

## **Serving the Underserved**

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## Abstract

Urban, rural, and suburban public libraries across North America serve homeless and transient patrons as part of their patron population. Providing library services to these patrons can be challenging due to the external pressures facing the patrons. Libraries often struggle with finding the best ways to work with and serve these patrons. Homeless patrons have a variety of needs and it can prove challenging for library staff to address those needs cursorily, to say nothing of addressing them in a more profound and lasting way. This is in part due to a lack of specific occupational training and is aggravated by misconceptions associated with homelessness. Some public libraries have implemented training and services designed to meet the societal needs for this specific patron population, often with varying levels of success. Other like-minded who serve this population have experienced greater levels of success. It is the library's goal to break down any barriers being identified as restrictive for the homeless and transient patrons and to adequately train staff to be comfortable serving all patrons equally. By identifying the specific needs of this impoverished demographic and implementing successful training methods, our group hopes to develop a basic training model to aid library staff who are serving or will serve homeless and transient patrons.

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Libraries are responsible for serving patrons regardless of national origin, background, creed, or financial attainment. Libraries are community spaces for everyone to enjoy and are among the public and private institutions who serve a group of patrons who may be considered the underserved; those patrons who are in a state of homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are a part of the overall population who use public libraries. Library staff and administration are receptive to assisting the homeless, but are often at a loss how to do so. Many library employees cite a lack of proper training in how to work with patrons who experience homelessness.

Library staff, and members of the public, will often ask ‘just who are the homeless?’ Homeless patrons come from all walks of life and are found in almost every municipality and county in the United States. The Department of Housing and Urban Development reports that just under two-thirds of the homeless in 2018 were housed each night, while just over one-third were unsheltered. According to a 2018 report issued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, over 553,000 people in the United States were in a state of homelessness on a typical evening. HUD has also reported that the homeless population in the United States has experienced a slight increase in the last few years. Georgia, while experiencing a numerical decline in the homeless population, has over 9,000 homeless persons on a given night according to HUD. Homeless patrons often struggle to find basic needs, and may see the library as a type of refuge. Some homeless patrons will seek out public libraries for restrooms, no cost resources and programs, controlled climate, and a physically safe space (Collins, 2017).

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Homeless patrons may require a different type of customer service than other patrons due to their unique situations. Library staff strive to serve all patrons who walk through the doors of the library, but often find serving homeless patrons to be a unique challenge. Librarians are often asked to serve as surrogate mental health workers (Ford, 2019). The *Washington Post* has reported that library science curricula has not kept pace with training staff to work with the homeless, the mentally ill, or patrons who are experiencing both conditions (Gunderman & Stephens, 2015). Libraries with large numbers of homeless patrons, such as the San Francisco Public Library, are reaching out to assist homeless patrons as part of larger efforts (Berry, 2018). Other libraries, including the Racine Public Library in Wisconsin, are offering patrons access to social workers (Rogan, 2019). Library social workers often provide training to library staff members in working with homeless patrons (Schacter, 2017). Other public libraries conduct outreach and visits to local homeless shelters (Luby, 2016).

Serving homeless patrons within public libraries can be viewed through the lens of the Clear Impact performance based accountability system. There are four key measures of this model that could be applied to library services in this regard. The first measure would examine the level and quantity of service provided to the patron. The second measure would determine how well the service was delivered. The third measure would focus on how much change the library produced for the individual patron. And the final measure examines the quality of the change that was produced.

The fourth measure would be the hardest one to measure, and would be the greatest source of frustration for librarians. Unlike a craftsman or artisan who works on a product from start to finish, and can then look with satisfaction at a well-done completed product, the librarian

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may never know the quality of change they have produced for a library patron experiencing homelessness.

A patron may enter the library and ask a public service employee for information on local homeless resources. The patron might be provided with a brief list on note paper of local agencies with phone numbers. The patron then takes the list and leaves. The librarian may never know that the patron then called one of the agencies and was paired with housing. The library may offer a great quantity of services to homeless patrons, but the quality of these services may remain elusive unless measuring only services offered and used within the library. A homeless patron requesting computer access may have a high quality experience if they are simply allowed to use a computer.

Measuring delivery can also be a bit subjective. A goal of almost all public libraries is to provide high quality customer service. Customer service can draw patrons or drive them away based upon the perception of the service. Library staff may consciously or unconsciously provide a different level of customer service to patrons they perceive to be or known to be homeless. Some libraries and librarians may go out of their way to provide a strong delivery of library services in an effort to help improve the lives of these patrons. Other staff may provide a lesser or more abrupt service. This may be due to the staff member's perception of the homeless, or due to a lack of confidence and skill in working with these patrons.

As with any new or uncomfortable situation, training is needed to better equip library staff at all levels in working with the homeless. Increased training or resource access can help remove negative stigmas of the library in the minds of the homeless, encouraging the idea that the library is a welcome environment for all (Hansen, 2017). There are several reasons why specific training for working with the homeless is paramount especially when the National

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Alliance on Mental Illness estimates 46% of unsheltered people suffer from mental illness (Hubert, 2018). To say training is enough is in itself too general. Homeless patrons and employees face a number of challenges, and each requires its own specific training.

Mental illness of some type affects nearly half of all homeless people. It is easy to remind library staff of this fact, but it should not be the expectation for staff to determine which homeless patrons are suffering from such debilitations. Nor should staff attempt to diagnose possible illnesses and/or offer up solutions. A more appropriate action for staff is to inform homeless patrons of available resources where diagnoses and suitable solutions are discussed with social service professionals or medical doctors. In fact, it should be an expectation of staff to do so when appropriate.

A common library staff complaint when working with the homeless is the smells homeless bring into the library and their place of work. Simply, the homeless do not have access to fresh water in ways sheltered people do. Lack of freshwater limits their access to showering and laundering of clothes. Staff should not be expected to provide fresh water or laundering services, but staff can potentially help alleviate the smells by informing homeless patrons of any local social service outlets who do provide such services.

One of the best tools to have on hand for all staff members is local organizational resource guides that are updated continually with the purpose of providing staff current information of what resources are available for homeless patrons. No library staff member can be expected to know and remember all local resources and what services the organizations provide. As with any reference-type interaction, the amount of time the patron will spend with the staff member is short. Having a readily prepared document to refer to or hand to the patron can make all the difference in actually providing assistance or missing out on the opportunity.

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Just as it's the expectation of library to proceed with empathy and provide informational assistance to homeless patrons, it should be the expectation of library administrators to provide training for their staff. Consider hosting staff development days or specific training events focused on understanding the challenges homeless people face. Invite homeless advocates, former homeless individuals or shelter administrators to share their experiences and knowledge with working with the homeless on a daily basis (Lynch)

Libraries are always on the search for impactful and mutually beneficial partnerships. Consider the steps the Z. J. Loussac Library in Anchorage, Alaska has taken to assist their homeless patrons. In 2015, the library entered into a partnership with the University of Alaska to allow student interns to be onsite at the library. Their purpose was simple: the interns would work as social servants to assist all homeless patrons who were looking for employment.

*“That positive relationship you build with an individual allows you to create confidence in that person to reach out to access needed services, which is scary, and overwhelming. But when they have the support and experience of a positive human interface, you create confidence in the person to take the challenge and reach out to access services.” ~ Rebecca Barker*

Libraries have even taken the step in some instances of hiring full-time social workers to help integrate homeless patrons with library services (Hansen, 2017). About 25 libraries nationwide employ social workers (Bookwalter, 2017). If partnering with a university or outright hiring of a professional social worker are not options, consider partnering with a local social services organization. The professional organization can provide a worker to assist the homeless patrons with the issues they face. This reduces the expectations on library staff and connects the homeless population with professionals in a location they naturally navigate to.

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Finally, some libraries are taking the progressive steps of hiring former homeless people. The San Francisco Public Library employs a staff of six “HASAs” or health and safety associates (Kritz, 2017). The broad idea is to hire people who have been homeless and understand the issues the homeless face on a very personal level. The HASAs primary focus is to make sure all patrons feel welcome including their homeless patrons. “I’m proud of myself for having been through what I’ve been through and now it’s a full circle, and I’m on the other end of giving services to people whose shoes I used to be in,” says Joe Banks, HASA. “That’s a pretty awesome thing.” (Kritz)

Library staff are not expected to diagnose mental illnesses or offer suggestions for such debilitations; however, library staff can actively take measures beyond information sharing and acquiring training to make a difference for their homeless patrons. One of the best ways to make all patrons feel welcome at the library is to engage them with programming and outreach.

One of the best ways to connect with patrons of all ages and economic statuses is simply to talk to them. Coffee and Conversations is a great program to offer homeless patrons. The premise is to simply set up a space that is relaxed and welcoming and encourage patrons to talk about the issues they face. This program idea was originally implemented by the Dallas Public Library and quickly adopted by many other library systems. “I’m really here to learn from you guys,” said Austin Taylor, who was formerly homeless, to about 20 participants. “I want to know, and Goodwill wants to know, what do you need? What can make life better?” (Campbell, 2017)

Outreach is not always the easiest sell to all library staff. Many librarians do not prefer to leave the comfort of the desk much less the walls of building. In order to take effective measures to combat what homeless people face, librarians who interact daily with homeless patrons must

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leave the building and make themselves available to all patrons. No one is suggesting librarians visit tent cities but library staff should be open to making themselves available provided the environment is safe and the purpose of the visit is attempting to make a difference. Just like all library patrons, transportation to and the accessibility of the library itself can be a barrier. Library staff should attempt to eliminate the barrier when appropriate.

As a deficiency for resources persists, libraries will continue to do what they can to fill the gap and serve. This means librarians will need to seek training and support of local agencies who support the homeless and transient in need. Identifying those in need is a challenge as is referring patrons to the best resource to fit their needs. Not all agree with the presence of the homeless in public libraries. As already mentioned, “the homeless population, often barred from other social institutions, frequently finds refuge in public libraries, gaining both physical and social access” but some oppose their presence (Dowd, 42). By allowing patrons to sleep, use the bathrooms for cleaning, a comfortable place to get out of the elements, access books and technology and participate in events where all people are welcome, librarians are certainly filling a need but there are challenges.

Such challenges were recently researched, by Georgia’s PINNACLE Institute students, in a survey conducted targeting libraries in Georgia. The results varied depending on the region and services provided within the cities in which the libraries resided. Some of those surveyed reported that in fact there are times when staff and/or patrons are not comfortable being around the homeless and transient patrons, and that social workers, collaborative partners and trauma informed training would better equip librarians to serve those who are homeless. According to this survey there is also a strong argument for the right to information for homeless patrons. The library provides informational resources to all patrons, connecting patrons to information. The

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right to information and services to homeless fall directly in line with the Core Values of the American Library Association. These values include: Intellectual Freedom, The Public Good, Diversity and Lifelong Learning, aligning with the library's mission to serve our homeless populations (Admin, 2019). Several of the libraries surveyed reported that they provide computer passes for those who do not have a card, due to the fact that the absence of a home address prevents a patron from receiving a library card. Additionally, many of the libraries elaborated on other anecdotes they have come up with to fill the gap. These include solutions such as allowing patrons to sleep, eat and drink in areas where normally a patron would not be allowed to. One library noted that they donate weeded books to family shelters, many suggested having up-to-date community reference sheets to give to homeless patrons. Other accommodations included having free toiletries available at the front desk and having staff call local shelters for those who need a place to stay. Finally, one of the largest suggestions was simply better training, one library surveyed suggested the Ryan Dowd homeless training.

The following best practices are based on the recommendations from industry experts, ALA (American Library Association), NASW (National Association of Social Workers) and outcomes from a survey of Georgia Public Library Directors.

### **Get the stats**

What is the reality of homelessness in your area? Check local statistics. The statistics would center on homeless and or transient patron activity and could help provide insight on library impact to this population

### **Establish a policy**

This policy should be constructed within framework of ALA Code of Ethics, The Library Bill of Rights and Local law and ordinance

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**Establish regular professional development**

This training should include input and content from social service agencies, advocacy groups, mental health professionals, law enforcement officials, and other community resources

**Establish a Safety Plan of Action**

This plan should include exit strategies, verbal de-escalation techniques, effective strategies for clinical interventions with violent or potentially violent clients, and nonviolent self-defense and the impact of secondary trauma

**Compile a list of local resources**

This resource listing would include oft-updated contact information for local resources with clear descriptions of what they provide

**Consider appointing a staff person**

This individual would act as a resource manager and resident “expert” on matters relevant to this population

**Establish community partnerships**

These partnerships would open dialog and help get patrons connected to resources in the Continuum of Care (an organization of service providers established by the Department of Housing and Urban Development [HUD] to oversee community planning around homelessness. Continua work together to define needs, plan strategies, and prioritize funding for supportive housing service)

Service to homeless and transient individuals within a community is certainly not without its challenges. It may require libraries, who may not have abundant resources themselves, to tax themselves even further by allocating time and staff to meet specialized needs. It certainly requires the promotion of a culture of patience and compassion from the surrounding

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community. However, by employing the best practices provided in this paper, libraries would be on track to lend a meaningful hand in the fight against homelessness.

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