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Orland Park library reviewing porn policy

Orland Park checking IDs of computer users, but says Web content protected

November 11, 2013|By Taylor W. Anderson, Chicago Tribune reporter



Some area libraries forbid viewing pornography on computers, but Orland Park allows access to any legal material. (Taylor W. Anderson, Chicago Tribune)

A suburban library is altering its computer procedures while it reviews a controversial policy that allows adult patrons to view pornography.

The Orland Park Public Library will now check identification of anyone accessing computers in the adult section, said library spokeswoman Bridget Bittman. Before the new measure, users could sign onto the 18-years-and-older computers with only their library card information.

The library hasn't changed its policy that allows adults access to any legal material, including pornography.

The new measure was put in place after the library's policy came under fire last month at a board meeting, when two patrons confronted officials about the Internet policy. One of the patrons later posted a video of the meeting online that has been viewed by thousands.

The library board at a special budgetary session last week reiterated its stance behind its computer policy, which it says upholds First Amendment rights to free speech. The library is still reviewing its policies, Bittman said.

"I believe they realize that if something is going to be changed, they should do it in short order rather than over a period of time," Bittman said.

At the contentious Oct. 21 board meeting in Orland Park, patrons complained that the library's Internet policies weren't in line with those of public libraries in surrounding communities.

The Tribune reported last week that there is no consensus among Chicago-area libraries on Internet policy. Public libraries in nearby Mokena, Tinley Park, Frankfort and Lockport forbid viewing pornography on library computers. Libraries in Arlington Heights, Evanston and the Chicago Public Library have Internet policies similar to those in Orland Park.

"One of the more difficult things ... is when you talk to people about filtering and pornography in libraries and you try to explain to them that porn is legally protected speech," said Emily Knox, an assistant professor at the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

In recent weeks, Bittman said the library has received calls from patrons who support and oppose the policy.

Some library users have expressed their feelings in person. Recently, two women who came to the library to become members got upset when someone approached them outside and handed them a flier citing "sex crimes in the library."

"They came back in with the flier, slammed it on our circulation desk and said, 'I will never come here again,'" Bittman said.

Orland Park police are investigating an Oct. 31 incident in which a patron told library staff she saw a man in the computer area masturbating. The library called police, who spoke with the man and determined the report was unfounded, according to police reports.

Orland Park police Cmdr. John Keating said that case "is still pending investigation" because officers were unable to get the name or identification of the woman who made the claim.

Documents obtained by the Tribune through a Freedom of Information request show that in the last 12 years the library filed three internal reports based on complaints about patrons who were accessing pornographic sites, including the unfounded Oct. 31 complaint and another grievance involving a man allegedly viewing child pornography on a computer in 2011.

The man denied the claim when library staff questioned him at the time, saying the image was a pop-up advertisement, according to the library's report. Police are investigating.

Another report claimed a young boy in 2002 was found viewing pornography on a computer in the library's primary room. The boy was not supposed to be allowed on the computer without permission and was issued a warning. Staff also told the boy's mother.

The library is expecting a big crowd at its Nov. 18 board meeting, when officials likely will address its policy, Bittman said.

Orland Park resident Polly Pellicer-Steel said she's considering pushing for a new policy that bans pornography from all library computers.

"Do you think that's not the first place someone with ill intent is going to go now that the library is more or less opening the door for them?" asked Pellicer-Steel. "Not all people that watch porn are bad, but you're going to have the predators."

Bittman said patrons are encouraged to report to staff if someone is accessing material that offends them.

"No. 1 on our list is to keep our kids safe," Bittman said. "I don't know how else to put it."