**Draft Revision**: Prisoners’ Right to Read: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

The American Library Association asserts a compelling public interest in the preservation of intellectual freedom for individuals of any age held in jails, public and private prisons, detention facilities, juvenile facilities, immigration facilities, prison work camps, and segregated units within any facility. Intellectual freedom principles should not be predicated upon ownership or management of these facilities. As Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote:

“When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor is his quest for self-realization concluded.  If anything, the needs for identity and self-respect are more compelling in the dehumanizing prison environment.”1

Participation in a democratic society requires unfettered access to current social, political, legal, economic, cultural, scientific, and religious information. Information and ideas available outside the prison are essential to prisoners for a successful transition to freedom. Learning to be a law-abiding citizen and thrive in a free society requires access to a wide range of knowledge. Suppression of ideas does not prepare the incarcerated of any age for life in a free society. Even those individuals that a lawful society chooses to imprison permanently deserve access to information, to literature, and to a window on the world.

Material that contains unpopular views or even repugnant content does not provide justification for censorship. Censorship is a process of exclusion by which authority rejects specific points of view. Unlike censorship, selection is a process of inclusion that involves the search for materials, regardless of format, that represent diversity and a broad spectrum of ideas. The correctional library collection should reflect the needs of its community.

Federal, state, or local laws; administrative rules; or court decisions may prohibit material that instructs, incites, or advocates criminal action or bodily harm or is a violation of the law. Only those items that present an actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security should be restricted. Although these limits restrict the range of material available, the extent of limitation should be minimized by adherence to the *Library Bill of Rights* and its interpretations.

These principles should guide all library services provided to prisoners:

* Collection management should be governed by written policy, mutually agreed upon by librarians and correctional agency administrators, in accordance with the *Library Bill of Rights*, its interpretations, and other ALA intellectual freedom documents.
* Correctional libraries should have written procedures for addressing challenges to library materials, including a policy-based description of the disqualifying features, in accordance with “[Challenged Resources: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/challenged-resources)”2 and other relevant intellectual freedom documents.
* Correctional librarians should select materials that reflect the demographic composition, information needs, interests, and diverse cultural values of the confined communities they serve.
* Correctional librarians should be allowed to acquire materials that meet written selection criteria and provide for the multi-faceted needs of their populations without prior correctional agency review. They should be allowed to select from a wide range of sources in order to ensure a broad and diverse collection. Correctional librarians should not be limited to acquisitions from a list of approved materials.
* Age is not a sufficient reason for censorship. Incarcerated children and youth should have access to a wide range of fiction and nonfiction, as stated in “[Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/access-library-resources-for-minors)."3
* Correctional librarians should make all reasonable efforts to provide sufficient materials to meet the information and recreational needs of prisoners who speak languages other than English.
* Equitable access to information should be provided for people with disabilities, as outlined in “[Services to People with Disabilities: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/servicespeopledisabilities)”4
* Media or materials with non-traditional bindings should not be prohibited unless they present an actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security.
* Material with sexual content should not be banned unless it violates state and federal law.
* Correctional libraries should provide access to computers and select internet content.
* All prisoners and detainees should have the same access to information, regardless of citizenship status.

When free people, through judicial procedure, segregate some of their own, they incur the responsibility to provide the incarcerated or detained humane treatment and essential rights. Among these is the right to read and to access information. The right to choose what to read is deeply important, and the suppression of ideas is fatal to a democratic society. The denial of intellectual freedom—the right to read, to write, and to think—diminishes the human spirit of those segregated from society.

1. *Procunier v Martinez*, 416 U.S. 428 (1974)
2. “[Challenged Resources: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/challenged-resources),” adopted June 25, 1971 by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; January 10, 1990; January 28, 2009, and July 1, 2014.
3. “[Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/access-library-resources-for-minors),” adopted June 30, 1972, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; July 3, 1991; June 30, 2004; July 2, 2008 under previous name "Free Access to Libraries for Minors"; and July 1, 2014.
4. “[Services to People with Disabilities: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/servicespeopledisabilities),” adopted January 28, 2009, by the ALA Council under the title "Services to Persons with Disabilities"; amended June 26, 2018.

Adopted June 29, 2010, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 2014; revisions proposed January 2019.