

## Case Study 5: Keeping a Close Eye on a Policy Violator—Is There a Better Approach?

### SCENARIO:

A teen in the library came to the attention of library staff because he was suspected of smoking in the restroom. The staff kept a close eye on this teen and the branch head noticed that sometimes he came into the library carrying several bags and a blanket. One day the teen sat at a computer for hours, with several bags at his feet, and occasionally dozed off. All the time the staff kept close watch on this person to try to catch him smoking in the restroom. The branch head began to suspect that the teen was not living with family and may have been couch surfing, but unsure how to approach the issue. Finally, the teen was caught smoking in the restroom and was told he would be asked to leave the library if it happened again. The teen has yet to return to the library.

### RESPONSE:

As I read this scenario, I can't help but feel this was a missed opportunity for the staff. It is, first of all, good to know that the patron was on staff members' radars, but I wonder about the motives of that attention. He was already suspected of smoking in the restroom, and it seems like staff was waiting around so that they could "bust him," which is what ended up happening.

So what could have been an alternative scenario? Let's review a possibility using the ASSESS-ENGAGE-FOLLOW-UP model:

### **ASSESS:**

- **What is going on here?**

It appears that we have an unhoused teen here, given his "several bags and a blanket" and his "dozing off" behavior. Assuming his behavior (besides the smoking in the bathroom) had not violated any library policy, engagement on some level is in order. But under what pretense? And how best to go about that? As it stands, there are no mental health issues that seem to be of concern, although it is difficult to know without that engagement.

- **What is my role? Who else can/should help?**

It is a good idea to get the branch manager involved in that engagement, but not a necessity. Regardless of who it is, it seems like someone should have engaged with the patron. First of all, though, it would be instructive to have a resource list of local shelters at librarians' disposal. It might also be a good plan to alert security or some other staff member in case the engagement did not go well, but all that work should be "under the radar" of the patron.

- **What space is the encounter occupying?**

It appears that the patron in question here is occupying prime "computer" space. Is there a policy violation going on here? Is he taking more time at the computer than allowed? If so, that is the reason for engagement. If not, there is an opportunity to use his being at the computer as the reason for engagement.

## **ENGAGE:**

- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm verbal communication?**

As with all patron encounters, it is important that the staff member who decides to engage do so in the right frame of mind. The first of the five tips for nonjudgmental listening from [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://mentalhealthfirstaid.org) shared in the presentation is “Reflect on your own state of mind.” If you approach this patron in an accusing manner or with the intention of getting him to admit that he was smoking in the bathroom, it will not likely go well. If you approach him, on the other hand, like every other encounter—i.e., as someone who needs assistance—the outcome might be better. The second [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](http://mentalhealthfirstaid.org) tip for nonjudgmental listening is “Adopt an attitude of acceptance, genuineness, and empathy.” Getting past the frustration you may be feeling at a patron who is trying to “pull one over on you” is key here. He is using the computer. For what purpose? Can this be an opportunity for you to ask if he needs any assistance with resources, saying, “I notice you have been at the computer a lot today. Do you need any help finding anything?” Introducing yourself by name seems appropriate. What about asking his name? Sometimes all it takes is an opener like this one, well within your role as a reference librarian, to begin to build the relationship and do further assessment about the patron’s needs.

What if there is no engagement from him in response to your question? The scenario states that the branch manager was unsure how to bring up the issue of his being unhoused. Is it appropriate to offer the shelter resources at your disposal anyway? Should you treat the encounter like any other and say, “Okay. Great. Just let me know if you need anything. I will be right over there.” The answer to this question is based on the teen’s response, both verbal and nonverbal. If there is no room for further conversation, know that you have begun a dialogue that can continue, especially if you introduce yourself and ask his name as well. Allow time and space for a patron relationship to develop, especially since it appears that this individual will return to the library at some point.

- **How do I respond with calm, welcoming, yet firm nonverbal communication?**

Assessing your nonverbal communication is key here. The literature tells us assuming a relaxed and alert stance off to the side of the patron will disable any sense that you are coming across as an authority. Sitting next to him, if possible, seems entirely appropriate.

- **How do I keep myself safe?**

Safety should always be on your mind in any encounter. Having the conversation in the space he is occupying, as opposed to asking him to come to you, seems wise. As always, as mentioned above, letting other staff members (including security personnel if they are available) know about your intention to engage with this patron isn’t a bad idea.

## **FOLLOW-UP:**

- **How can I ensure that the problem is resolved?**

Let’s assume for a moment that the patron in question here returns the next day and you happen to be working. Saying hi to him seems entirely appropriate. The follow-up here, in other words, is continuing to build on the opening conversation you had. Calling him by name and asking, “How are you doing today?” is all that is needed here. Eventually, there might be an opener to delve into something deeper: “I notice that you have bags and a blanket. Are you staying somewhere nearby?” The point is to try to cut off the suspected behavior (smoking in the restroom) before it happens, rather than set the patron up for a policy violation that you deal with after the fact.

- **How can I debrief/take care of myself after the encounter?**

The value of enlisting other staff members to assist you, or at least know your intentions in engagement, is that you have someone to debrief with, if necessary. I would recommend that you make the initiative to engage these staff members about the encounter in the manner of giving them an update, rather than waiting for them to approach you. In the end, we have to be the ones to advocate for our own self-care in the workplace.