re-authorization bill, as well as the Tribal Connect Act when they appear in the House.

When we met at Sen. Murkowski's office we shared our message, but changed it slightly. From our

research, we knew that Senator Murkowski was an original co-sponsor of the Tribal Connect Act and is on the appropriations committee. She has a long-time history of supporting libraries. So, instead of just asking for her support, we asked that she reach out to her colleagues in the Senate and ask them to support library-related legislation. Katie Baxter shared a touching story of how one man used his public library service to go from unemployed to owning his own businesses; and because his children visited the library along with him when he went to find the next business form or use the broadband to get training, he developed lifelong library users in his children as well. Senator Murkowski shared her love of libraries with us, and particularly mentioned how she appreciated the books by mail service that ensures that Alaskans have access to books no matter where they are in the state.

For our last meeting in Sen. Sullivan's office we once again shared the same information, slightly tailoring our message. Since Senator Sullivan is an enormous supporter of our military veterans and their families, Mary Jo Joiner shared a story of how library services helped a veteran connect with important resources to adjust to life after deployment, get a new job, and get the mental health assistance that he needed. Senator Sullivan shared with us that he had recently talked with the FCC chairman about e-rate and net neutrality and was looking for a solution to get e-rate for our tribal libraries. He was pleased to hear about the Tribal Connect Act and agreed to look into it.

No matter what happens when it comes time for the vote, these meetings gave us a chance to connect with our legislators and their staff and form relationships that can grow over time. During these meetings, we used our opportunities not just to ask for support but to show the Congressman and Senators how libraries support their priorities.

This two-way exchange is not about playing politics; it's about messaging. Libraries are already supporting veterans, contributing to the local and state economy, ensuring equity by providing broadband and databases and ebooks and books by mail, and helping students develop academic and social skills. We already provide training and education and connect people to the other resources available to them. Our job during NLLD – and any advocacy opportunity – is to point out what we already do and how it aligns with the priorities of our policy and decision makers so that together we can work toward a shared goal.

It's a bit of a cliché, but I heard it said at the meeting several times: "If you aren't at the table, you're on the menu." The other way to think of this is no one can know what you want or what you need if you never tell them. I often hear people speak of advocacy like it's a dirty word. They are afraid that by speaking out and demonstrating what they need, they are implying that not everything is perfect. They are afraid that they will draw negative attention. Or perhaps they are afraid they don't have the skills necessary to be an effective advocate.

I'm here to tell you that none of that matters. Advocacy is necessary for libraries to communicate the amazing work we do every day and to tell our legislators what we need them to do; even if it's just maintaining the status quo. The great thing about advocacy is that anyone can do it. Our Senators and Congressmen and state legislators may seem imposing, but they are people just like you and I, and whether we agree with the way they go about it or not, they want what's best for our community. If we don't do this important work there is no way for them to know how libraries support economic devel-

opment, lifelong learning, and more. And it's not enough just to send a few people to National Library Legislative Day. One day is a beginning, but we are competing for their attention with all the other people with legitimate needs and concerns. We all must take a minute to advocate if, as a community, we want to be heard.