Homelessness in the Public Library: How Can Libraries Offer Effective Assistance?

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LI801 XU Final Issue Reflection Paper

April 14, 2008
Abstract

Following is a discussion of some of the challenges of providing services to homeless patrons as well as a discussion of the importance to the library profession of providing service to all. Some ideas and examples of successful programs are also presented.
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On any given day at the Boise Public Library many homeless patrons sit, read, attempt to sleep, and pass the time at the Boise Public Library. Some of these patrons are transitionally homeless due to the break-up of a marriage, the inability to find a job that pays a living wage after losing a low-paying job in the first place, or circumstances out of their control. Others could be considered chronically homeless, those experiencing long-term or repeated homelessness accompanied by a disability (Boise 2007). Still others are mentally ill and their illness keeps them from existing normally in society with its rules, norms, and expectations for them. Because of their inability to fit in, they find themselves homeless and unable to secure steady housing and a job that affords them enough money to live on, causing a serious problem of marginalization. The presence of homeless patrons in not unique to the Boise Public Library, urban libraries all over the United States face the same challenge of providing services to homeless patrons.

The presence of homeless patrons presents many challenges to libraries in which they reside. Other patrons complain about the way that they smell, the fact that they sleep in the library, and some of the strange behaviors that they exhibit. Librarians are not often trained to deal with homeless or mentally ill patrons and are uncomfortable and sometimes frightened by some of the behaviors that they exude. This can be perceived as judgemental feelings and attitudes toward homeless patrons.

The issue of serving homeless patrons becomes even more challenging when viewed against the backdrop of the American Library Association’s Code of Ethics which states as quoted in Rubin (2004), “We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests” (348). Additionally, the Library Bill
of Rights, as quoted in Rubin (2004), states that “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views”. What do these assertions and ethics statements mean viewed in the light of homeless patrons or patrons living in poverty? Does it become the role of the librarian to deconstruct the various ways to support homeless patrons and to find ways in which the library is uniquely situated to provide information and resources to its patrons? The needs of homeless patrons and patrons living in poverty are quantifiably different than patrons not living in crisis, but the role of the library remains the same; to provide a high level of service to all users, regardless of their background.

Additionally, librarians have a role to play as Dresang (2006) asserts, to provide…

“freedom to access information and ideas regardless of the content or viewpoints of the author(s) or the age, background, or beliefs of the receiver “(169). This right to freedom of information extends to homeless patrons and patrons living in poverty and provides a challenge to serving patrons living at the margins of society.

In his book Free for All, Don Borchert (2007), illustrates the challenge and importance of serving homeless patrons. He presents a picture of the issue of homeless patrons in the Los Angeles Public Library by discussing the ways that various other patrons view the homeless patrons and how that interaction occurs. He relates a story of patrons complaining about homeless patrons due to odor and discusses the challenges of balancing the needs of homeless patrons with the needs of other patrons and hoping to make the library a more equitable place for all.

In his article “The Public Library as an Asylum for the Homeless” (2008), former Salt Lake City Public Library assistant director Chip Ward, discusses the challenges and failures of
society that have led us to this place, suggesting that libraries are a microcosm of the social inequity that exists everywhere in our “democratic” nation. He says of the Salt Lake City Library:

We empower citizens and invite them to engage one another in public dialogues. I like to think of our library as the civic ballroom of our community where citizens can practice that awkward dance of mutuality that is the very signature of a democratic culture…The presence of the impoverished mentally ill among us is not an eloquent expression of civil discourse, like a lecture in the library’s auditorium, but it speaks volumes nonetheless (10).

Ward places the library as a central barometer of the reality of the community it serves. The presence of homeless patrons in the library re-affirms the presence of the marginalized and homeless in society. Although it may be the role of social workers, homeless clinic workers, and other social service agencies to provide services and help to homeless patrons, the reality is that these agencies are often grossly under-funded and under-staffed. This leads to a situation where the library becomes a de facto homeless shelter. In some cases and in some libraries this de facto homeless shelter status can lead to resentment from librarians and other patrons.

Although it may not be appropriate for libraries to serve as de facto shelters, there are appropriate ways for libraries to serve homeless populations and cater to their unique needs. Many of these needs are for referrals and information (Shuman 1996). These referrals are sometimes for social service agencies, sometimes for job placements, and sometimes for free meals, or clothing. Other questions concern maps of an area, phone books or an area or other directional questions. Additionally, some questions concern seeking basic skills training or
computer skills. Many of the homeless patrons at the Boise Public Library are loyal computer class attendees.

Another successful example of a library working with a homeless population is the Cleveland Public Library (Marino 2008). The library has partnered with a homeless shelter to provide books for a homeless book club. The facilitator of the books club has “noticed that participants pick the place where the character is at the crossroads. They are at the same point, and they’re trying to get to someplace better” (Marino 2008). Reading allows them a way to make sense of their experience. How are libraries handling this and catering to the needs of homeless patrons and what is appropriate for us to provide? Example of book club for homeless men, chapter from down and out in the public library “along with the book chat, they have revealed pasts that contain enough despair-abuse, addictions, poverty, loss—to fill a thousand novels.

Libraries can also confront this issue by providing training to their employees about ways to successfully deal with homeless patrons and mentally ill patrons (Shuman 1994). Not all homeless patrons are mentally ill and not all mentally ill patrons are homeless but they do overlap at times. By giving staffs the tools to deal with homeless and mentally ill patrons with compassion and understanding libraries are better able to provide service to these marginalized patrons.

In closing, although homeless patrons bring different needs with them into the library, they are still valid needs and it is important for libraries and librarians to find ways to effectively support homeless patrons.
References


