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How Santa Cruz Library deals with its 'problem patrons'

By CANDACE ATKINS

There is more to working in Santa Cruz City-County Public Libraries than helping preschoolers find books on fire engines and checking out stacks of romance novels and murder mysteries to gray-haired ladies.

Some people use foul language, insult employees and other patrons and threaten violence. Others bed down inside or outside the building, panhandle or simply smell terrible. Some are all of the above — and it is up to library staff to handle such troublesome situations.

Through the efforts of library administration, employees recently completed a training session on handling "problem patrons," and also have a thick handbook containing guidelines for dealing with everything from chatty visitors to sexual deviants. The action, according to library director Anne Turner, was to give staff a way to tell

disruptive people to stop their inappropriate behavior, and to explain library policy to that person. In addition, library regulations are now posted in several places in the buildings.

While some identify problem patrons as the street-people type who frequent the main Santa Cruz branch, Turner said every library in the system has trouble.

"Not all of it (handbook) relates to what some people perceive as 'bums' (at the Santa Cruz main library)," she said. "The manual gives the staff specific coping techniques."

Staff are taught through the manual, to confront with a firm, but pleasant attitude, those who bring animals (other than guide dogs) into the library, parents who leave their young children alone in the building, teen gangs, bizarre behavior and drunkenness. Repeatedly, staff are told to remain calm, but insist in a low voice, that the

patron change his or her behavior.

"Problem behavior," the handbook reads, "can range from the pitiful to the eccentric to the dangerous." Staff are urged to use common sense, not to touch or physically corner anyone, and when necessary, to call the police for help.

Although Turner said Santa Cruz system has no greater problems than any other library across the country, difficult situations involving patrons and staff or other people are expected to increase, due possibly to people reacting to a bad economy, mental patients released to the care of their own "community" and suspected increase in the use of drugs and alcohol. The training and handbook are to provide staff with a humane but uncompromising method to handle problems, not, said Turner, "to turn libraries into a 'shhh' atmosphere."

"This problem has been around in large

cities for a long time, it's nothing new," said Turner. "It has spread (in recent years) to libraries where people weren't expecting it."

Turner was quick to point out that people, regardless of whether they pay taxes or even own a library card, have a constitutional right to use the library, even if it is to nap or get out of bad weather.

"We are a free public library," she said. "There is nothing in the United States Constitution that says you cannot have the right to go into a library just because you don't pay taxes. Everybody has a right to use the library, but nobody has the right to interfere with another person's use of the library."

Turner said it is important to look objectively at people, rather than aesthetically, and to really decide if a person is interfering with the rights of others or if he or she is simply unattractive.