

Library book ban attempts are at an all-time high. These librarians are fighting back

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Americans last year challenged more book titles than ever before, according to a new report by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

More than 4,000 unique titles were challenged in public libraries and school libraries in 2023, the most the group has recorded since it began tracking censorship efforts.

Much of that increase came from groups or individuals trying to censor dozens or hundreds of titles at a time, the organization said. It's part of a conservative push across the country to ban certain books based on the claim that they are inappropriate for children. Many of the books were about or written by LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

"The rhetoric about book banning right now is built around this falsehood that books touching on sex or gender identity, sexual orientation, or deal with what's called critical race theory are legally harmful to minors," said Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom.

WATCH MORE: Judy Blume describes latest wave of book bans and censorship as 'disgusting' and 'fascist'

Librarians are often caught in the middle of these campaigns and state legislative attempts to censor library materials. They've faced criminalization and harassment and in some cases have been fired after refusing to move or remove books.

"I'm not going to let them do this to our library"

Suzette Baker lost her job as a librarian in Llano County, Texas, after refusing to put a third edition of *Critical Race Theory* behind the counter where patrons couldn't find it unless they asked for it.

"Libraries are neutral space. And they should be protected as that neutral space. There's no protections for them," she said. "We need a free library, a library of everything, a library that reflects the good, the bad and the ugly."

She is among the librarians across the country fighting censorship and trying to engage their communities.

The PBS NewsHour spoke to six librarians about what they've experienced:

Lawsuits

Baker said when she was asked to put the critical race theory book behind the counter, “I spoke out and said, this is censorship, we can’t do this, this is not right. And I was subsequently fired.”

Baker is now suing Llano County, county commissioners and community activists appointed to the library board. Her lawsuit claims that she was fired in order for the defendants to discriminate against protected groups, like those who identify as LGBTQ+, as well as suppressed her First Amendment rights.



Suzette Baker was given a list of books to take off the shelves of Kingsland Library in Llano County. Baker refused, and she was fired. Photo by Lauren Witte/The Texas Tribune

“This was never about the books. This was never about protecting people,” Baker said. “The books that they gave me to get rid of were books on racism. They were books on transgender and sexual orientation and questioning for teens.”

She joins several other librarians who have sued their former employers after being fired following book challenges and concerted efforts from the community to remove or move books they find offensive.

Brooky Parks in Colorado won a \$250,000 settlement with her former employer, High Plains Library District, following a civil rights dispute she filed after being fired in 2021. Her firing came after she organized anti-racist and LGBTQ+ programs for teens.

“Teens need those programs,” she told the NewsHour through tears. “If it costs me losing my job or even losing my house, it’s worth standing up for and fighting for. And I know at the end of the day, I will be able to lay my head down and sleep at night.”



Brooky Parks poses for a portrait at office of Rathod Mohamedbhai LLC in Denver, Colorado on Thursday, February 3, 2022. Photo by Hyoung Chang/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post via Getty Images

[READ MORE: Book ban attempts soared in 2022. Here are the 13 most targeted titles](#)

Terri Lesley, a library director in Wyoming with more than 20 years of experience, said she endured attacks on her professional judgment from her community in the two years of book challenges that

preceded her firing. Lesley filed a charge of discrimination against the county commissioners who voted to remove her. Her filing says she was “relentlessly harassed...for opposing discriminatory practices” in her association with LGBTQ+ minorities.

In public meetings, she pointed to the widely-used collection development policy that helps guide libraries on how to select and evaluate books. Lesley said she “invited people who did not like the books that we had to go through our challenge process.”

In just a few months, more than 50 challenges flooded in.

“I never had a challenge hit my desk until this [conservative movement] started,” Lesley said. “And then when they came, they came fast.”

The books challenged generally covered sex education and LGBTQ+ identity issues, she said.

Caldwell-Stone with the ALA says there are exceptions for legally obscene material, but most books being challenged are not considered legally obscene and are “protected speech.”

[READ MORE: How many book bans were attempted in your state? Use this map to find out](#)



Taking to politics

Patty Hector was fired from the Saline County library in Arkansas after speaking out against a push from a local conservative group to remove books. That same group organized a billboard campaign against Hector.

Now, she’s running for justice of the peace on the Saline County Quorum Court, which controls library funding. “I’m not going to let them do this to our library,” Hector said. “And we will fight them tooth and nail if they try to take their funding away.”

(Photo courtesy Patty Hector) Caldwell-Stone said political offices and voters can have an “enormous” impact on how libraries operate. In some states, governing boards or voters themselves have withheld funding over debates about book bans and library policies. Politicians, in some cases, can also appoint people to library boards with specific agendas around library materials instead of interest in “operating the library as a community resource,” Caldwell-Stone added.

Community outreach

Librarians typically view their role as politically neutral, Baker said.

“A librarian is like Switzerland,” Baker in Texas said. “They can’t show their favoritism.”

In her lawsuit, Baker said the library system director told her and other librarians they were “prohibited” from attending public meetings. Caldwell-Stone said arguments made by people seeking these bans in public forums often lack context, which is crucial when legally determining if a published work is obscene and therefore should be removed from library shelves.

“People would show up at board meetings, read spicy excerpts from books, and there would be no countervailing voice to point out that that was one paragraph in a 300 page, you know, award-winning novel,” she said.

“The entire community is going to have to come together with the librarians in order to stop this”

Many librarians interviewed by the NewsHour said they knew other librarians who were scared to speak out publicly for fear of retribution.

“The mental damage is done, the trauma is there,” said Becky Calzada, a library coordinator for a large central Texas school district. “I truly believe that’s what keeps many librarians from speaking up.”

Calzada dealt with book challenges to her school libraries in early 2021 when a parent’s speech at a school board meeting asking to remove a book that included a sex toy went viral.

Calzada said there was “a lot of push from the community” on getting books they felt were inappropriate out “with a quick urgency,” rather than going through official channels.

Calzada co-founded FReadom Fighters, a group of librarians that advocate in support of intellectual freedom. Her aim is to educate lawmakers about how librarians curate a collection.



Karla Hernandez-Mats, president of United Teachers of Dade, center, leads in chanting slogans against book banning as marchers arrive at Books and Books in hope of bringing awareness to Florida’s book banning, on Sunday, Oct. 1, 2023. (Carl Juste/Miami Herald/Tribune News Service via Getty Images)

“Much of the work that I’ve been doing is really behind the scenes,” she said.

Lisa Varga, Virginia Library Association director, is active in public meetings in her community of Virginia Beach.

“I just feel as though I’ve been doing my job, which is to speak up and speak out against this injustice,” she said.

She presented an invoice of \$7 million to the Virginia Beach School Board, saying the cost of reconsidering hundreds of books, via challenges filed by community members, would amount to that much staff time.

“Instead of simply saying, let’s have a conversation with the librarian about this book, you’re immediately jumping over their head and going into this process,” Varga said.

She also speaks at conferences to help other librarians prepare for and defend libraries against similar attempts to ban books.

Brooky Parks, who was fired, said groups who support their libraries should stand together.

“Librarians need to stand up, but if our community doesn’t stand up behind us, one person can’t make this change,” Parks said. “The entire community is going to have to come together with the librarians in order to stop this.”