

It Takes a Village – How Public Libraries Collaborate with Community Agencies to Serve People Who Are Homeless in the United States

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Abstract:

This paper will cover the following: the status of homelessness in the United States; why people become homeless; how people experience homelessness; and the role of libraries in serving people who are homeless. At the conclusion of the article, there is a bibliography on recent articles on public library service to people who are homeless in the United States.

Key Words: Homelessness, libraries and homelessness, United States and homelessness

Ryan Dowd, (Dowd, 2013) former director of the Hesse House in Richmond, Virginia, describes what it's like to be homeless. He says:

It's boring.

There is no privacy.

There is no bathroom.

It's hard to stay clean – your body or your clothes.

It's hard to stay safe.

It's hard to find food.

There is no control over space.

There is no physical space entirely your own.

There is no alone time.

You can only have limited possessions and they are incredibly important to you.

You need to protect your possessions.

It's hard to sleep – others are loud.

*It's hard to sleep – someone might steal your possessions.
It's exhausting.*

Dowd goes on to say that it is dangerous to be homeless. Women who are homeless are raped more often than the non-homeless population. They are often viewed as prostitutes and it makes them untrusting of others. Experiencing homelessness is bad for a person's self-esteem. Other people are condescending and this discourages eye-contact. Trust is low because people experiencing homelessness have often experienced both personal failure that caused the homelessness and the failure of community or government agencies to provide assistance.

Status of homelessness in the United States

There are conflicting data on the status of people who are homeless in the United States. Overall, there seem to be fewer people who are homeless but while it is declining in some states (32), it is growing in other states (17) and growing more in large urban areas. (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015)

While there are conflicting data on who is homeless, the following data are typical of the percentages reported (National Student Campaign against Hunger and Homelessness, 2013):

- In the U.S. more than 3.5 million people experience homelessness each year
- 63% of people who are homeless are single individuals
- 37% of people who are homeless are in family units; the faster growing of people experiencing homelessness
 - 88% of these family units are headed by women
- 23% are US Military veterans
- 8% are children alone
- 30% have experience domestic violence
- 20-25% suffer from mental illness

Causes of homelessness

There are 3 main factors that cause people to experience homelessness (National Student Campaign against Hunger and Homelessness, 2013).

Economic Factors

There is a severe lack of affordable housing in the United States. According to Students against Hunger, "the growing gap between wage earnings and the cost of housing in the United States leaves millions of families and individuals unable to make ends meet." This is compounded by low wages that make it difficult for people to afford both food AND housing. The lack of universal health care causes some people who experience a sudden illness, chronic disease, or an accident to be financially devastated.

Political Factors

As the US economy worsened, local, state and national federal assistance programs were slashed. Services in housing, employment, medical care, mental health, etc. were cut and local offices closed. Just as the economy got worse, the number of people who became homeless increased and access to public assistance decreased. The conservative turn of US politics also resulted in an attitude that people are to blame for their own poverty and situation, and, thus, there was no incentive to restore services. Programs that were designed to help, such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) impose requirements such as sanctions, work requirements, time limits, and immigrant restrictions that made it hard for people to be eligible for benefits. Without assistance, people must choose between food, transportation, medical care, and housing to survive. Housing often loses

Social & Medical Factors

While economic factors are the main causes of homelessness, long-term issues like mental illness, drug addiction, and alcoholism can exacerbate situations of poverty and put people at greater risk of homelessness. Surveys of people experiencing homelessness show that about 25% of the homeless population suffers from some form of mental illness; the high cost of health insurance leaves homeless people without access to proper care to treat mental illness. Drug and alcohol addiction affect about 20% of the homeless population who, again, often lack access to proper, affordable care for these illnesses.

Why libraries?

Libraries have been populated by people who are homeless probably as long as there have been free public libraries in the United States. It's not hard to understand why. Look back at the description of the homeless provided by Mr. Dowd (Dowd, 2015).

It's boring. Libraries relieve boredom.

There is no privacy. People in libraries are usually quiet and leave you alone.

There is no bathroom. There is a free bathroom

It's hard to stay clean – your body or your clothes. And you can wash your body and your clothes – as long as you don't get caught.

It's hard to stay safe. Libraries are safe.

It's hard to find food. Well, libraries usually don't have food, at least not free but even that is changing (see below.)

There is no control over space. There is some control of your space even though it is not entirely your own.

There is no alone time. You can sit, alone, by yourself, and try to sleep.

You can only have limited possessions and they are incredibly important to you.

You need to protect your possessions. Your possessions are usually safe.

It's hard to sleep – others are loud. Libraries are quiet.

It's hard to sleep – someone might steal your possessions. Libraries are secure.

It's exhausting. Libraries are usually relaxing.

And while libraries can't provide a salary or a job, they can help people find jobs, and find assistance, and programs that educate and entertain. As local and state agencies closed local offices, they put their programs online and told people to go the public library to get assistance and learn how to file for benefits online. Libraries all over the country took on this role for everybody who needed it in the community, including those experiencing homelessness.

American Library Association policies on serving the homeless

The American Library Association (ALA) first passed a resolution on "Library Service to the Poor" in 1990. In its current version it says (ALA, 1990):

*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 policy continues with "Policy Objectives" which include:

- Promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.
- Promoting training to sensitize library staff to issues effecting poor and homeless people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries
- 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.

In addition to these, other "policy objectives" urge dealing with poor (and homeless) people in a respectful way; lobbying for state and federal programs for the poor and homeless; and increasing local funding for staff and programs to assist people who are homeless (ALA, 1990).

ALA has issued two publications in the last five years that deal specifically with library services for people who are poor or homeless. In 2011, ALA published "Outreach Resources for Services to Poor and Homeless People", (ALA, 2011). While the data in this document is now outdated, it links to US national agencies and organizations that provide current data on homeless populations in the United States. It also includes a list of barriers to serving the poor and homeless:

- 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 which serve people experiencing poverty or homelessness [Basically, lack of networking on the part of libraries]
- Limited access to the building by either limited means of transportation or service hours [and I would add, waking those who are sleeping]
- Lack of programs or resources that address people's experiences or current situations

The second is "Extending Our Reach: Reducing Homelessness through Library Engagement," published (Winkelstein, 2011). This publication defines terms, describes homeless populations in the United States, and indicates ways that libraries can begin to serve the homeless. It also includes essential services for people who are homeless, including: programming, reference, services to young people, partnerships with community agencies, use of materials and the Internet, and personal conduct.

Examples of library service to people who are homeless in the United States

Representatives from the Denver Public Library, the Dallas Public Library and the Salt Lake City Public Library spoke on this topic at the American Library Association annual conference in San Francisco in June, 2015. The information below comes from notes this author took at that program and also the power point presentations which the speakers generously shared with me. The Resource List at the end of this paper provides information about additional US programs serving the people experiencing homelessness.

First a word about language. More and more libraries and agencies are using the term "people experiencing homeless" to raise consciousness that not everyone who is homeless is permanently so, or even homeless on a long term basis. Many people experience homelessness for a short time only and are then able to get back on track. David Pirtle from the National Coalition for the Homeless describes it this way: "Homelessness is not a character flaw, it's a circumstance" (Pirtle, 2014).

Denver Public Library

Director, Michelle Jeske and Elissa Hardy, licensed social worker and Community Resource Specialist, represented the Denver Public Library. (Jeske, M. and Hardy, 2015).

Denver is an urban city of about 640,000 people in a metro area of about 2.3 million people. A survey conducted in 2015 identified 6,130 individuals experiencing homelessness in the seven county metro Denver area. Of these, 37% were women and 49% of "households" were families with children. Additionally, 25% of the individuals surveyed were newly homeless, meaning they have been homeless less than a year and this is their first time to experience homelessness. Many of the people who were homeless used the Denver Public Library so it was to the library's and community's advantage to cooperate in dealing with this issue.

On its own, Denver PL, over the last few years, has been increasingly investing in staff support and outreach to people experiencing homelessness. In 2012, a small group of staff members concerned about better serving library customers experience homelessness organized a forum on homelessness for library employees, resulting in the creation of a Homeless Services Action Committee at the library and reaching out to other community organizations that also serve the homeless. The Action Committee researched barriers on library service to people experiencing homelessness and what other urban libraries were doing in this service area.

The overarching goals of the program are to:

- Connect with the population of people experiencing homelessness
- Refer them to services they need
- Reduce incidents at the library requiring professional intervention
- Train staff
- Remove barriers to service
- Work with as many community agencies as possible
- Make the library safe and productive for all

The result was a proposal to hire a social worker to work at Denver PL and develop programs and services. This was funded in the 2015 budget year and Elissa Hardy was hired. Hiring a social worker emphasizes DPLs commitment to equal access to library services for all people who live in Denver, regardless of their personal or economic situation. Staff felt a social worker would

effectively connect with the library's at-risk community of customers located at the Central Library and branch libraries, connect them to the social services they may need, remove barriers they face in receiving library services, while effectively reducing the number of security and emergency incidents library staff and emergency first responders have to address, making the library a safer and more comfortable place for everyone.

Director Jeske goes on to say:

One goal of hiring a full-time social worker was to decrease 911 [emergency calls to the police.] There will always be times when the library has to call 911, but if the social worker can intervene with someone who has mental health issues, connect with that person when he or she is having a good day, and then she might be able to prevent unnecessary calls.

The role of Hardy is also to help those experiencing homelessness who want to improve their lives, find jobs, find housing, apply for benefits, and participate productively in society. Denver PL staff often feel they are in the position of having to offer social services when they have not been trained to do so. One of her roles is to train staff in what benefits and services are available and to train them to deflate difficult situations. The program is currently only funded for two years but Denver PL hopes it will be continued as long as there is a need.

The key to Hardy's success is collaborating with other community agencies who also serve or are impacted by people experiencing homelessness. These include homeless service providers, mental health centers, Denver's Department of Human Services, Veterans Administration, plus city government. DPL also participates in the national Vulnerability Index – Service Prioritization and Decision Assistance Tool (VI-SPDAT). This is a nationally developed assessment tool used to evaluate individuals experiencing homelessness to determine how best to help each individual, rather than general categories (100,000 homes, 2014).

Hardy participates in a group of these agencies to discuss how they can work together to better serve people experiencing homelessness with the goal to increase empathy and compassion leading to more community effort in the resolution and prevention of homelessness.

Dallas Public Library

Jo Giudice, Director of the Dallas Public Library, spoke on "They're Our Customers, Too! Dallas Public Library's Homeless Engagement Initiative," (Giudice, 2015)

Dallas PL believes it is important to interact with people experiencing homelessness and get to know them personally. Dallas PL has greeters at the door who greet all customers, including those experiencing homelessness, and ask how they can help them. One of their early assumptions was that people experiencing homelessness needed education and a high school degree. They were surprised to discover that 80% of this population had either a secondary or college degree. In response to this need, in 2013, Dallas PL established the Homeless Engagement Initiative (HEI)

The first activity of HEI was a program called "Coffee and Conversation," aimed at providing a place where the homeless population of Dallas can talk about topics that "unite us, rather than divide us." Coffee & Conversation is designed to provide a space for open dialogue on topics that unite us, rather than divide us. Its focus is engaging the homeless population of Dallas. They discuss the special needs of people who are experiencing homelessness and also a host of different topics such as literature, literacy, art and culture, crafting, sports, fitness, and health. Staff spent two months getting to know customers better and personally inviting them to the first session of the program. The program was marketed through fliers on each floor of the library and staff personally invited people to the first session. The program costs about \$50 a month for refreshments (ALA Programming Librarian, 2015).

Coffee and Conversation is an excellent venue in which to collaborate with other organizations and agencies also serving people experiencing homelessness. Some programs include presentations from groups such as the VA hospital, City of Dallas Housing, HIV testing, and Girl Scouts. The presentations are short and representatives are encouraged to engage one on one with attendees.

One of the intended consequences of the Homeless Engagement Initiative and Coffee and Conversations is to make the people experiencing homelessness more aware of the library so that they police their own behavior, so that they care what happens in the library and what other people do there. They can influence the behavior of people who are homeless to, again, as with the Denver PL, reduce the number of times that the police department has to be called for intervention.

Other programs in the Homeless Engagement Initiative include the Street View Podcast and Art and Creativity. Street View Podcast is recorded at the Central Library with Rashad Dickerson serving as the show's main host. He interviews both those serving the homeless and those experiencing homelessness. Rashad Dickerson is himself homeless and "offers a unique voice for the show and for the homeless community.

Art and Creativity is a program to help people experiencing homelessness keep busy in the library. They have the opportunity to see movies, discuss books, and create crafts. The library provided cameras and created an exhibit of the photos taken of the urban environment.

The Homeless Engagement and Leadership Program uses volunteers from AmeriCorps (a sort of domestic Peace Corps) to help people in need of social service programs. The HELP desk sees about 140 people a month and refers these clients to multiple service programs.

Giudice concludes by saying:

Our ultimate goal... is to focus on what people (staff and customers) have in common regardless of their housing status. We seek to provide an opportunity to keep open dialogue with each other and remind each other of our commonalities so the mutual respect bleeds over into how we interact with each other at the library. We do not use it to constantly remind customers they are homeless – focusing too much on service offerings will do this.

Salt Lake City Public Library (SLCPL)

John Spears, Director of the Salt Lake City Public Library spoke on "They're Our Customers, Too: Engaging the Homeless at Your Library," (Spears, 2015).

Spears began his presentation highlighting the backlash he received from Salt Lake City residents when the library proposed offering services to people experiencing homelessness and keep the library open 25 hours instead of discouraging this population from coming to the library. For example, letters he received said:

My concern is tax payer money and the homeless sleeping there. I know you can't turn them away but maybe block off certain areas where they cannot go....

I have stopped taking my children to the downtown library due to large homeless population throughout the building. This will only increase that problem and keep me away in addition to my kids. What a terrible idea.

Spears identified six principles under which the library developed their program:

- Homelessness is a condition, not a characteristic
- People who are homeless are constituents of the library
- The library needs to be knowledgeable of all community services that can help people who are homeless
- Library staff need to be educated and trained about serving people who are homeless
- Embrace a leadership role in your community's response to homelessness
- Bring service providers into the library
- Provide the same level of service to all who come to the library

In implementing these principles, Spears said that the library is on the front line. It is a major point of contact for people experiencing homelessness and can also be a major point of service. In their leadership role, SLCPL staff worked with other community agencies to establish goals for a community approach to serving people who are homeless:

- Create housing
- Make placing people in housing the top priority
- Create day services to help people (a key role of the library)
- Locate these services where the people are (another key role of the library)
- Emphasize a safe environment for everybody
- Be a national pioneer in serving people who are experiencing homelessness

The library has three social workers assisting people who are homeless and plan on hiring a fourth. They serve as a host venue for Volunteers of America (another domestic Peace Corps program). One of their more successful programs is Project Uplift, a community fair with representatives from as many community agencies and services as possible, including food, gifts, haircuts, photos, and one-on-one consultations.

Spears concluded saying that SLCPL has provided 3,527 hours of care coordination; 197 hours of staff consultation/training; and 921 unique individuals served.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've presented some definitions of homelessness, the status of homelessness in the United States, the causes of homelessness, policies of the American Library Association on serving people who are homeless, and why libraries are popular with people who are homeless. Finally, I presented three examples of major urban libraries who serve the homeless.

Two quotations from *Extending Our Reach: Reducing Homelessness through Library Engagement* illustrates the way people who are homeless think about libraries.

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. (Homeless man)

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 attached or any of that is extremely ideal, and extremely beneficial to the reader and pretty much everyone involved. (Homeless youth)

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