

Comprehensive Policy and Accountability Assessment of the Denver Public Library System: Funding, Civil Rights, and Operational Transformations

Executive Summary

The Denver Public Library (DPL) system is currently navigating one of the most profound operational and existential transitions in its institutional history. Originally conceived as a traditional municipal repository for books, information, and community learning, the modern DPL has increasingly evolved into a frontline public safety net. Across its network of locations, the library functions as a de facto day shelter and social services hub for Denver's unhoused and highly vulnerable populations.¹ This transformation has necessitated the integration of licensed clinical social workers and peer navigators into library staffing models¹, alongside a systemic shift toward trauma-informed security practices designed to manage complex behavioral health crises.² However, this dual mandate—serving simultaneously as a public educational institution and a frontline crisis response center—has generated acute budgetary friction, complex legal liabilities, and significant civil rights concerns.

This comprehensive research report provides an exhaustive, evidence-based analysis of the Denver Public Library system, focusing systematically on four interconnected domains. First, it examines municipal funding structures, evaluating recent budget allocations, voter-approved tax initiatives, and the severe austerity measures mandated for the near future. Second, it investigates the library's operational shift toward homelessness service provision, contrasting official institutional mandates with the empirical reality of daily branch operations. Third, it assesses documented discrimination complaints, civil rights litigation, and exclusion policies affecting vulnerable patrons, with a specific focus on the intersection of housing status, severe mental illness, and disability. Finally, it scrutinizes specific branch regulations—notably the study room policies at the Bob Ragland Branch—and their implications for patron rights, procedural due process, and public accountability.

The ensuing analysis indicates a fundamental paradox in DPL's current trajectory. In 2022, Denver voters approved the "Strong Library, Strong Denver" initiative, establishing a dedicated property tax expected to generate approximately \$37 million annually to support the library system and insulate it from the volatility of the city's General Fund.⁴ Despite this injection of dedicated revenue, overarching municipal fiscal pressures—driven by broader economic variables, flat revenue growth, and city-wide responses to an unprecedented influx of migrants and asylum seekers—have culminated in a mandate for DPL to reduce its 2026 budget by 15%, equating to a \$9.2 million reduction.⁵ To meet these austerity targets without terminating staff,

the library will be forced to implement the temporary, 18-month closure of four branch locations, a move expected to save nearly \$5 million.⁵

Simultaneously, the library faces continuous public scrutiny regarding its enforcement of the Library Use Policy.⁷ Strict regulations prohibiting sleeping, large baggage, and poor hygiene⁷ disproportionately impact unhoused patrons, raising highly complex civil rights questions. While homelessness itself is not recognized as a federally protected class, the deep and undeniable intersectionality between housing status, severe mental illness, and physical disability exposes the library to ongoing legal risks under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the civil rights protections enforced by the Colorado Civil Rights Division (CCRD).⁸

This report relies exclusively on public records, official budgets, court dockets, and verified accounts to present a thorough timeline of these policy shifts. It provides detailed budgetary analyses, a review of documented civil rights cases, and highly specific, actionable recommendations for establishing stronger public accountability mechanisms through the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA).¹⁰

Key Findings

The research yields several critical insights regarding the operational, financial, and legal realities governing the Denver Public Library system:

The library is facing an imminent and severe budget contraction despite the recent acquisition of dedicated taxation. The DPL operating budget reached approximately \$90.9 million across all funds in 2024, bolstered by the "Strong Library, Strong Denver" property tax initiative.⁴

However, severe municipal deficits driven by flat revenues and emergency spending have mandated a 15% (\$9.2 million) cut for the 2026 fiscal year. To meet this mandate without instituting layoffs, the Hampden, Ross-Broadway, Eugene Field, and Ross-University Hills branches will close for approximately 18 months, generating \$5 million in direct operational savings.⁵

The Denver Public Library has fundamentally institutionalized social work as a core library function. DPL is widely recognized as a national pioneer in integrating human services into library administration. Since hiring its first social worker in 2015, the system's Community Resource Team (CRT) has expanded aggressively to include multiple licensed social workers and peer navigators who assist thousands of unhoused patrons annually with critical case management, housing assessments, and mental health triage directly on the library floor.¹ Despite official literature framing the library as a traditional space for learning, branches operate as de facto homelessness survival hubs. Official DPL policies maintain that the institution is fundamentally an informational and community connection space.² In practice, however, branches function as critical survival spaces for unhoused residents seeking refuge from extreme weather, access to internet for survival logistics, and functional restroom facilities.³ This reality has led to sustained citizen complaints regarding severe hygiene issues, open substance use (including overdoses requiring the administration of Narcan), and general public safety anxieties.³

The library relies on stringent exclusionary mechanisms to maintain order, which present disparate impacts. The DPL Library Use Policy strictly prohibits survival-oriented behaviors such

as sleeping, using restrooms for bathing, bringing in more than three items of baggage, and possessing hygiene that poses a "health risk".⁷ Security personnel actively enforce these bans, and suspensions exceeding one year can only be appealed directly to the mayoral-appointed Library Commission under a standard of review that heavily favors the institution.⁷

The library possesses systemic civil rights and discrimination vulnerabilities. The institution has been subject to federal civil rights litigation, including a notable 42 U.S.C. § 1983 claim filed by a patron in 2009 (*Thomas v. Denver Public Library*), which was eventually dismissed following a settlement conference.¹⁷ Furthermore, the disparate impact of stringent exclusion policies on individuals exhibiting symptoms of severe mental health conditions presents ongoing and complex compliance challenges under Title II of the ADA and state public accommodation laws.⁸

Micro-level policies, such as study room regulations, severely prioritize administrative flexibility over patron privacy. Policies at modern locations like the Bob Ragland Branch are heavily regulated. Study rooms, which are limited to a two-hour maximum per day and enforce a strict 15-minute check-in grace period, offer no expectation of privacy. Library staff explicitly reserve the right to enter these spaces and terminate reservations at any time without prior cause, leaving patrons with highly limited immediate procedural recourse in the event of staff error or alleged discriminatory removal.²⁰

Historical and recent audits reveal gaps in contractual and financial oversight. A 2020 audit conducted by the Denver Auditor's Office identified critical lapses in DPL's financial oversight mechanisms, specifically regarding the monitoring of expired contracts, the tracking of employee timesheets, and overall cash handling protocols, highlighting the ongoing need for rigorous public accountability and open records scrutiny.²²

Timeline of Funding and Policy Changes

The operational posture of the Denver Public Library has evolved through a sequence of critical legal, financial, and policy milestones. Understanding this chronological development is essential for contextualizing the library's current environment and its approach to civil rights and public safety.

The library's engagement with civil rights issues dates back decades. In 1943, Pauline Short Robinson became the first African American librarian in Denver, utilizing her position at the Community Vocational Center Library in the Five Points neighborhood to provide resources to marginalized communities and later participating in lawsuits to desegregate local public accommodations like Lakeside Amusement Park.²³ This legacy of civil rights engagement continued into the late 1970s. In July 1978, disability rights activists known as the "Gang of 19" staged a foundational protest near the Central Library, throwing themselves in front of inaccessible public buses.²⁴ The archives of this movement, led by figures like Wade Blank, are now preserved in DPL's Western History collection, cementing the library's role as a custodian of civil rights history.²⁴

In the early 2000s, the library became directly involved in modern civil liberties disputes. Between 2002 and 2003, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a class-action lawsuit exposing the Denver Police Department's covert surveillance of civil rights activists, peace

organizations, and ordinary citizens. Following a legal settlement, the city agreed to archive the heavily redacted "Spy Files"—containing intelligence on up to 3,200 individuals and 208 organizations—at the Denver Public Library, where they remain accessible to the public.²⁵

The institution faced direct civil rights litigation later in the decade. In 2009, *Kevin Thomas v. Denver Public Library* was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. The plaintiff alleged civil rights violations under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a federal statute used to sue state actors for constitutional deprivations. The case underwent mediation before Magistrate Judge Kathleen M. Tafoya and was eventually dismissed with prejudice by Judge Marcia S. Krieger in 2010 following a settlement agreement.¹⁷

The modern era of library operations began roughly a decade ago as the city's housing crisis deepened. In 2015, recognizing that library staff were ill-equipped to manage the profound needs of unhoused patrons, DPL became one of the first library systems in the United States to hire a full-time social worker.¹ This initiative, initially funded by a two-year grant, rapidly proved essential and expanded into a permanent division.

By 2017, the library was forced to implement significant security enhancements. Following spikes in drug overdoses, assaults, and trespassing at the Central Library, DPL leadership announced a multi-pronged safety strategy. This included increased Denver Police Department patrols, the hiring of additional internal security guards, structural modifications like lowering bookshelves to increase lines of sight, and the stockpiling of Narcan to reverse opioid overdoses occurring in public restrooms.¹⁴

Accountability issues surfaced in 2020 when Denver Auditor Timothy O'Brien released a report identifying lapses in DPL's financial oversight, noting that the library had operated under several expired contracts and exhibited weak cash-handling and timesheet protocols.²²

The library's financial structure was fundamentally altered in 2022. Denver voters approved the "Strong Library, Strong Denver" initiative, establishing a dedicated property tax mechanism expected to provide approximately \$37 million annually directly to the DPL Fund.⁴ In the same year, the modern Bob Ragland Branch opened in the rapidly gentrifying RiNo neighborhood, representing the system's contemporary architectural and operational ethos.³⁰

However, external environmental and economic crises quickly challenged this newfound stability. In late 2022 and early 2023, public libraries across the Colorado Front Range—including facilities in Boulder, Englewood, Littleton, and Arvada—were forced to abruptly close after environmental testing revealed toxic levels of methamphetamine residue in restroom exhaust vents.³² While DPL branches were not part of the initial wave of closures, this crisis forced Denver library administrators to critically reevaluate the occupational health hazards related to public substance use.

The financial climax occurred recently. In 2024, the Central Library reopened to the public following extensive renovations funded by the Elevate Denver GO Bond³³, and DPL's total operating budget across all funds peaked at roughly \$90.9 million.¹¹ Yet, in late 2025, Mayor Mike Johnston's administration announced a projected \$200 million municipal budget shortfall.⁶ Driven by rising operational costs, flat tax revenues, and the massive fiscal strain of providing services to tens of thousands of newly arrived migrants, the city mandated strict austerity. DPL was ordered to slash 15% (\$9.2 million) from its 2026 budget.⁵ Consequently, the library

announced the impending temporary closure of four branches for 18 months, representing a massive retraction of public services to achieve \$5 million in savings.⁵

Section 1: Denver Public Library Funding and Budget History

The financial architecture of the Denver Public Library is highly complex, relying on a multifaceted composite of municipal general funds, dedicated property taxes, voter-approved capital improvement bonds, and private philanthropic foundation transfers. Despite recent voter-led initiatives intended to insulate the library from macroeconomic volatility, DPL remains acutely vulnerable to city-wide fiscal deficits, as evidenced by the impending 2026 austerity measures.

Primary Funding Sources

The operational and capital needs of the library are sustained through four primary revenue streams:

First, the **City and County of Denver General Fund** has historically served as the library's baseline operational lifeblood. These funds are subject to annual appropriation by the City Council and are derived primarily from local property and sales taxes. Relying on the General Fund historically forced the library to compete directly with critical emergency services, such as police, fire, and sanitation departments, for scarce municipal dollars.³⁵

Second, the **DPL Fund**, established via the 2022 "Strong Library, Strong Denver" ballot initiative, provides a dedicated property tax stream. This fund yields approximately \$37 million annually, specifically earmarked for library operations. This influx of capital allowed DPL to expand open hours, hire additional specialized personnel, and bolster the Community Resource Team.⁴

Third, the **Elevate Denver GO Bond Program** and other municipal bonds serve as the primary mechanism for capital improvements, deferred maintenance, and large-scale structural renovations. The bond package, approved by voters, allocated substantial sums for branch upgrades, such as \$4.47 million for the Schlessman Branch, \$3.77 million for Athmar Park, \$12.3 million for the Blair Caldwell African American Research Library, and \$10 million for co-located housing and library facilities.¹¹ The massive November 2024 reopening of the Denver Central Library was supported heavily by \$43 million from the Elevate Denver GO Bond Program, supplemented by other funds.³³

Fourth, the **Denver Public Library Friends Foundation (DPLFF)** and the **DPL Trust** provide vital philanthropic support. The Friends Foundation transforms private donations into funding for essential literacy programs, summer reading initiatives, and cultural inclusivity services that tax revenues cannot fully cover.³⁵ Furthermore, the DPL Trust functions as a charitable entity formed by the Library Commission to manage bequeathed assets, specifically deriving revenue from an interest in real estate partnerships. These funds are deposited into a managed bank account and transferred quarterly to the DPLFF to support ongoing library initiatives.³⁷

Budget Allocation and Trajectory

An analysis of the budgetary trajectory over the past five years demonstrates a period of

aggressive expansion followed by an abrupt, forced contraction. In 2018, the library operated on an annual budget of slightly more than \$50 million.² Following the passage of the dedicated property tax, the budget swelled significantly. By 2023, actual expenditures across the system had risen, and the 2024 total operating budget across all funding mechanisms reached an apex of \$90,910,775.¹¹

City Council presentations indicate that the library's full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing levels expanded correspondingly, growing from 538.25 FTEs in 2021 to an estimated 605.5 FTEs by 2025.³⁹ For the 2024 fiscal year, the revised General Fund expenditure for the library was approximately \$61.1 million, while the dedicated DPL Fund generated roughly \$37.8 million in revenue.³⁹ The City and County of Denver Charter strictly requires the library's annual budget to remain balanced, meaning expenditures cannot exceed the total of estimated opening balances and anticipated revenues.⁴⁰

Funding Category	Source Entity	Estimated Amount	Primary Uses
Total Operating Budget (2024)	Composite (All Funds)	\$90.9 Million	Comprehensive system-wide operations, staffing, materials, and standard facility maintenance. ¹¹
General Fund Allocation (2024)	City General Fund	\$61.1 Million	Core salaries, basic utilities, and standard municipal overhead. ³⁹
DPL Dedicated Tax Fund (2024)	Voter-Approved Property Tax	~\$37.8 Million	Expanded operational hours, social services staff, advanced security upgrades, and teen spaces. ⁴
Central Library Renovation	GO Bond + DPL Fund + DPLFF	\$64+ Million	\$43M (Bond), \$5.25M (DPL Fund), \$5.7M (Friends Foundation), \$10M (Capital Imp.). ³³
2026 Mandatory	General Budget	(\$9.2 Million)	Mandated 15%

Budget Cut Target	Austerity		reduction required by the Mayor's office due to municipal deficits. ⁵
Branch Closure Savings	Operational Reductions	(\$5.0 Million)	Suspending operations at 4 branches for 18 months to achieve the austerity targets. ⁵

The 2026 Fiscal Crisis and Austerity Measures

The stability provided by the 2022 property tax initiative proved insufficient to protect the library from broader municipal economic failures. In late 2025, Mayor Mike Johnston's administration announced a projected \$200 million municipal budget gap for the upcoming 2026 fiscal year.⁶ This severe deficit was attributed to a confluence of factors: flat municipal revenue growth, the expiration of federal COVID-19 pandemic relief funds, and the enormous fiscal strain caused by an influx of nearly 40,000 migrants and asylum seekers requiring emergency city services since late 2022.⁶ Former Mayor Michael Hancock had previously noted that pandemic-era deficits were massive, comparing them to the entire operating budgets of multiple city departments combined; the current crisis mirrors this severity.⁶

Consequently, DPL, as a major city agency, was ordered to absorb a 15% budget reduction, totaling a massive \$9.2 million.⁵ To achieve this without engaging in devastating mass layoffs, the library elected to hold existing vacant positions open, extend recruiting timelines, and implement severe service reductions.³⁹ The most visible and controversial impact of this austerity is the temporary 18-month closure of four branch locations: Hampden, Ross-Broadway, Eugene Field, and Ross-University Hills.⁵

The closure of the Ross-Broadway branch is particularly notable, as it is an architecturally significant mid-century modern building designed by prominent architect Victor Hornbein.⁵ While staff from these four branches will be relocated rather than terminated—requiring some librarians to navigate complex new commutes via multiple public transit routes—the closures represent a significant and painful retraction of public services in their respective neighborhoods.⁵ The \$5 million saved directly from these closures will be diverted to meet the overarching municipal budget-cutting target.⁵

Section 2: Denver Public Library as a Homelessness Service Hub

The most profound operational shift within the Denver Public Library over the last decade has been its undeniable institutionalization as a frontline agency managing the urban homelessness

crisis. As traditional municipal safety nets have frayed, the library—by virtue of being one of the only free, publicly accessible, climate-controlled indoor spaces remaining in the urban core—has been forced to adapt to unprecedented social demands.

Official Mandate vs. De Facto Reality

Officially, the DPL states its mission is to "create welcoming spaces where all are free to explore and connect".² Strategic plans, such as the *Denver Here: 2025-2030* document, focus heavily on traditional library metrics: childhood literacy, technological access, engaging community experiences, and providing quiet spaces for study.²

However, the empirical reality of branch operations diverges sharply from this traditional paradigm. The library, particularly the massive Central Library location, serves as a de facto day shelter. Unhoused residents utilize the facilities for critical survival needs that far exceed reading or research. Patrons rely on the library for shelter from extreme weather conditions, access to public restrooms for basic hygiene, electrical outlets for charging mobile communication devices, and internet terminals for navigating complex housing and employment bureaucracies.²

The Genesis and Expansion of the Community Resource Team

In response to this reality, DPL became an early and aggressive adopter of the "library social work" model, acknowledging that librarians trained in information science were ill-equipped to manage severe psychiatric and logistical crises. In 2015, DPL hired Elissa Hardy, LCSW, funded initially by a two-year grant, to proactively connect unhoused patrons with external social services.¹ The program was highly successful and expanded into the permanent Community Resource Team (CRT).

Today, the CRT is a robust and heavily utilized division featuring multiple licensed social workers and "peer navigators".¹ Peer navigators are professionals who possess lived experience with homelessness, substance use disorders, or mental health challenges, a background that allows them to build immediate, authentic trust with highly vulnerable patrons.⁴¹ Navigators such as Cuica Montoya and Rochelle Brogan patrol the library floors wearing distinct rainbow lanyards, carrying vital supplies, and engaging patrons directly.¹² As Montoya noted in an interview regarding her work, "I've definitely sat across from a couple people that I feel like I'm looking into a mirror of my past... That's where the magic happens, is when somebody comes in asking for help and needing resources. I can sit down and say 'Hey, I get it'".⁴¹

The CRT does not provide long-term clinical case management; rather, it functions as an expert triage and referral network.¹ They administer standardized housing assessments (such as the VI-SPDAT)¹², guide patrons through the complex web of local social services, and provide critical internal training to library staff on trauma-informed care, harm reduction, and de-escalation tactics.¹ The Resource Center, located on the first floor of the Central Library, operates dedicated drop-in hours for immediate assistance.⁴² The model has proven so effective that the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment (DPHE) replicated it, creating their own peer navigator positions for outreach.² In its early years alone, the team

served thousands, with records indicating 3,501 individuals were assisted in 2017.¹²

Substance Use, Contamination, and the Evolution of Security

The integration of heavily marginalized populations into library spaces has generated profound institutional friction. The high concentration of individuals experiencing severe mental illness and active addiction has fundamentally altered the library environment, creating safety hazards for both staff and the public.

DPL has struggled significantly with active, open drug use in its facilities. The Central Library has documented numerous critical overdoses, prompting staff and security to carry and administer Naloxone (Narcan), an opioid reversal agent, as a standard operating procedure.¹⁴ In late 2022 and early 2023, the entire Front Range library community was shaken when multiple suburban libraries (including facilities in Boulder, Englewood, Littleton, and Arvada) were forced to abruptly close after environmental testing revealed highly toxic levels of methamphetamine residue inside restroom exhaust vents, left behind by patrons smoking drugs.³² While DPL branches avoided immediate mass closures in that specific wave, the severe threat of ambient environmental drug exposure remains a critical occupational health and safety concern for library administration.

To deter illegal activity and maintain order, DPL has implemented structural and personnel changes. Architecturally, bookshelves have been lowered to improve lines of sight and eliminate isolated blind spots where illicit activities previously occurred.¹⁴ The library significantly increased its security budget, employing a cadre of internal security guards and contracting off-duty Denver Police officers for high-visibility patrols.¹⁴ However, the philosophical approach of the security team has shifted under the guidance of the CRT. Rather than strictly focusing on punitive ejection and arrest, security guards now receive trauma-informed training to de-escalate crises and retain patrons in the building whenever it is safe to do so.²

This dual use of the library as an informational hub and a day shelter has generated substantial, documented public backlash from traditional patrons. Citizens frequently report feeling unsafe or disturbed. Documented complaints highlight issues of severe lack of hygiene (foul odors that permeate reading areas), individuals sleeping in chairs, the monopolization of public computer terminals by unhoused individuals, and episodes of verbal harassment or erratic behavior. Patrons have specifically reported anxiety when unhoused individuals exhibit severe coughing fits or unpredictable behavior in or near children's sections.³ Library administration is continuously forced to balance these legitimate public safety grievances against their institutional mandate to provide equitable, barrier-free access to all citizens.

Section 3: Discrimination, Exclusion, and Civil Rights Vulnerabilities

Because the Denver Public Library functions as a critical public accommodation funded by taxpayer dollars, its policies regarding who may access the space—and under what specific conditions they may be forcibly removed—are subject to intense legal and civil rights scrutiny.

The Disparate Impact of the Library Use Policy

The primary administrative mechanism for removing individuals from DPL property is the **Library Use Policy**.⁷ While the policy is written to be facially neutral, the specific behavioral prohibitions contained within it inherently target actions associated with extreme poverty, untreated mental illness, and homelessness. According to the policy, the following activities are strictly prohibited and serve as immediate grounds for ejection and formal suspension⁷:

- Sleeping anywhere inside the library.
- Using library restrooms for bathing or washing clothes.
- Bringing in more than three total items of personal property (e.g., strictly limiting patrons to one medium piece of luggage, one backpack, and one personal item).
- Leaving personal property unattended or impeding passageways.
- Exhibiting personal hygiene that poses a "health risk" to others.
- Consuming food or beverages in a messy manner that attracts vermin.
- Public possession or use of alcohol, marijuana, or illegal drugs.
- Engaging in abusive language, unreasonable noise, or failing to wear shoes or a shirt.

When a patron violates these rules, library security or DPD officers may intervene and issue a formal trespass notice or suspension.⁷ Individuals who are suspended for a period greater than one year possess the right to appeal the decision to the Library Commission. However, the procedural standard of review heavily favors the institution; the Commission will uphold the security manager's decision so long as there is "reasonable evidence" the incident occurred and the decision was not "arbitrary and capricious" under the circumstances. The patron has no absolute right to a verbal hearing; written statements are standard, and in-person testimony is allowed entirely at the Commission's discretion.⁷

Legal Analysis of Disparate Impact: From a civil rights perspective, homelessness itself is not recognized as a protected class under federal or Colorado law. However, the library's strict enforcement of hygiene, baggage, and sleeping rules frequently intersects directly with legally protected classes—specifically, physical disability, severe mental illness, and race. For instance, the strict three-bag limit disparately impacts individuals who are unhoused and must carry all their worldly possessions, an issue compounded if the individual suffers from a psychiatric disability related to hoarding or severe executive dysfunction. If a patron with a diagnosed mental health disability is banned for erratic behavior or unreasonable noise that manifests strictly as a symptom of their disability, the library faces severe legal exposure under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires public entities to provide reasonable modifications to policies, practices, and procedures to avoid discrimination.⁸

Documented Civil Rights Litigation and Historical Flashpoints

The Denver Public Library is not merely a passive observer of civil rights issues; it has historically been the site of, or a direct party to, significant civil rights actions and controversies.

One of the most consequential federal lawsuits involving the library in recent history is **Kevin Thomas v. Denver Public Library (2009–2010)**. In 2009, plaintiff Kevin Thomas filed a federal civil rights lawsuit (Case No. 1:09-cv-01748) against the Denver Public Library, the Library

Commission, and several individual defendants under the Civil Rights Act (42 U.S.C. § 1983).¹⁷ Section 1983 claims are powerful legal tools used to allege that a state actor deprived an individual of constitutional rights under the color of law. The complex case proceeded through the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado, heavily managed by Magistrate Judge Kathleen M. Tafoya and District Judge Marcia S. Krieger.²⁷ After undergoing formal mediation and a settlement conference, the lawsuit was voluntarily dismissed with prejudice in 2010.¹⁸ While the specific underlying allegations of the Thomas case remain buried in federal archives, the litigation permanently underscores the severe liability public libraries face regarding patron and employee civil rights.

Beyond direct litigation, DPL staff have frequently found themselves at the center of regional free speech, censorship, and employment discrimination debates. When Brooky Parks, a former DPL reference librarian, was fired from her subsequent position at the High Plains Library District in Erie for organizing an anti-racism and LGBTQ+ "Read Woke" book club, she filed formal complaints with the Colorado Civil Rights Division (CCRD) and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).⁴⁴ Dodie Ownes, a prominent DPL librarian and co-chair of the Colorado Association of Libraries' Intellectual Freedom Committee, publicly condemned the High Plains District's censorship policies, highlighting the ongoing internal and external vigilance library staff must maintain regarding First Amendment protections and retaliation.⁴⁴

The city has also faced broader systemic ADA challenges. The City of Denver previously entered into a comprehensive Settlement Agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice (DJ # 204-13-298) to rectify broad ADA Title II deficiencies across municipal services, legally binding the city to establish strict grievance procedures for resolving complaints of ADA violations.⁸

Issue/Case	Date/Era	Location/Context	Nature of Complaint	Status/Resolution	Source
Thomas v. Denver Public Library	2009–2010	Federal Court (Dist. of Colorado)	42 U.S.C. § 1983 Civil Rights violation lawsuit filed against the library and commission	Dismissed with prejudice following formal settlement conferences in 2010.	¹⁷
ACLU "Spy Files" Archiving	2002–2003	DPD to DPL Central Library	DPD covert surveillance of civil rights	Settlement; redacted intelligence files	²⁵

			activists; ACLU lawsuit forced policy change.	permanently archived at DPL for public access.	
First Amendment / Retaliation Advocacy	2022	DPL Staff / High Plains District	DPL staff publicly supported a former DPL librarian fired from a neighboring district for LGBTQ/anti-racism programs.	EEOC/CCR D complaints filed against the High Plains District.	44
Disparate Impact of Library Use Policy	Ongoing	System-wide (All Branches)	Strict rules against sleeping, large bags, and odors target survival behaviors of unhoused/disabled individuals.	Ongoing public debate; enforcement executed via security interventions and trespass bans.	7
ADA Title II Systemic Settlement	Historical	City of Denver	DOJ investigation into Denver's compliance with accessibility standards	Settlement agreement mandating physical upgrades and formalized grievance	8

			across city services.	procedures.	
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Regulatory Avenues for Discrimination Claims

When patrons or employees experience alleged discrimination at DPL, the internal appeal process to the Library Commission is not the final avenue for redress. Several municipal and state regulatory bodies exist to investigate such claims:

- **Colorado Civil Rights Division (CCRD):** Patrons claiming discrimination in a public accommodation (e.g., being unjustly banned from the library due to race, gender, or disability) must file an intake questionnaire with the CCRD. The statute of limitations is exceptionally brief: complaints regarding public accommodations must be filed within 60 days of the alleged discriminatory act.⁹ Employment discrimination claims have a longer 300-day deadline.⁴⁵
- **Denver Human Rights & Community Partnerships (HRCP):** This powerful municipal agency oversees local anti-discrimination efforts and provides a platform for formal complaints regarding racism, sexism, and ableism within city agencies. They fund community groups and provide direct avenues for citizens to report inequitable treatment.⁴⁶
- **Denver Office of Disability Rights (DODR):** A specialized division of HRCP located at 201 W. Colfax Avenue, this office coordinates the city's efforts to ensure compliance with Titles II and III of the ADA. The DODR directly investigates complaints of alleged discrimination on the basis of disability filed locally, including failures to provide reasonable accommodations at library locations.¹⁹

Section 4: Bob Ragland Branch Library and the Anatomy of Study Room Policy

To fully understand the micro-level application of library policies and how they impact patron autonomy, it is highly instructive to examine the daily operational guidelines of specific branches. The Bob Ragland Branch Library, located at 1900 35th Street in the rapidly gentrifying RiNo neighborhood, opened in 2022 and represents the modern architectural and operational ethos of the Denver Public Library.³⁰

However, patron access to specific amenities—such as highly coveted quiet study rooms—is strictly regulated, revealing an institutional framework that heavily prioritizes administrative control and security over patron privacy and uninterrupted use.

The Illusion of Privacy: Reservation Mechanics

Study rooms at the Bob Ragland Branch, and equivalent spaces across the DPL network, are intended for individuals or small groups to focus. The policies governing these spaces are remarkably stringent and unforgiving²⁰:

First, while a library card is not explicitly required to book a standard individual study room,

patrons are strictly limited to a maximum of two hours of use per day across the entire system.²¹ The default booking duration is merely one hour. Furthermore, study rooms are expressly forbidden from being used for private social gatherings (such as showers, wakes, or birthday parties), and open flames are strictly banned.²⁰

Second, reservations operate on a rigid, zero-tolerance timeline. Patrons must physically check in with a staff member within 15 minutes of the reservation start time; failure to do so results in the automatic cancellation of the reservation.²⁰ Furthermore, there is absolutely no time buffer scheduled between reservations, meaning rooms must be completely vacated and left clean immediately upon the expiration of the reserved slot to allow the next user access.²⁰

Most importantly, patrons do not possess an absolute right to quiet study without disruption, nor do they possess any expectation of privacy. The official Library Use Policy explicitly dictates that library staff, security personnel, or municipal representatives "may enter the reserved premises at any time, on any occasion, and for any purpose".²⁰ The library retains the ultimate, unilateral authority to preempt or cancel any reservation to prioritize library services or due to suspected policy violations. Furthermore, the library tracks patron compliance; individuals who overstay their allocated time, cause damage, or fail to show up for reservations can be administratively denied future access to all meeting spaces.²⁰

Dispute Resolution and Grievance Escalation Pathways

If a patron experiences staff error (e.g., an administrative double-booking) or is abruptly and unfairly removed from a reserved room by security, the internal policy framework provides virtually no immediate procedural recourse for the patron. Because the library explicitly disclaims any endorsement of room activities and retains an absolute right of entry at any time for any purpose, patrons are subject to the immediate discretion of the staff on duty.²⁰

If a patron believes a removal, denial of access, or behavioral correction was executed unjustly—or worse, was based on a legally protected class such as race, perceived disability, or national origin—the complaint transcends internal branch management. The correct escalation path involves navigating a complex municipal and state bureaucracy:

1. **Immediate Remediation:** The patron should immediately document the incident and request intervention from the Branch Manager or escalate the issue to the library's Manager of Security (Bob Knowles) or the Director of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (Fabiola Mora).¹³
2. **Municipal Escalation:** If the issue is not resolved internally, the patron must file a formal grievance with the Denver Office of Equity or the Denver Office of Disability Rights (DODR) via email at DisabilityAccess@denvergov.org, particularly if the issue involves a failure to accommodate an ADA requirement.⁴⁹
3. **State Civil Rights Action:** For severe allegations of discrimination in a public accommodation, the patron must bypass city agencies and file a formal public accommodations complaint with the Colorado Civil Rights Division (CCRD). As noted, this must be executed within the highly restrictive 60-day statutory window, or the state loses jurisdiction over the claim.⁴⁵
4. **Ombudsman Oversight:** While the city utilizes specific ombudsman offices (such as the

Child Protection Ombudsman and Behavioral Health Ombudsman), these offices generally lack direct jurisdiction over general library operations, though the Behavioral Health Ombudsman may intervene if a patron with severe mental illness is denied access to behavioral health resources due to library exclusion policies.⁵²

Recommendations for Next Steps

Based on the exhaustive synthesis of budgetary documents, operational policies, civil rights history, and current exclusion frameworks, the following strategic recommendations are provided to enhance equity, ensure legal compliance, and improve operational transparency at the Denver Public Library.

1. **Conduct a Formal Disparate Impact Analysis on the Library Use Policy:** DPL administration should commission an independent, third-party civil rights audit to determine whether the strict enforcement of the Library Use Policy—specifically the three-bag limit, the prohibition on sleeping, and the "health risk" hygiene requirements—disproportionately results in the suspension of racial minorities and individuals with diagnosed psychiatric disabilities. If a disparate impact is proven, the policy must be modified to ensure ADA Title II compliance.
2. **Reform Suspension Appeal Procedures to Ensure Due Process:** Currently, bans lasting longer than one year can only be appealed to the mayoral-appointed Library Commission through a written request, with verbal testimony allowed only at the Commission's absolute discretion.⁷ To ensure procedural due process, DPL should implement an intermediate ombudsman review step and guarantee the fundamental right to an in-person, verbal hearing for any patron facing a multi-year or permanent ban from public facilities.
3. **Clarify Study Room Dispute Protocols:** DPL administration must update the terms of use for study rooms across all branches to include specific protocols for handling staff-induced scheduling errors (such as double-bookings). The policy should explicitly outline how patrons can formally document complaints regarding staff conduct or alleged discrimination during room ejections without fear of retaliation.
4. **Increase Transparency Surrounding Budget Austerity and the DPL Fund:** Given that Denver voters specifically authorized the "Strong Library, Strong Denver" property tax to expand services, the decision to close four branches for 18 months due to overarching General Fund deficits will likely severely erode public trust.⁴ DPL and the City Council must publish detailed, location-specific fiscal models demonstrating exactly how the \$5 million in savings is calculated, and they must implement strict auditing measures to ensure that dedicated DPL Fund revenues are not being improperly diverted to backfill General Fund shortfalls.
5. **Expand Harm Reduction and Environmental Contamination Architecture:** Acknowledging that the library operates irreversibly as a de facto day shelter, DPL should formalize this reality architecturally. Future bond-funded renovations (such as those funded by Elevate Denver³⁶) must include the construction of dedicated, highly ventilated hygiene centers, secure baggage storage lockers, and safe-consumption infrastructure to mitigate the severe risk of environmental contamination (e.g.,

methamphetamine residue) that recently forced the closure of multiple neighboring suburban libraries.³²

Public Records Request (CORA) Checklist

To ensure absolute public accountability and to independently verify the findings and policy applications detailed in this report, targeted public records requests should be submitted under the Colorado Open Records Act (CORA). Under CORA, municipal agencies may charge a statutorily defined rate of up to \$41.37 per hour for research and retrieval after the first free hour, plus \$0.25 per page for physical copies.¹⁰

It is critical to note that requests regarding internal library operations must be submitted via the specific DPL CORA form, while police dispatch data, auditor compliance documents, or city-wide budget inquiries must be routed directly to their respective custodians (e.g., the Department of Safety, City Council, or the Office of Human Resources).⁵³ A 2020 audit by Denver Auditor Timothy O'Brien explicitly found lapses in DPL's monitoring of contracts, employee timesheets, and cash handling²², making the ongoing acquisition of financial records legally vital.

DPL Administration and Security CORA Checklist:

- **Incident and Suspension Logs:** Request the complete database or spreadsheet logs of all formal trespass notices and suspensions issued at all DPL branches over the last 24 months. The request must include the stated reason for the ban (e.g., sleeping, hygiene, drug use) and the exact duration of the suspension.
- **Library Commission Appeal Records:** Request the agendas, meeting minutes, and written security reports submitted to the Library Commission regarding patron appeals for suspensions exceeding one year.⁷ (Note: Demand that personally identifiable patron information be redacted if necessary to comply with privacy laws, rather than allowing the agency to deny the request entirely).
- **Study Room Reservation Logs:** Request the digital reservation logs for the Bob Ragland Branch study rooms over the past 90 days, specifically seeking records of administrative cancellations or internal staff notes indicating a patron was forcibly removed from a room.²⁰
- **Security and CRT Contracts:** Request the current service contracts, vendor agreements, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) between DPL, external private security firms, and any third-party social service agencies providing peer navigators or mental health outreach, paying specific attention to compliance following the 2020 auditor's report.²²
- **Narcan Administration Reports:** Request internal incident reports documenting the administration of Naloxone (Narcan) by library staff or security personnel at all DPL locations from 2022 to the present, to quantify the scale of the overdose crisis on library property.¹⁴
- **Environmental Testing Reports:** Request any documentation, invoices, or test results regarding environmental assessments for methamphetamine residue or other hazardous substances in the restrooms or HVAC systems of DPL facilities, referencing the crises

faced by suburban districts.³²

City and County of Denver (External Departments) CORA Checklist:

- **DPD Dispatch and IAPro Logs:** Submit a CORA request to the Department of Safety for computer-aided dispatch (CAD) data and IAPro routing logs regarding police responses to the Denver Central Library (10 W. 14th Ave Parkway) and the Bob Ragland Branch over the last fiscal year.⁵³
- **Auditor Compliance Documents:** Request communications from the Denver Auditor's Office detailing DPL's compliance progress regarding the 2020 audit findings on expired contracts and cash handling.²²
- **HRCF / DODR Complaint Logs:** Submit a request to the Denver Office of Disability Rights and the Agency for Human Rights & Community Partnerships for aggregate data on formal ADA or civil rights complaints filed against the Denver Public Library system over the past five years.⁴⁹

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