

Extending Our Reach: Reducing Homelessness Through Library Engagement

“The best thing that libraries can do for the homeless is to treat them with the same status afforded to all other library patrons...the library has been a focal point of my homelessness.”

Kevin Barbieux, “The Homeless Guy”

Key Terms

Some common terms that relate to issues of homelessness include:

Homeless: Federally defined as “a person sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. living on the streets, for example) OR living in a homeless emergency shelter.”

Hidden homeless: These include people who are precariously housed and at eminent risk of becoming literally homeless. They may be doubled up with friends or relatives, or temporarily staying in a motel or sleeping in their cars. Hidden homeless refers to the fact they are not visibly homeless.

Chronic homelessness: Federally defined as “either (1) an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition who has been continuously homeless for a year or more, OR (2) an unaccompanied individual with a disabling condition who has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years.”

Throwaway youth: A term used to describe two types of circumstance: 1) A child who is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and with the child out of the household overnight; or 2) A child who is away from home and is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight.

Affordable housing: Housing, either ownership or rental, for which a household will pay no more than 30% of its gross annual income.

Continuum of care: Organization of service providers established by Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to oversee community planning around homelessness. Continuum work together to define needs, plan strategies, and prioritize funding for supportive housing services.

This Toolkit is designed to help librarians and library staff create meaningful library services for people who are experiencing homelessness.

The Homeless Population in the U.S.

The label “homeless” can be difficult for many people to use and understand. In many ways this term has come to be a label for people, replacing their identity. However, it is really only a description of a particular and, frequently temporary, housing condition.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) issues an Annual Homeless Assessment Report reporting the number of individuals and families who were homeless in the previous year. The report provides results of local counts of people homeless on a single night in January (Point-In-Time counts) and patterns of all people who used residential programs during the fiscal year.

According to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report:

- 649,917 people were experiencing homelessness during the Point-in-Time (PIT) count, an increase of 1.1 % over the previous year.
- 79,446 families—241,951 people were homeless on the night of the PIT count.
- 109,812 people were chronically homeless—persons with severe disabilities and long homeless histories.
- More than 1.59 million people spent at least 1 night in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program.

Homelessness among Youth

Homelessness among youth is a particular area of concern. According to the 2002 National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Run-away, and Thrownaway Children (NISMAART),

conducted by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, nearly 1.7 million youth nationwide were missing due to a runaway or throwaway episode. The homeless youth population is equally divided males and females.

The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 20% of homeless youth are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. This particular population, although resilient, may be especially vulnerable to victimization, mental health challenges, sexual exploitation and violence, and increased rates of suicide.

Equity of Access

Library services for people experiencing homelessness may be limited or denied in many circumstances, including:

- Library card or access policies requiring a permanent address
- Prohibitive fines, fees or other penalties or the perception that services incur fees
- Staff who are not trained in service to people who are poor or homeless or who are made uncomfortable by prejudices against people who are poor or homeless
- Limited promotion at the community centers and organizations (food banks, shelters, after-school programs) which serve people experiencing homelessness
- Limited access to the library building by either lack of transportation or service hours
- Lack of programs or resources that address people's experiences or current situations

Key Terms

Emergency housing: Temporary housing provided on an emergency basis. Stays at emergency shelters are limited in time and the amount of time varies among shelters. For some programs, emergency shelters are the first step in a series of steps as homeless adults and youth move from emergency to transitional to permanent housing.

Transitional housing: Housing that is more stable than emergency housing and that can be for a longer period of time, such as 1 to 2 years. Once homeless youth and adults have been stabilized in emergency housing, they may move to transitional housing as a next step.

Supportive housing: Subsidized housing directly tied to specific supportive services for homeless individuals or families who have come from emergency shelters or the streets. Supportive housing may be categorized as transitional (people may stay for up to 2 years) or permanent (there is no limit on the length of stay and clients abide by a lease).

Housing First: A term that has come to mean providing a chronic homeless person with direct and immediate access to housing. It reverses the traditional concept of "treatment first and then housing" to "housing first and then appropriate treatment." Housing first is a consumer driven model. It is producing successful outcomes for keeping people from returning to the streets.

Harm reduction: Harm reduction is a nonjudgmental philosophy that allows young people and adults to have input into their own recovery plans. A harm reduction approach begins with the person, allowing each person to progress at a comfortable pace.

Case management: The process of arranging for provision of an array of services and supports for an individual or family that is based on assessment of their unique needs and designed to address the specific needs identified.

These definitions come from a variety of sources, including: Larkinstreet.org; Anendinten.org; HUD; the Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources; National Resource Center on Domestic Violence

Steps to Getting Started

Take a breath. You did not create the situations that cause homelessness and you probably will not be the superhero who solves them all. You are here to do your part and you are not alone.

Open your mind. The best place to start is with our own feelings and perceptions. What do you think of when you think of homeless people? How do you think the library plays a role in their lives?

Get the stats. What is the reality of homelessness in your area? Check local statistics. Ask your local community leaders and service agencies for input. This may come in handy when you speak to your supervisor, the library board, local elected officials, or to library funders.

Read. There are many articles and books on homelessness. Read a few to help get a better understanding. Don't forget local newspapers, newsletters, and social media. You can even sign up for online newsletters, so you will automatically be kept current with issues, workshops, legislation and other topics related to homelessness.

Discuss. Share your concerns and plans with your colleagues. They are working in the same community as you and are probably as concerned and as uncertain about the same issues. Sometimes a team effort can be more meaningful and motivating than an individual one.

Don't Worry. You will make mistakes. Things will not always work out. Partners won't always come through. People will not always be as supportive as you would like. Just revise your plan and keep going.

Celebrate. You are learning and developing new and much-needed library services for some of your community members. Everyone benefits!

Essential Library Services for People Who Are Homeless

Libraries will be most successful in providing those services aligned with the general mission and purpose of libraries. For all of the other ideas of how to help those experiencing homelessness — food, clothing, personal or medical care — libraries can play an important role as partners or supporters of other service organizations.

Programming

Library programming is a popular service for all patrons. For the most part, people who are homeless want the same programming as other library users: computer classes, educational workshops, storytimes, arts and crafts, and social activities.

If there is something unique to programming for patrons who are homeless, it is the need for outreach and promotion. Physical barriers and social exclusion prevent many people who are homeless from getting to the library or learning about programs in a timely fashion. Make sure that shelters, organizations that work with people who are homeless, and transitional housing facilities regularly receive fliers, emails, and other promotional materials.

Programs of particular interest to people who are homeless may include programs on health, mortgage or rental assistance, and applying for government benefits.

When seeking ideas for outreach and programming, one of the best places to look for ideas is in local street newspapers. Street newspapers are usually written, edited, and filled with articles and opinion pieces from the viewpoint of people who are homeless.

Reference (or Preventative Librarianship)

Reference can be among the most essential services librarians can provide and it should be

one of the key pieces in serving library users who are homeless. Information of most need to people who are homeless or in jeopardy of becoming homeless may include where to find shelter, food or a shower; accessible medical care; help in finding employment; or how to find a professional that can help stop an eviction or foreclosure.

Many of these reference questions can be easily answered by having a list of local social services available at the reference desk, in literature racks or displays, or on a library resource page. To increase awareness and collaboration throughout the library, involve staff in researching contact information for social service organizations and develop a plan to make sure this information is regularly checked and updated.

Library Services to Young People in Transition

Libraries have a special place in the lives of children and young people. By far the most important consideration when working with young people in shelters or foster care is to help them recognize the public library as a consistent, safe and welcoming place.

Library cards are the first step to building a connection, so it is especially important for administrators and other decision-makers to examine library policies to make sure they are as inclusive as possible. If possible, be flexible when the situation warrants it.

Be aware that some young people have not had much experience with libraries or that their experiences have been negative ones. Look for ways to rebuild trust and convince young people that the library is worth a second chance. Framing the library as a source of free information and entertainment (computers! gaming! music!), a place to meet and hang out with friends, and a safe haven where they can escape from daily trials and tribulations, may get teens and kids looking at libraries in a whole new way.

Partnerships

In most communities, there are organizations that have the specific experience, training, and contacts to provide services to people who are homeless. Locating partners can be as easy as attending local government meetings, joining meet ups of social service organizations, consulting a directory of local social services, searching the Internet or phone book. Likely partners include:

- Transitional housing facilities
- Food banks and community organizations
- Health clinics and hospitals
- Faith-based organizations (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.)
- Educational institutions and after school programs

The library can play a key role as resource provider, community center, and facilitator for multi-organization collaborations. An initial conversation can spark ideas for larger conversations or just be a reminder of how the library can play a role in the lives of community members.

In the words of those we serve...

“I needed a book about how to live through this more than I needed to know I had somewhere to stay, to know I had a way to get to school or to know what I would have for dinner. I needed a book to prove to me that survival was possible.”
Sassafras Lowery, from introduction to the anthology Kicked Out, describing her experience at the library after being kicked out of her family’s home

“Even though people say that we’re victims and that we’re this and that, you can’t be a victim and vulnerable and survive on the streets, or be homeless. There comes a little bit of self-sufficiency, and a little bit of direction that’s of our own making...” *Homeless youth of color who identifies as queer*

“And it’s always good to be able to have a safe space to relax and just open a book and just let the words take you. And having a place you can do that safely, without being harassed or attacked or any of that is extremely ideal, and extremely beneficial to the reader and pretty much everyone involved.”
Homeless youth, when asked what he would want librarians to know about him

Policies

Library policies can often stand in the way of providing equitable services to those experiencing homelessness. Developing effective policies and helping library staff properly utilize them can be the most important steps. Policies should strive for clarity, be posted or readily available, and be enforced equally.

Use of Materials

The library's collections, available for borrowing or for use in the library, provide a tremendous benefit to all members of the community. As a general practice, policies dictating the use of materials should be as simple as possible to help ensure full use by those within the community. Where there is the need to register users for service, registration policies should be as straightforward and inclusive as possible. When developing usage policies, consider:

- Does the policy reflect the Library Bill of Rights Article V, "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views"?
- Do any user registration requirements (utility bills, driver's license) preclude certain populations from obtaining borrowing privileges?
- Are alternative forms of identification made acceptable and are library staff aware of the alternatives?
- In the event individuals cannot obtain immediate borrowing privileges, are staff prepared to suggest other options, including use of the materials within the library or a free day pass for the use of computers?
- Are there possible exceptions or alternatives to fines for children?

Personal Conduct

Libraries can and should develop policies that

outline what is considered appropriate and inappropriate use of and conduct within the library and its facilities. Conduct policies should help patrons understand the environment of the library and help staff maintain a conducive space for all users. When developing policies on patron conduct, consider:

- Does the policy respect the rights of individuals under the First Amendment?
- Do library staff and patrons understand warnings, processes for appeal, and means of regaining admittance to the library should conduct violations occur?
- Do policies provide a clearly understandable measure or determination for disruptive conduct (e.g. "behavior poses a nuisance to other patrons", "an intention to disrupt") avoiding arbitrary or debatable standards or expectations?
- There is a difference between deliberate behaviors and behaviors or circumstances beyond the patron's control. Do library staff understand how to effectively address either behavior as it affects the library environment?

As much as there should be a focus on patron conduct, there should also be a focus on staff conduct. It is more than just treating all users alike—it is treating all users to an excellent customer service experience. That includes being helpful, respectful, and friendly no matter the outward appearance of an individual.

Issues of patron conduct should be respectfully addressed. Some issues—odor, cleanliness—may require a refined approach, seeking to provide help to the individual (ready print-outs of shelters, clothes banks, etc.) as much as maintaining a comfortable environment for other patrons. In all situations, staff should also be prepared to conduct themselves responsibly and safely, understanding when situations escalate beyond their control and when to request medical or security support.

Model Programs

Baltimore County (Mary.) Public Library Street Card-Resources for Help

<http://www.bcpl.info/community/street-card>

Created by the Baltimore County Public Library in cooperation with the Baltimore County Communities for the Homeless, the Street Card provides information on employment, food and emergency assistance, health, financial support, legal issues, and shelter. Information is available in print and online.

Denver (Colo.) Public Library Community Technology Center

<http://denverlibrary.org/ctc>

Denver Public Library's (DPL) Community Technology Center team provides regular visits to the area day shelter for homeless and low-income women. Women receive instruction on job interviewing techniques and technology skills. Once class is over, participants receive bus tokens to go to the main library for a tour and to get library cards.

Pima County (Ariz.) Public Library Homeless Service Agencies

<http://www.library.pima.gov/community/guides/homeless.php>

Pima County Public Library's Homeless Service Agencies guide provides information (phone number, address, description) for local services. Information is organized into categories (veterans, domestic violence, youth) which may help individuals find the specific help they need.

Queens (N.Y.) Library

<http://www.queenslibrary.org>

New York's Queens Library provides outreach service to homeless shelters. The library coordinates these services with the city's Department of Education family shelter liaison. The outreach service promotes the library's programs, events, and services. The library also highlights family offerings, children's programs, and job search help.

San Francisco (Calif.) Public Library

<http://www.sfpl.org/>

San Francisco Public Library formed a homeless and poverty outreach library team in partnership with the city's Department of Public Health and the SFFirst unit (San Francisco Full-Integrated Recovery Services Team). The full-time, in house social worker and the SFFirst director, a psychiatrist, provide staff training to better serve the community. Their team includes formerly homeless people who go through a 12-week vocational program. These "health and safety associates" reach out to homeless patrons in the library and distribute information on where to find shelter, showers and hot meals.

San Jose (Calif.) Public Library Homelessness—A Panel Discussion

<http://sjpl.org/tags/homeless>

In an effort to improve library services to those experiencing homelessness, the San Jose Public Library initiated a panel discussion to help library professionals learn about the issue. The event brought together library professionals, students, and social workers and the resulting web page compiled resources, statistics, and information.

Traverse Area Library District

<http://www.tadl.org/>

Traverse Area District Library partners with a faith-based winter shelter to offer on-site book club meetings. This partnership fosters outreach and promotes community through open dialogue and shared experiences.

OLOS Resources on Delicious



Interested in more resources? See OLOS's annotated list of resources on Delicious:

<http://www.delicious.com/alaolos/poorhomeless>

ALA Policy Statement: Library Services to the Poor

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies. Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people's needs and deliver relevant services. And within the American Library Association the coordinating mechanisms of programs and activities dealing with poor people in various divisions, offices, and units should be strengthened, and support for low-income liaison activities should be enhanced.

The American Library Association shall implement these objectives by:

1. Promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.
2. Promoting the publication, production, purchase, and ready accessibility of print and nonprint materials that honestly address the issues of poverty and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.
3. Promoting full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislative programs in support of low-income services and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families.
4. Promoting training opportunities for librarians, in order to teach effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people.
5. Promoting the incorporation of low-income programs and services into regular library budgets in all types of libraries, rather than the tendency to support these projects solely with "soft money" like private or federal grants.
6. Promoting equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.
7. Promoting supplemental support for library resources for and about low-income populations by urging local, state, and federal governments, and the private sector, to provide adequate funding.
8. Promoting increased public awareness—through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity—of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
9. Promoting the determination of output measures through the encouragement of community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the needs of low-income people and involving both anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments.
10. Promoting direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
11. Promoting training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.
12. Promoting networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.
13. Promoting the implementation of an expanded federal low-income housing program, national health insurance, full-employment policy, living minimum wage and welfare payments, affordable day care, and programs likely to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty itself.
14. Promoting among library staff the collection of food and clothing donations, volunteering personal time to anti-poverty activities and contributing money to direct-aid organizations.
15. Promoting related efforts concerning minorities and women, since these groups are disproportionately represented among poor people.

ALA American Library Association
Office for Literacy and Outreach Services