

THE HOMELESS AND THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

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INTRODUCTION

As homeless people seek a "safe" space to escape from the harsh conditions of living on the streets, public libraries are increasingly having to face the problem of homelessness. Should public libraries welcome people who come to the library to rest, stay dry, get warm and not necessarily to use library services? Experts writing in the field of librarianship express diverse opinions on the role public libraries should take in serving homeless patrons. There must be a distinction made between homeless patrons who may be considered a nuisance but who are harmless and homeless patrons who are potentially harmful to themselves or to others. This paper will focus on how public libraries deal with the former type of patron. The use of the public library by homeless people involves issues about the role of the library in society, the rights of library users, and the issue of access. These issues are discussed and examples of a variety of programs designed to address homeless patrons are presented. The conclusion focuses on what approaches seem to work and suggestions of how public libraries can address the issue of homeless patrons.

THE HOMELESS/THE NEW POOR

Estimates of the number of homeless people in the United States range from a conservative estimate of 2 million by the US Department of Health to over 4 million by the National Coalition for the Homeless.¹ There are many social, economic, political, and personal reasons for homelessness. Deinstitutionalization of mental health patients, unemployment, and cuts in federal spending under Reagan left many people without residences. Elaine Landau in her book *The Homeless* describes America's new homeless as people from all ages, races, and religions.

[They] are families who were forced from their homes as a result of floods, fires, or other natural disasters and who are unable to afford another residence. [They] are elderly victims of urban renewal. . . [they] are young mothers with few or no marketable skills, who fled with their children from

*intolerably abusive home situations. . . [they] are the newly unemployed. . . [they] are runaway children and teenagers, who tried to escape from unfit homes, seeking refuge on the streets.*²

The homeless of the 1980s are referred to as the “new poor” since many were formerly part of mainstream America. The “new poor” according to Landau includes more people under age forty, more blacks, and more children than ever before. Many people refuse to face the fact that homelessness can happen to anyone. Rather, middle-class America tends to think of homeless people as somehow essentially different from themselves and as being personally responsible for their situation.³

The library profession is becoming increasingly concerned about the issue of homeless patrons and the need to address this issue. At the 1986 annual conference of the American Library Association in New York City, there was a program presented on serving the homeless entitled “Patrons in Crisis: Where They’re Coming From—Where We’re Sending Them—A Call for Library Intervention.” In 1989 at the ALA national conference in Dallas, the late Mitch Snyder, director of the Community for Creative Nonviolence and an advocate for the homeless, was one of the Public Library Association’s key speakers. Professionals who propose that libraries ignore the problem of homelessness are increasingly in the minority. An example of this opinion is expressed by Herbert S. White who believes that if libraries refuse to deal with the issue then the government will be forced to deal with it. “We must never accept as our own a problem that is not ours,” advises White.⁴

This position is being drowned out by the majority of public library professionals who recognize the need to do something to address the issue of homelessness. An example of this concern by public libraries and the library profession in general is the “Poor People’s Policy” adopted by the American Library Association at the 1990 annual conference in Chicago. This policy is very clear on the role libraries must play in empowering poor people. Objectives include:

Promoting the publication, production, purchase and ready accessibility of print and nonprint material 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 people.*⁵

Concerns are expressed both by librarians and by library patrons about the presence of homeless people in the library. These concerns range from librarians who do not want to assume the role of social workers to patrons who are offended by the smell of some homeless patrons. Some patrons resent the homeless using all the chairs in lounge areas and dislike sharing library equipment with the unkept who are feared to be carriers of communicable diseases. Glenda Rhodes, director of Public Services at the Salt Lake City Public Library, found that the library staff is effected by the increasing number of homeless (or transients as she refers to homeless patrons) using the library.

*After they [librarians] realize the futility of referral to community agencies whose resources are severely taxed and after they remind themselves that appearance and economic status are not criteria for use of the library, the librarians become demoralized. Staff members get tired of awakening people and are frustrated by the complaints of other patrons.*⁶

Joy Greiner describes the conflict in this way: "On the one hand there is a responsibility to maintain a safe, pleasant and non-disruptive environment for all patrons in the library while on the other there is a responsibility of the library to act as a democratic social agency."⁷ It is important to note, as Patsy Hansel, president of the North Carolina Library Association, reminds us: "Some of our homeless patrons use the library appropriately and some do not, just as some of our more affluent patrons use the library appropriately and some do not."⁸

There is no common practice in the way that public libraries deal with homeless patrons. In some libraries there are as many ways of dealing with these patrons as there are librarians. This variation in treatment occurs because many public libraries lack a formal written policy on how to deal with homeless patrons. Many libraries fail to recognize the special needs of the homeless and group these people into the category of problem patron. Some libraries recognize that homeless people have special needs and attempt to refer the homeless to community agencies which might be able to assist them and to

otherwise inform homeless patrons on available services. Some libraries focus on creating special library facilities for homeless patrons and sometimes get outside sources of funding for these special services. Other libraries focus on outreach efforts to the homeless while others network with community groups to advocate for the homeless.

REFERRAL AND INFORMATION SERVICES

Public libraries are committed to meeting the information needs of the community. Does this include the need to know where shelter and food can be found? Greiner solicited the professional views of PLA representatives on the role of libraries in providing referral information to the homeless. The consensus was expressed by Patrick O'Brien, director of the Dallas Public Library.

[T]he library's responsibility to provide referrals and emergency shelter to the homeless is secondary to that of other social service agencies which exist specifically to perform these functions. The library should be designated as a specific referral agent for a clientele that requires information to enable them to cope—and possibly to survive—only if no other social agency exists to provide that service.⁹

The Dallas Public Library is a member of Dallas Agencies Serving the Homeless (DASH), a coalition of city-wide community agencies formed to coordinate service to the homeless. The library maintains a database listing agencies offering services to the homeless.

Another issue of access to information is the increasing trend in libraries to charge for access to computerized information. Fay Blake points out, "Fee-based information changes the very nature of information. The special kinds of information poor people need are least likely to be collected for commercialized databases."¹⁰ Blake warns that denying access to information because of inability to pay will ultimately damage our entire society. She suggests that library professionals get to know the poor as "specific information clientele" and try to meet their specific information needs.

Library school students could, and should, be exposed to information problems of the poor through courses. . .through seminars exploring library services to the

*poor, through individual or group field study placements with agencies that provide or ought to provide useful information to the poor.*¹¹

Mary Bundy followed Blake's advice and taught a course on meeting the information needs of the poor at the University of Maryland College of Library and Information Sciences. In a class project "to determine how responsive, in information terms, government agencies (including libraries) are regarding the homeless"¹² her students were frustrated by the lack of cooperation they received when requesting referral information from government agencies such as the welfare department. They noted in their report that they found the Pratt Library to be the most cooperative agency that they contacted but that they learned the most from meeting with private social service providers. They concluded:

*From identifying and collecting and organizing information bearing on this community problem, we learned how important it is to build information resources to support positive community change. . . . We found that information can be a strong force in the lives of people and communities.*¹³

SPECIAL FACILITIES, SERVICES AND OUTREACH

An example of designing library facilities for the homeless is the new public library building in Haverhill, Massachusetts due for completion in 1992. Haverhill is a town with about 150 homeless people. The new library will include a room designed specifically for the homeless and accommodating up to twenty people. A January 19, 1989 *New York Times* article describes the room as conceived by its designers:

*The furnishings will include sofas, easy chairs, a television and a coffeemaker. On the tables will be newspapers, paperbacks, magazines, and brochures on social services offered by the community.*¹⁴

A peer tutoring project for the homeless is operated by the Milwaukee Public Library. This program, operated at a daytime center for the homeless, includes a browsing library and is funded by a Library Services Construction Act Title VI grant. The participants have access to information on jobs and on developing job skills. Other such programs include the creation of a reading room

in an inner city homeless center by Multnomah County Public Library in Portland, Oregon and the Memphis/Shelby County (Tennessee) Public Library's efforts to supply reading material and library information to temporary residences for the homeless.

Alan Jay Lincoln, a library crime specialist, suggests that social work professionals come to the library to meet with homeless patrons. Lincoln's reasoning is that this would demonstrate "the magnitude of the problem. . .allow the mental health professional access to a large number of clients. . .free the library staff from the role of monitor and look out, and patrons could gradually be diverted from the library to other more appropriate settings without being thrown out into the streets from which they are trying to escape."¹⁵

Mario Gonzalez and Harriet Gottfried of the Office of Special Services at the New York Public Library organized an outreach program to serve homeless families living in welfare hotels in New York City. Initially, librarians were asked to participate on a volunteer basis. Some key aspects of this program were that the coordinators had the full support of the administration; the different offices and departments within the library cooperated; and participating library staff attended sensitivity training workshops (offered free to people working with the homeless by the School of Social Work at Columbia University). In the future this program hopes to operate a bookmobile to bring books to all the shelters and hotels in New York City. The New York Public Library's philosophy on how to deal with homeless patrons is expressed at the end of the Gonzalez and Gottfried report:

*The problem of homeless people will be with us for some time to come. . .we, as librarians, cannot provide homeless people with shelter or food, but if we can mobilize ourselves as a profession, we can, on a modest scale, provide access to books and other library services. We can make a difference.*¹⁶

ADVOCACY

Some public libraries are going as far as to organize food and shelter facilities for the homeless. In response to the increasing problem of homeless people sleeping and causing problems in the library, Pat Woodrum, director of the Tulsa Public Library, called together a group of concerned citizens to find a solution. Woodrum

proudly states: "Less than a year after I first called on the community for help, a day shelter for the homeless opened its doors."¹⁷ During its first year of operation, 87,000 people used the day shelter's services of food, shelter, laundry facilities, free clothes, recreation and, of course, a depository library provided by Tulsa Public. As a result of the library's advocacy efforts, the number of street people in Tulsa's library has diminished.

As mentioned earlier, the Dallas Public Library is a member of a city-wide coalition that advocates for homeless services. The library worked with other community groups "in pushing for the establishment of a day resource center where the homeless can shower, wash clothes, obtain counseling, etc."¹⁸ Also, the library donates surplus shelves and furniture and supplies books and magazines to the center.

At the 1986 ALA conference in New York City, a program on serving the homeless patron was presented. Perhaps, libraries like Tulsa and Dallas Public heeded the words of E.J. Josey, a past president of ALA, who called for libraries to form coalitions for the homeless. Josey strongly defended the view that homelessness is a library issue.

*...they [the homeless] are human beings. They are potential users of libraries, and they are potential tax payers, who will support libraries, and more importantly, when they were working they contributed to the growth and development of libraries through their taxes and even if they were not employed, they have a right to the access of information to help them alleviate their plight. And libraries have a responsibility to help and to aid them.*¹⁹

ROLE OF THE LIBRARY IN SOCIETY AND ISSUES OF ACCESS

Libraries were begun as social change agencies. The purpose of public libraries was to achieve a more equitable access and distribution of information. If libraries are to continue to be "of enduring importance to the maintenance of our free democratic society"²⁰ then we must reach out to those, such as the homeless, who are being denied fruitful participation in society. In contrast to the Carnegie Public Library staff who informed me that homeless people are given the same treatment as other problem patrons, Josey emphasizes:

“These people are not problem patrons, they are patrons in need of your help.”²¹ Elaine Landau emphasizes that homeless people are not “other” for no one is immune to the possibility of someday being homeless. Homeless people need advocates because the experience of homelessness is dehumanizing and leaves people feeling powerless to change their situation.

The public library Statement of Principles is clear about the library’s efforts to serve all of society.

*Only the public library provides an open and non-judgemental environmental in which individuals and their interests are brought together with the universe of ideas and information. . . . Public libraries freely offer access to their collections and services to all members of the community without regard to race, citizenship, age, education level, economic status, or any other qualification or condition.*²²

Certainly, homeless people are members of the community. If public libraries were to follow this ideal then the homeless patron would have every right to feel welcome in the library.

Yet, many public libraries have adopted policies that specify standards of behavior, dress, and hygiene. A recent *American Libraries* news article dealt with the Morristown, New Jersey public library’s adoption of such a policy. The American Civil Liberties Union intervened when the Morristown Library implemented their policy and asked a homeless patron to leave the library. The policy was subsequently modified. The Ann Arbor Public Library has come under heavy criticism for its rules over behavior which ban problem patrons. The ACLU fears such rules would discriminate against homeless patrons. The Ann Arbor “policy prohibits the disturbance of other library patrons and interference with other library patrons’ use of the facilities through their [problem patrons] extremely poor personal hygiene.”²³ According to the Ann Arbor rules, if the library is crowded patrons may be asked to leave for sleeping more than ten minutes. The bottom line is that the individual’s personal hygiene must pose a public health hazard for there to be grounds for expelling the individual.

Randall Simmons sees the issue of access as bordering on elitism.

*The crux of the issue is whether or not the library profession is willing to make the value judgements about an individual's right to be in a public library or to make value judgements about the conditions necessary (both in terms of what the patron is doing and physical/mental state of being) for an individual to be in the library. . . . The issue borders on elitism. . . . It beckons the library to appease politically powerful segments of society while at the same time neglecting the powerless.*²⁴

Simmons suggests that librarians provide community leaders with research on the homeless to assist city planners in providing social services and housing for the homeless. He concludes after reviewing the literature that "the homeless come to the library, not because they want to be in a library, but because it is a means of survival."²⁵ If other community support systems were provided then the library might be alleviated of some of the planning involved in serving the homeless patron.

Susan Poorman of the New York Public Library surveyed public libraries in the hundred largest US cities. Her survey showed that large urban libraries are being frequented by many homeless patrons. She found that "many library staff members are working as volunteers at local social service agencies and churches and would like to have more administrative support and training in how to aid the homeless."²⁶

CONCLUSION

There is an increasing need for public libraries to deal with the issue of homeless people coming to the library. How can public libraries reach out to the homeless? First, as Prof. Josey suggested and the Tulsa Public Library so effectively practiced, public libraries must form coalitions to advocate for the homeless. Second, as Lincoln suggests in "Crime in the Library", libraries can arrange to have a social worker present in the library to meet the "other than informational" needs of these patrons. Third, as the Haverhill Public Library plans to do, public libraries should have referral information on available social services. Fourth, as was done in New York City, library staff can be trained on how to deal sensitively with the homeless. Fifth, public libraries should initiate and encourage programs which are preventive measures against some of the sources

of homelessness. Examples include adult literacy classes, workshops on the importance of parents reading to their children, story hours for "at risk" children, etc. Sixth, libraries should make an effort to understand the issue from the point of view of the homeless patron. Most importantly, libraries should focus on gathering, maintaining, and providing free access to the information that potentially has the power to change the lives of homeless people.

In summary, there is a need for public libraries to establish written policies for dealing with homeless patrons who are not behaving as problem patrons. To address the frustration of having library facilities used for non-library purposes such as sleeping and washing, librarians can initiate programs requiring homeless patrons to attend career counseling programs or read referral information on available social services. But beyond the need to establish written policy, there is the need to establish principles that support efforts to change the conditions that create homelessness and to establish alternative "safe" places for these patrons. Joy Greiner reminds us that "homelessness is more a reflection of our society than it is of the character of the affected individuals."²⁷ Librarianship as a profession must ask itself if it is willing to take a reactive or proactive role on the issue of homeless patrons. A reactive stance would focus energies on developing standards of behavior and dress that control the potential problems homeless patrons can cause. A proactive role would advocate for a change in government policies that create homelessness and, following the example of Tulsa Public, organize community groups to address the problem.

In not taking a clear position on the need to advocate for the homeless patrons and in continuing to treat them as problem patrons, public libraries are making a choice. The library is choosing an elitist attitude and allowing the ever widening gap between rich and poor to continue unimpeded. Public libraries exist to narrow the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Perhaps, libraries cannot change the economic conditions that lead to homelessness but at the very least we can provide people with information resources that have the power to change their lives.

Notes

1. Mario M. Gonzalez and Harriet Gottfried, "Library Services to the City's Homeless," *Bookmark*, Summer 1988, p.229.
2. Elaine Landau, *The Homeless*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp.56.
3. *Ibid.*, p.7.
4. Herbert White, "Send the Homeless, Tempest-Tossed to Me (Priorities of Public Libraries)," *Library Journal*, February 15, 1989, p.147.
5. Minnesota Social Responsibility Round Table, "Poor Peoples' Services," *Progressive Librarian*, Summer 1990, p.36.
6. Glenda Rhodes, "Transients in the Library: A Problem Statement," *Public Library Quarterly*, Summer 1983, p.56.
7. Joy Greiner, "The Homeless: PLA Members' Consensus is for Equitable Services and Respect," *Public Libraries*, May/June 1989, p.137.
8. *Ibid.*, p.141.
9. *Ibid.*, p.138.
10. Fay M. Blake, "Information and Poverty," in Jovain P. Lang, ed., *Unequal Access to Information Resources: Problems and Needs of the World's Information Poor*, Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1988, p.12.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Alice Bell, et al., "Relevant Library Education in the Eighties," in Sanford Berman and James P. Danky, eds., *Alternative Library Literature 1982/1983: A Biennial Anthology*, Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1984, p.252.
13. *Ibid.*, p.255.
14. Elaine Louie, "At Library, a Room for the Homeless," *New York Times*, January 19, 1989, p.C3.
15. Alan Jay Lincoln, *Crime in the Library: A Study of Patterns, Impact and Security*, New York: R.R. Bowker, 1984, p.152-3.
16. Gonzalez and Gottfried, *ibid.*
17. Pat Woodrum, "A Haven for the Homeless," *Library Journal*, January 1988, p.57.
18. Greiner, *ibid.*, p.138.
19. E.J. Josey, "Libraries, Coalitions, and the Homeless," address delivered at the 1986 Annual Conference of the American Library Association, New York City, June 29, 1986.

20. Public Libraries Principles Task Force, "The Public Library: Democracy's Resources: A Statement of Principles," *Public Libraries*, Fall 1982, p.92.
21. Josey, *ibid.*, p.11.
22. Public Libraries Principles Task Force, *ibid.*
23. "Local Press Defends Ann Arbor Public Library Behavior Rules Banning Problem Patrons," *American Libraries*, January 1985, p.7.
24. Randall C. Simmons, "The Homeless in the Public Library: Implications for Access to Libraries," *RQ*, Fall 1985, p.117.
25. *Ibid.*, p.118.
26. "Public Libraries Find Ways to Serve Urban Homeless," *American Libraries*, April 1988, p.251.
27. Greiner, *ibid.*, p.141.

