

WHY DOES THE LIBRARY DO THAT?

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Periodically patrons will inquire as to why we have certain policies that they find inconvenient or annoying. These are policies that were developed in order to comply with the Library Privacy Act (Michigan Compiled Laws, Chapter 397, Sections 601-606). Section 603 of the Act says that we cannot disclose anything from the record of one individual to another individual without a court order or written consent of the person whose record is being requested.

One of the policies that gets questioned on a regular basis is why we will not give out any patron information over the telephone unless the caller has their library card number. Michigan law prohibits us from disclosing information about one patron to another, so we have adopted this policy to prevent, as much as possible, one person from finding out information about another. To put this in perspective let me give you an example. From the group of people I work with I know enough about a dozen of them to pretend to be them over the telephone. So, if the library did not have this policy I could call in and say that I am Mr. Smith and I live at 123 Main Street here in Mt. Pleasant and I would like to know what I have checked out. The circulation clerk would look at Mr. Smith's record and tell me that he has The Mayo Clinic on Prostate Health, File Your Own Divorce, and the romance novel Savage Heat checked out. Already I have discovered stuff about Mr. Smith that he may not want me to know, but I decide to push further and ask if my (Mr. Smith's) daughter, Sally, has anything still out on her card. The clerk looks up her account and tells me that she has All about Horses, From Foal to Horse, and H is for Horse checked out. This all seems innocent enough, but in the event that I was a pedophile this would be good information for me to develop a rapport with Sally. By requiring patrons to have the unique number that we issued to them at the time

they applied for a card, we are minimizing the possibility of something like this happening.

The second policy we get questioned about on a regular basis is why a husband and wife cannot be told about what the other spouse has on hold or checked out on their card. This is also because of the Library Privacy Act. But it is easy to see why this is a good idea. I can illustrate this with another example. Mrs. Smith has been married to Mr. Smith for 2 years. As it turns out, Mr. Smith is an abusive husband. Mrs. Smith would like to leave him, but is too embarrassed to ask friends or family how to go about it, so she comes to the library and checks out Getting Free: You Can End Abuse and Take Back Your Life and The Michigan Divorce Book. She keeps these in her desk at work to read during her lunch breaks so her husband does not find out. Mr. Smith comes into the library to return some DVDs that he had checked out on his card and also some CDs that Mrs. Smith had checked out. When he comes back to the desk after picking out some new DVDs to take home he tells the clerk that he also had returned some CDs for his wife and asks if there is anything else she has out so he can make sure nothing comes back late. The clerk tells him that she still has the two books checked out. He returns home angry and beats his wife.

Both of these are extreme examples, but they do illustrate how the Library Privacy Act and our circulation policies are there for the protection of the rights and safety of individuals. The library adopts circulation policies in order to comply with State law, protect the library's collections, and to encourage equitable access for all patrons.