



south carolina
STATE LIBRARY

Leesa M. Aiken
Agency Director

August 21, 2023

Tracie D. Hall, Executive Director
American Library Association
225 N. Michigan Avenue, Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60601

Dear Executive Director Hall,

It is after much contemplation and with great disappointment that I write this letter to inform you that the South Carolina State Library will not be renewing our institutional membership with the American Library Association (ALA). We are a longstanding member of ALA and continue to support the foundational goals of ALA which include the Freedom to Read, Intellectual Freedom, ALA's Code of Ethics, and associated principles. Those principles are in part, connected with my decision not to renew our membership.

As a membership organization, it should be the goal of ALA to represent the diversity of the membership and develop a deep understanding of issues facing libraries. ALA's hyper-focus on groups of people at the exclusion of others has been problematic for libraries and has hindered their ability to engage with all members of their communities and government representatives.

ALA has become a distractor from the core mission of serving all people and has failed to develop an understanding of differences in geographic areas. Guidance which has been provided by ALA concerning book bans, and handling difficult situations locally have quite frankly been tone-deaf and show a lack of understanding of what is happening in the field. ALA's statement that it "... is a non-partisan, non-profit membership organization that develops, promotes, and improves library and information for all" does not ring true in the current climate. ALA's actions appear to be activism for certain groups of people and not advocacy for libraries and all of the people they serve. To be clear, the South Carolina State Library was the first State Library to have a Library Development Consultant focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion – we fully believe the library is for everyone and should be a space for all members of the community.

My concerns with ALA began several years ago when ALA discontinued the coordination of events and meetings associated with National Legislative Day, which had previously been one of the greatest benefits to states. The following year, certain "key" States were invited to participate in a Legislative Day fly-in, coordination of this event was clearly made with extremely limited knowledge by those in charge of planning. In the third year, people were arbitrarily invited from South Carolina without any notification or coordination with the State Library. This lack of action in organizing a national gathering has hurt libraries, and not helped in obtaining additional funding.

The latest publication by ALA, claiming credit for an increase in federal dollars to states lacks substance and data, and further demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding the relationships that each State Library, local library, school library, etc. has with Members of Congress. Further, the publication from ALA related to an increase in South Carolina's funding is not only inaccurate and slanted, but it is also short-sighted. For the last four years when I have presented my State budget, I have spent at least 1/3 of my time answering questions about the actions of ALA and have been unable to focus on my actual budget requests and the amazing work that libraries are doing in South Carolina. ALA has been a significant distractor from funding in my State and I find the suggestion otherwise insulting.

Finally, the advice and action of some individuals associated with ALA for librarians to sneak materials into libraries and book their meeting rooms to avoid usage of certain groups of people is not only unprofessional, it goes against the basic principle that libraries are for everyone. Better advice to librarians in the field would be related to creating a balanced collection, developing policies that clearly outline who can reserve meeting spaces at the library, and dealing with opposing viewpoints. Libraries should be fully operating in the open to provide services to all people without a need for the above-mentioned antics.

Your organization, the national organization for libraries, has a professional obligation to provide resources that can be utilized by libraries and librarians to serve their patrons. While this can be challenging, it is possible with inclusion and diversity. My hope is that this letter, the loss of membership, and the additional voices of my colleagues in the field will create reflection and action within ALA to be guided by the mission "to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all."

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Leesa M. Aiken". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Leesa M. Aiken

Agency Director