March 27, 2023

Members of the Board of Trustees
The Greenville County Library System
25 Heritage Green Place
Greenville SC 29601

To the Members of the Board of Trustees of the Greenville County Library System:

The robust exchange of ideas and opinions is fundamental to a healthy democracy. Providing free, unfettered access to those ideas and opinions is an essential characteristic of public libraries in the United States. Libraries celebrate and preserve our democracy and our civil society by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions, and ideas, so that all individuals, young and old, have the opportunity to learn about and engage with a broad range of diverse topics and ideas.

Because public libraries are welcoming and inclusive institutions that serve everyone in the community, libraries have a particular responsibility to avoid bias and ensure that their materials and programs represent diverse views and encompass all topics of interest. There should be no limiting qualifiers on resources or programming based on perceived controversy.

For this reason, we write to express our deep concern regarding recent activities imposing discriminatory restrictions on programming, displays, and access to materials that pertain to LGBTQIA+ community members, or which have LGBTQIA+ characters or authors. The recent decision to amend the collection development policy to move all LGBTQIA+ materials from the juvenile and young adult sections into the adult section of the library, regardless of their intended audience of readers, is alarming. These actions limit the community's access to materials simply because some in the community would not choose those books for themselves or their children, based on their personal values.

But those who object to certain materials for themselves or their children should not be given the power to deny access to materials and programming in the public library that serves the information needs of other members of your community. Not only does this deny other families the right to find and choose books and programming, it also unfairly stigmatizes the interests and concerns of many of the families and young persons who want to read and learn more about the lives and experiences of LGBTQIA persons and their concerns.

Librarians and library staff take their responsibilities to their communities seriously. They are dedicated to developing collections and resources for young persons that allow a child to see themselves and their families reflected in the library's materials and provide a means to understand themselves and the world around them.

We believe that parents know their children best. We fully support the right of every parent to guide their children's reading, and always encourage parents and children to talk together about the materials that they are reading. We do not believe, however, that a parent's right to guide their child's reading includes a right to restrict what other children read or limit the materials and programs available to other families in the community.
An additional concern is the library's responsibility to uphold the First Amendment’s promise of freedom of speech, freedom of belief, and the freedom to read. Library policies and procedures that effectively deny families, children and youth equal and equitable access to library resources intended for their use can raise significant First Amendment concerns.

This is not an abstract statement of principle. In Sund v. City of Wichita Falls, Texas, 121 F. Supp. 2d 530 (N.D. Texas 2000), a federal district court held that a city council’s decision to place two LGBTQ-themed children’s books, Heather Has Two Mommies and Daddy’s Roommate, on a restricted shelf in the adult area of the city’s library violated both adults’ and minors’ First Amendment right to receive information in the library. It further ruled that removing books from the children's area of the library to the adult section because of a citizen group’s disapproval of the ideas and themes contained in the books was both content and viewpoint discrimination that violated all library users’ First Amendment rights, including the right of minors to find books meant for young people in the children’s area of the library.

The public library, a shared community resource, should provide books and programming to support each community member’s individual pursuits and should not place a greater value on one library user’s needs or preferences over another’s. The public library recognizes each reader’s First Amendment freedom to read and upholds the right of the individual to access a wide range of information and ideas, even though the content may be controversial, unorthodox, or unacceptable to others.

The staff of the Greenville library system should have the flexibility and means to obtain materials and create programs that represent a full range of viewpoints and serve the interests and information needs of all members of Greenville’s community, without regard to complaints, public pressure, or fear of criticism. We strongly encourage you to reconsider your recent decisions regarding shelving and programming that place barriers between readers and the books they want to read.

We want to extend our full support to the library directors and staff who have worked to provide a diverse range of materials and programming to meet the information needs of everyone in your community without shying away from potentially controversial topics or views. By empowering your directors and staff to acquire, plan, and provide diverse materials and programs, you send a powerful message: in the United States, everyone has a place at the library.

Sincerely and Respectfully,

Deborah Caldwell Stone
Director, Office for Intellectual Freedom
American Library Association