THE HOMELESS: A CURRENT ISSUE WITHIN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of the homeless within the public library setting. It asks the question of what approach should be taken when interacting with this population. It provides suggestions and examples of trainings, programs, and outreach from various public libraries across the United States.
What approach should be taken when interacting with the homeless and low income population at our public libraries? This is a question that many urban libraries have to answer. All too often the homeless are referred to as a “problem” within these organizations. While this is a population that can be a challenge to work with, they are a part of the community that the library has a duty to serve. In fact, it could be considered a matter of pride that the public library is an important resource for this population, and should be treated in that manner. The question is: “What role should the public library serve for the homeless of their community?”

Many people are forced to live on the margins and cannot participate in society as equals. Remedies are rarely immediate or easy, but libraries are well-equipped to do more and better.\(^1\) Different libraries approach this issue in different ways. Some libraries simply choose to ignore the “problem” and try not to rock the boat. Others create policies like rules against sleeping, offensive body odor, or bans on bulky bags or bedrolls in the library in order to deal with the issues created by this population. This approach begs the question of the legal ramifications as to whether these policies are little more than “poverty profiling”.\(^2\) However, some public libraries have accepted this challenge as an opportunity to make a positive impact on an underserved population. Some libraries take the approach of focusing on the needs of this community, while others are finding ways to create relationships with this underserved population and engage them in a meaningful way. According to John Kretzmann and John McKnight from the Institute for Policy Research, a needs-based strategy can guarantee only

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survival, and can never lead to serious change or community development. Therefore, both approaches are important to the community in different ways. Libraries across the country are tackling these issues through innovative training, creating programs to engage them through community outreach, and creating programs specifically for the homeless and low income patron at the library itself.

One way to address the public library’s role in interacting with the homeless is through innovative training. This was the approach taken by the Seattle Public Library and the King County Library system. They brought in community organizations who specialize in working with the homeless youth in their area to provide interactive training for their teen librarians. Once they completed their training, the librarians brainstormed ways to put their newfound knowledge into use at their respective libraries. In providing this training, the libraries also created invaluable community partnerships with these organizations. Shelley Quezada, an adjunct faculty member at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College in Boston, serves as consultant for the unserved to the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners. With them she helped stage a "Gimme Shelter Workshop" at a Massachusetts Library Association meeting. Speakers included public library officials from Boston and Worcester and Jim Greene, with the City of Boston Emergency Shelter Commission, who urged librarians to visit the shelters to understand the library's appeal to its residents. "Just doing a

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workshop makes a statement about the importance of a topic such as homelessness and how libraries can serve them," Quezada said.5

Another way to serve the homeless and low income population in a library’s community is to create programs that engage them in a meaningful way. There are various approaches to this concept as every community is different. One way to accomplish this goal is to provide services on site at shelters and locations serving this community. The Multnomah County Library in Oregon has created a shelter delivery program in which they distribute paperbacks on a monthly basis to shelters and transition homes. The Live Oak Public Libraries in Georgia provide story time at six different shelters.6 The Southwest Oklahoma City Public Library sets up an information table about their available resources at the local food bank’s food resource center on a weekly basis as well as a permanent drop collection available to their clients. The Denver Public Library makes quarterly visits to a woman’s day shelter to acquaint women with technology and the library as well as provide training on job interview techniques. The Traverse Area District Library in Michigan holds a book club at a local homeless shelter in effort to get to know their homeless patrons on a more personal basis.7 While these programs are as diverse as their communities, they are all working to serve their homeless and low income populations by meeting them where they are.


Creating engaging programs for the homeless and low income populations that operate within the library itself is another way to have a positive impact on their community. Libraries across the country are implementing this in a variety of ways. At the San Jose Public Library, they have created a program called “Social Workers in the Library”. This is a program that could be replicated at any library in the United States. Every fourth Monday of the month, members of the National Association of Social Workers serve as volunteer counselors at the library. They make referrals to a wide range of organizations that serve the various needs of the community.8 At the Kitsap Regional Library system in Washington, Seth Ciotti has crafted a successful tech program to aid homeless youth. His program is called BiblioTEC, and it focuses on the merging of library and technology. Ciotti created a one hundred-hour curriculum that spanned forty to fifty different types of programs such as robotics, electronic chess boards, and even a rover, trying to match interests with computer applications.9 The Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma City has created a program called “Share Your Story”. In August and September 2015, they are showing a special photography exhibit highlighting the impact of libraries on the homeless community in OKC. It features original works photographed by local artists and members of the homeless community. This is a great way to engage the local homeless population as well as spread awareness to the community. Each of these libraries are taking different approaches to their programming, but all are having a positive impact on the homeless and low income populations of their community from inside the doors of their library.

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There are many possibilities for public libraries across the United States to have a positive impact on the homeless and low income population of their community. Whether it is through trainings, community outreach, or programming, it is important that public libraries make an effort to do their part. This population is often already there. They are setting at the computers, resting in the chairs, or browsing the books. Librarians have a choice to either continue to marginalize them as most of society does, or create meaningful relationships with them and possibly make a difference in their lives. It is a simple choice to make, but one that can have a major impact on the community in which they serve.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


