

Alameda County Library Collection Philosophy: The Living Library

Alameda County Library strives to build vibrant and vital collections to meet the information needs of its communities. To maintain the most useful collections, the library employs a philosophy called the “Living Library”—a careful balance of new and classic titles, coupled with thoughtful refreshment of outdated materials. This approach serves the changing role of public libraries today by creating collections that are relevant, flexible, and responsive to community needs.

The library collection’s ‘life cycle’ includes many stages and processes: selection, acquisitions, processing & cataloging, shelving, circulation, re-shelving, maintenance, weeding, and replacement. All materials must be managed and evaluated in this continual process. Library materials have a ‘life expectancy’ based on their use, condition, and relevance. With limited space, public libraries like Alameda County Library must support current, wide-ranging selections for all ages in varied communities. Consequently, the life expectancy of an item is often less than it would be in another type of library, such as a historical archive or an academic library.

In the Living Library approach, it is important to cultivate attractive shelves and spaces for all ages. Overstocked shelves and densely populated spaces hamper library users’ ability to browse the collection and locate materials. Customers in our communities need and deserve updated materials and accessible, well-organized collections.

“Weeding” is part of the collection life cycle. At Alameda County Library, we follow the national standard of CREW (Continuous Review, Evaluation and Weeding) Guidelines. We weed for a number of reasons: condition, lack of use, if information is out of date or erroneous, or if more recent information is available in print or digital format. Like other parts of collection management, weeding occurs locally, at each branch, on an ongoing basis. There are multiple levels of review at the branch, involving various levels of front-line staff. As appropriate, weeded items then go to the system level (Technical Services Department) for final review and redeployment. Input from front-line staff (pages, clerks, and librarians) is essential to each stage of collection management; these are the people the public talks to about items they want and need. All Alameda County Library employees strive for transparency in working with the public, particularly in the delivery of services and collections that are taxpayer-funded. We strive to offer as many options as possible for our public to get the services and materials they want.

As a County Library, we recognize that not every title is available at all branches. However, materials may be reserved online 24-hours a day, or by visiting or calling the Library. The Alameda County Library offers access to materials in many ways, including:

- Hold Requests within the system: other Alameda County Library locations will deliver books to the patron’s desired location.
- Wide variety of digital content: many additional titles are available in digital form, accessible through a variety of devices, day or night.

- Link+ services via library consortium reciprocity agreements: Alameda County Library participates in Link+, a wide-ranging partnership with other institutions that enables us to borrow additional materials.

While fluid movement of titles between library locations promotes and refreshes the Living Library, Alameda County Library customizes collections for each community in the following ways:

- Specifically at Albany, a refresh spreadsheet is maintained and submitted quarterly to selection staff for purchase consideration. The Albany branch staff is actively encouraged to add suggestions from their own professional expertise, patron comments and collection trends observed during the daily operation of the library.
- Specifically at Albany, the Poetry Honor Collection and the Archival Collections were developed. The Poetry Honor Collection supports the strong local interest in poetry in the Albany community. The Archival Collections highlight the life's work of local historian Catherine Webb, the history of the library, and the history of the city.
- System-wide, the library analyzes circulation trends and usage statistics via collection management inventory software to help build Refresh Lists (i.e. CollectionHQ and Decision Center). From these inventory reports, collection review lists are created upon staff request based on individual branch criteria and space allocation.
- System-wide, the library recently established a "Lucky Day" collection containing popular, high-demand titles to promote in-library browsing and more user-friendly borrowing.
- Public and staff input to the Collection Management unit is always welcome and appreciated:
 - Online Purchase Suggestion
 - Request for Reconsideration Customer Comment Form
 - Personal feedback to staff