

CENSORSHIP?

Anoka County told libraries not to use Pride or Black Lives Matter in June messaging. County claims it's being neutral, but some library employees see a troubling pattern.

By Emilee Wentland
Staff Writer

Anoka County is being accused of censorship after a memo to library staff prohibited public messaging around Pride or Black Lives Matter in June.

Anoka County Library communications manager Erin Straszewski sent the memo to employees May 26 regarding public messaging options and displays.

"County guidance is that we will not have public messaging around Pride and Black Lives Matter month," Straszewski's memo said. "If you would like to do a display celebrating diversity in our community in honor of one or both of these themes, you may do so through a lens celebrating diversity on a broader spectrum."

June is widely recognized as Pride month to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and commemorate the Stonewall riots of 1969. The month is also considered Black Lives Matter month, in remembrance of Black people who have been killed by members of law enforcement.

It was not clear who at the county gave the direction referred to in the memo, and a county spokesperson did not respond to a follow-up question seeking clarification.

The memo says appropriate messaging could include June being Great Outdoors Month, National Camping Month and Audiobook Appreciation Month.

Josiah Cox, a county library employee, posted the memo to Facebook June 14, saying "the choice to exclude these groups amounts to targeted disenfranchisement."

Cox, who is speaking as a resident of Anoka County and not on behalf of the library system, told ABC Newspapers the message made him feel



Anoka County Library staff received a memo in late May saying not to use any Pride or Black Lives Matter messaging in their public displays. File photo

"othered." As someone who is bisexual, he said the LGBTQ+ community's representation isn't valued by the county he serves.

He called the memo "anti-library."

"I do not believe that the library itself ... is communications for the county," Cox said. "I believe it's a public resource for information. ... It's about sharing ideas with the community and having them available, no matter what the topic is."

Library associate Liza Shafto said any public library should feature information on the communities they serve.

"Our display spaces have been used to highlight topics that are of interest to our patrons and the communities," Shafto said in an email. "When I am told that I can't make these displays it's as if I am not allowed do an important part of my job."

When she saw the May 26 memo, she thought the county was saying the library should serve as a means of marketing for the county.

"As a library professional I feel dismissed," Shafto said.

In a statement about the controversy, the county maintained the library system is inclusive of everybody, regardless of background or political beliefs.

"Part of being welcom-

ing to everyone is providing an environment that is neutral and safe," the statement reads. "As a branch of county government, the Anoka County Library does not promote certain groups of people over others, whether it be in terms of race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political beliefs or other aspects."

The statement goes on to say that the county wants to promote diversity in a more general, wide-ranging sense rather than promoting two specific groups — the LGBTQ+ and Black communities.

"Those who walk through the doors of Anoka County Library buildings, browse online offerings, or interact with Library staff are able to access many Library resources that can broaden their perspectives," the statement reads. Therefore, the county aims to provide "comprehensive and diverse" information to county residents to make library system "an integral resource to patrons."

Cox said removing messaging surrounding two specific groups because it's "too political" for some is no longer neutrality.

And to not allow displays surrounding Pride month is not welcoming, Cox said.

"To say, 'But you're still welcome here, you're

still part of this, but we're not going to celebrate you, we're not going to allow that to be relevant to your experience,' that is targeted disenfranchisement," Cox said. "They chose to, in the guise of celebrating diversity, betray that message itself. ... They need to do better."

Commissioner Mandy Meisner wrote on Facebook that ignoring the comments in the memo is not an option. She believes the County Board should discuss the issue, because the board gives direction to the county administrator, who gives direction to the library staff.

"To my knowledge, the full board has never discussed what words, history or events are allowed for our Libraries to use," Meisner wrote.

Not the first time

Cox has worked for the Anoka County Library System for more than four years as a library services assistant.

He said there's a history of similar censorship, particularly when highlighting marginalized groups through messaging some might consider political. For instance, library staff were told to not use the phrasing "stop Asian hate" and replace it with a more generalized message that diversity is beautiful, Cox said.

Last year after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, a library had a display with the message "Black stories matter," with books from Black authors.

Library employee Mai Houa Thao created the display to provoke discussion, Thao said. She asked permission to create the display, knowing it could be seen as political. After some hesitation, her branch manager approved.

After less than a day, the library had to remove the wording "Black stories matter," but staff kept the rest of the display up.

Cox didn't see the "Black stories matter" message as political or controversial, but instead as a means of celebrating Black authors and their stories.

"Black authors matter and should be represented, especially in Anoka County," Cox said.

Thao said minority groups deserve to be represented at the library, because libraries are meant to welcome and inform.

"It's a good way to educate those who aren't familiar with these groups, just to shine a light on these groups and give others the opportunity to learn a little bit more about their neighbors, their communities and this world we live in that is so diverse," Thao said.

The libraries have put up displays for Black History Month and Women's History Month in February and March respectively, Cox recalled.

A county library employee of four years who wished to remain anonymous said censorship from the county extends to social media as well.

"It's not isolated events," she said. "It's a systemic problem."

In 2019, the woman suggested the library make a social media post about a book called "Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota" by Stewart Van Cleve. Shortly after publishing, the post was deleted, she said.

She was told that a library board member was upset by the post, and that's why it was taken down.

"There's no documentation or even acknowledgment that it had happened, which is really frustrating," she said.

That same year, a library board member resigned in protest to a county library employee doing a TV interview during a Pride festival. The employee was at a Metropolitan Library Ser-

vice Agency booth.

"That was not actually publicized," she said. "That was kind of like, 'if you know, you know,' and kept hush hush."

After the May 26 memo went out, the library system did get approval from the county to have displays focusing on LGBTQ+ topics and the Black community, Cox said, as long as they don't include the words Pride or Black Lives Matter.

Taking action

Cox, along with other Facebook users, called for action from the County Board and administration. He wants residents to contact their board representatives.

Ultimately, he wants to see the County Board create policies that he believes better align with a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Thao said she wants county administration, the County Board and the Library Board, to learn more about librarianship and how library staff operate.

"It's frustrating that the people on top keep telling us, 'Oh, this is not censorship,' when it is censorship, if they just don't know what we do," Thao said. "I would like them to actually come into the library — not just for a tour, but actually come in, see what we do, learn about what we do, why we do what we do."

Cox said he isn't trying to cast blame on anyone specifically, saying Straszewski was simply performing her job and passing on information she received.

"I would hope that [county administration] reflect on this," Cox said. "I would just want the county admin to work with the board on defining their policies — as they are local government — to be respectful of the library."

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