

# ALA's Washington Office

## An Interview with Executive Director Emily Sheketoff

Marta Mestrovic Deyrup

**O**n January 26, 2003, during the Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, *LA&M* met with Emily Sheketoff, the associate executive director of the American Library Association (ALA) in charge of managing the Washington Office. In that capacity, she directs lobbying efforts before Congress and the executive branch to fund libraries and works on initiatives important to the library community such as family literacy, public access to government information, First Amendment protection, and intellectual property and copyright issues. Sheketoff also oversees the policy work done by the Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP), an office that promotes the development and utilization of electronic access to information as a means to ensure the public's right to a free and open information society.

Prior to coming to the ALA Washington office, Sheketoff was the budget coordinator for the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Labor, advising labor agencies on budget initiatives and developing institutional strategies to communicate their ideas more effectively. Prior to that, as deputy assistant secretary of labor for OSHA, she ran the day-to-day operations of this government enforcement agency, working with the staff to be more responsive to the public and small business. She also held positions in the Office of Personnel Management and served as special assistant to the director of the White House Office of Administration in the Carter Administration. In the media, Sheketoff served as the Washington bureau producer for the Monitor Channel of the *Christian Science Monitor* and covered the Pentagon during the Gulf War. As an assignment editor with the *World Monitor*, she produced commentaries and made assignments to twenty reporters and thirty producers worldwide. Sheketoff also worked for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in its Washington Bureau.

*Q: Can you describe ALA's Washington Office for those of LA&M's readers who are not familiar with what it does?*

**A:** The Washington Office is made up of two major components: the Office for Government Relations (OGR) and the Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP).

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The OGR works with Congress and the federal government. It is involved in lobbying and helping congressional staff understand the issues and how the federal government can have an impact on these issues. And there is a great deal the federal government does that has an impact on libraries—be it the e-rate program in the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress, or trade agreements involving the trade representative in the Department of Commerce. OGR also reaches out into the wider Washington community. Just about every trade association and interest group has a Washington presence. We are a focal point to reach out to form coalitions and work with and learn from different groups. That helps us be more effective.

OITP was in Washington initially because of the e-rate and other technology programs. Now it also works with the federal government, not as a lobbyist, but in an educational situation, helping to develop policy. It is very active with the National Science Foundation, Internet 2, the Commerce Department, think tanks in Washington, and other groups as well.

Those are the major components of the Washington office. OITP develops policy, does research, and helps the OGR people understand how issues and policies are changing. OGR is out there in the field talking to people. As issues begin to brew, OGR often gets an early warning, enabling OITP to get our policy in gear so we can be ready when the issue becomes a legislative one.

*Q: How many people does the Washington office have on staff?*

**A:** We have twenty-two people. One is a grant manager for our MacArthur grant on copyright, we have an intern, and the rest of the people work for OITP/OGR or are support staff for both offices.

*Q: ALA has increased the size of the office and the amount of money that it was targeting for the office's activities since the mid-1990s. Did ALA perceive a need to be more proactive in Washington?*

**A:** In the last ten years there has been a substantial increase in the Washington presence of ALA. There was the creation of OITP and also an increase in the staff of OGR.

The reason is two-fold—there is recognition by the membership that we are involved in more and more issues of more and more complexity, and physically there weren't enough people before to handle this. Also, I think the membership feels that we do a great service for them. We are very involved in not only lobbying on these issues, but also educating the membership. The Washington Office was intimately involved in working with the FCC in the creation of an e-rate program, which has been tremendously beneficial to public libraries. It is now working with e-book publishers to help develop what ultimately will be the standards for e-books, which also will have a tremendous impact on public libraries. There is the recognition that we need to be involved right from the beginning and commit the human and intellectual resources that are necessary so that as standards are developed, policy is created, and new programs come into being, we can get the maximum benefit from them.

**Q:** *The Washington Office is involved in many complex legislative issues, ranging from *Eldred v. Ashcroft*, to the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), to the reauthorization of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA), to the TEACH Act. Which are the issues that LA&M's audience needs to pay the most attention to?*

**A:** The most important issue is funding. No matter what headway libraries make, libraries are not going to be able to take advantage of it if the funding is not there. That's a yearly issue for us—funding and appropriations. Once every five years we have the authorization battle for LSTA, which we are involved in right now. That sets the policy for what LSTA funds will be expended on and how that will happen—what the formula will be. The next level of importance has to be access to information. This entails not only access to government information, but also the Internet. This is why we are involved with Internet 2. We want to make sure to maintain the concept of fair use and first sale so that libraries can continue to deliver information to their users. We are concerned about copyright legislation and copyright comments to regulations, and we get involved in legal challenges to copyright. We are very concerned about educating librarians so that they know the copyright rules and what are their rights. As content providers try to scare public librarians, academic librarians, and higher education officials out of using things that are acceptable within the copyright realm, librarians need to be confident that they know and understand the law so that they can stand up for the library user.

**Q:** *Your office has two functions: lobbying and education. As far as the educational function of your office, do you report back to the ALA office?*

**A:** No. We are pretty autonomous. If we need to reach out to the Chicago office for assistance, we are very aggressive in outreaching to the divisions to keep them informed and to ask them for help. Take an issue like the TEACH Act, which is a legislative issue we worked on for two years. Once we were pretty confident that it would pass, we knew that we needed to educate people. People involved in dis-

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tance education and distance learning had to become familiar with the new rules. When the bill was signed into law, we were ready to put out an electronic summary of what the rules were. We put together a training class, and we are putting together an e-tutorial so that people will be confident that they understand how these rules have changed, how their rights have been enhanced, and how they can use these new rights. If we have time and staff, we put these components together ourselves. Sometimes we work with other associations like the Association of Research Libraries or the Association of College and Research Libraries. Sometimes we will work with the Association of American Universities, and sometimes we turn to consultants that we have long-term contracts with. Sometimes we draw up a new contract with consultants to help us. Because we are small we are able to be flexible, and we try to take advantage of any opportunity.

**Q:** *Some of the issues the office is involved in are important for all libraries, some for public libraries, and others for academic libraries.*

**A:** Academic freedom—from our perspective—is mostly important to academic librarians. It is important to the K-12 community, especially in high school, but it is not as bedrock as it is to the academic community. Often when a policy or law threatens academic freedom, it also is threatening privacy or intellectual freedom, which is of great concern to the general public that uses libraries. That is the situation we are in now with something that we call "e-spy"—Electronic Surveillance and Privacy and You. E-spy started with the USA PATRIOT Act, then Attorney General Ashcroft's change of the FBI guidelines, and a number of pieces of legislation and administrative procedures that are still evolving. They can jeopardize privacy and intellectual pursuit of knowledge, so we are very concerned about this.

Librarians think of themselves as the last line of defense for the public. Often the public doesn't even realize

we are fighting for them, but we are. We understand how their rights are being jeopardized. These are rights that we care about very deeply. If the public understood how these rights are being jeopardized, they probably would care as

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well. We, in Washington, feel we have a double duty. We have the duty to fight and protect these rights, but librarians also have the duty to educate the public as to what is going on. We have been turning to the public libraries especially and encouraging them to hold a town meeting or program where these issues can be discussed. In many communities, people are speaking out. At this point, more than twenty-six communities have passed resolutions calling on their city councils to protect the Bill of Rights or calling on their city councils to make sure the USA PATRIOT Act does not abridge any of their personal liberties. This is a great service that public libraries can play.

*Q: With the recent lower court ruling that CIPA is unconstitutional, have you gotten library and community support behind you? I know in the beginning this was a sensitive issue.*

*A: It's still a sensitive issue. But I hope that since I've come to ALA, which was more than three years ago, I've helped in my public statements to reframe the debate in the public's mind. We are no longer on the defensive, constantly being accused of being pornographers and putting our children in jeopardy. We've begun to turn the corner to making the public understand that we are the ones who care about our children and that we want to protect them. We don't want parents to have a false sense of security with a technology that doesn't work. We want parents and their children to get education so that they will be protected from all the negative aspects of the Internet. There are predators, there is pornography, there is identity theft, and parents and their children need education or they are going to become victims of these things. The Internet is a great tool, but you need to know how to use it.*

*Q: On January 15, 2003, the Supreme Court upheld the extension of the Copyright Law. Can you comment on the impact this may have on libraries?*

*A: We are very disappointed that they didn't sustain us in *Eldred*, but the ruling said that Congress has the right to legislate in this matter. It is not as though the Supreme*

Court has ruled that copyright should go on in perpetuity, but that is Congress's job. Congress should think long and hard before it keeps extending copyright. Maybe what we in the access community need to do is start looking at another model, at some other ideas of what to do. We need to get and keep more information in the public domain. Copyright was created to make sure that people could use this information, that there could be a good exchange of information.

Certainly we respect the content creator community, and we respect that they want to be remunerated for their creation. Every other industry seems to be using technology to come up with positive ways that it can work with stakeholders. The content creator community seems to be taking another tack and coming up with ways in which technology can abridge the rights of stakeholders. This is evidenced in the Uniform Computer Information Transactions Act (UCITA). Instead of coming up with a more creative way of using technology all they are thinking about is how technology can be as restrictive as possible. They are going about this in completely the wrong way. Didn't they learn anything from Sony and eight-track and Beta tapes?

There are always going to be attacks on privacy, and as technology changes, who knows what that is going to mean? You always will have to look at the unintended consequences of these great technological leaps forward, and you have to watch overly ambitious laws that are trying to address certain issues but could have negative spillovers in other ways.

*Q: How receptive has this Congress been to ALA's lobbying activities? Which members of Congress have been particularly receptive to ALA's agenda?*

*A: I'll give you a few examples. At the beginning of the 107th Congress, Pete Hoekstra, who is from one of the most conservative districts in the United States, was named chairman of the committee that had jurisdiction over libraries. I called the Michigan people and talked to them. These librarians went to a town hall meeting with Hoekstra to talk about LSTA reauthorization. Hoekstra initially expressed little interest. Nine months later, Hoekstra met with his staff and said the first thing he wanted out of his committee was a library bill. He said that the librarians had convinced him that it was important and he wanted to do to it. He held hearings, he had a bill, and he held firm. He said he wasn't going to accept any changes unless ALA accepted them.*

*Q: What do you think changed his mind?*

*A: The librarians in Michigan. It was a great partnership. I was successful in lobbying only because the*

librarians in Michigan hung in there. They just bombarded him with education, invited him to things, and it culminated with him receiving an award of Library Supporter of the Year. He still brags about the library award. It tickled him.

**Q:** *It shows you that when you have a group of people who believe in a cause—in libraries—they can accomplish a lot.*

**A:** It didn't take a generation. It took nine months.

**Q:** *Do you have any other examples you'd like to share with us?*

**A:** Ralph Regula, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee. His daughter is a school librarian in Ohio. Last year, the congressman went to the first lady's Conference of School Libraries. One of the purposes of this conference was to demonstrate to school administrators and school boards that there is a direct link between student achievement and a fully stocked, professionally managed library. He stayed for the entire conference. After years of listening to his daughter talk about school libraries and seeing the first lady and all these experts, it clicked with him.

**Q:** *Have you had a chance to work with Laura Bush?*

**A:** Not as much as we would like. She is, however, very close with Bob Martin, the director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), and we are very close to him, so if we need something we can funnel it through him. He lets her know where we are in things.

**Q:** *On January 23, 2003, President Bush announced an increase in monies intended for the museums and libraries. What is your feeling about that?*

**A:** I think it's fabulous. Especially in this time of discretionary spending problems, most agencies are being cut. The best you can hope for is level funding, and he is increasing library funding.

**Q:** *Why do you think he is doing that?*

**A:** I think Mrs. Bush was helpful in that. But I also think that libraries have demonstrated their worth. A small investment in the library has a tremendous pay-off for the community. Public libraries have demonstrated that they are great public-private partners. They take that small investment and they work with their communities to produce great dividends.

**Q:** *Nancy Kranich, former president of ALA, said on your appointment that you bring "knowledge and understanding of the political process, building coalitions and shaping public opinion that will strengthen support for libraries in Washington." How have you been able to draw upon your previous positions as budget coordinator for the U.S. Department of Labor and as deputy assistant secretary for OSHA in your work as executive director of ALA's Washington's Office?*

**A:** I know this sounds too spiritual, but I don't have a life plan. I always think things happen for a reason and they happen for the best. Who would have known that when I started in my career that I was building all these skills and that I would land in this job? For the first time in my life I've used all these skills that I learned over all these years. So it was kismet that brought me here.

**Q:** *What was it about the ALA that made you want to step into this position?*

**A:** I was coming off a very stressful job in the Clinton administration. OSHA was a great job, a wonderful place doing terrific things. But it was incredible mental pressure worrying about workers' health and knowing that you could make a decision that could cost a worker his or her life. And not a very popular organization with the Congress, I might add. I was looking for something that would not be as stressful, where I could regenerate and rejuvenate. Who knew that jumping to the library world would be more controversial than OSHA and more stressful?

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**Q:** *Library directors and administrators—at both academic and public institutions—play a powerful role within the library community. How can they best advocate on Capitol Hill?*

**A:** The library directors are the key to reaching into the community. In the past, librarians have been communicating with members of Congress and decision-makers and that's been enough. But it's not enough anymore. They need to enlist the public to advocate with us. In the public library, that is the general public. In the academic world, it is the university and college administration. Almost all colleges and universities have Washington representation, and they need to be advocating for library concerns as well as general higher education concerns. University presidents have great stature in local communities, and they need to

be aware of library issues and advocate for our issues as well.

We deliver a tremendous benefit to our communities, whether it is our academic community or the general community we live in. We are not just a book depository and we are not just a place where you can get onto a terminal. Librarians serve a tremendous function, helping people in many ways. They have a tremendous impact on people's lives. We need to start educating people and remind people about what we do and why it is important that we be given the tools to continue to do that.

*Q: Do you think there is a future for libraries?*

A: Oh, absolutely. There is no question. I think the people who say everything is going to be digitized are just foolish. We know that when public libraries bring more computers and databases and other electronic resources into their libraries, the experience with the collection goes up. We know that the more people come in to use technology, the more they use the rest of the library as well.

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the Recognition of Achievement, Library Buildings Awards, John Cotton Dana, YBP Essay Selection, and Braddom FRFDS Scholarship Award Committees—thank you for the hours spent soliciting nominations and reviewing all of the materials submitted. And to our members, remember you are part of a great tradition that includes leadership and recog-

But the library needs to keep changing. The library is a place where people need to go—a place where kids need to come after school to do homework, a place seniors need to come in to interact with other people. Every library needs to assess how it can best serve its community. And that will be different with every community. But libraries have to be given the resources to do that. It is not cheap.

*Q: Do you have anything else you would like to add?*

A: I think of LAMA as the leadership in the public library world. Although they haven't always done so in the past, they need to become much more involved in educating those around them. It's training and mentoring library workers to become good public spokesmen for what we are doing, but it is also educating the public and educating their trustees and getting the trustees more involved and active. We have the dormant support in the community and we need to energize that. The way to energize that is through the librarians and those are the LAMA members.

niton. Attend the President's Program at Annual Conference and meet the awardees. Nominate someone for a LAMA award next year. You will make the nominees and our profession very proud. Hats off to all our award winners and to all of our loyal sponsors and committee members.