

# Equal Access as Social Equity

## A Literature Review of Programming and Services in Public Libraries

by Lily Rose Kosmicki

In an increasingly stratified society, the central role of the public library is to provide equal access. Equal access comes from service-models that promote social equity and aim to alleviate a variety of social issues that are exacerbated by a lack of access to services. Contemporary society faces a variety of complex issues such as discrimination, hunger, substance abuse, poor health, inadequate education, unemployment, crime and homelessness. This literature review examines services, programs, and policies in public libraries that help meet the needs of vulnerable populations. A few examples include providing internet access, promoting digital inclusion, performing different types of reference services, progressive collection development policies and procedures, facilitating access to online resources and e-government, engaging in outreach efforts, creating opportunity through employment assistance, developing task forces, making space open and accessible and encouraging staff training. Incorporating such services, programs, and policies into any public library with the intention of benefiting the most vulnerable members of a community promotes equal access as a means to social equity.

The following literature review gives examples of contemporary public libraries in the United States that are using a lens of social equity to inform services, so that library advocates and employees have a source of information to inspire, design and implement their own programs and services to promote equal access as a means to social equity.

Equal access comes in many forms, which require definition. Beginning with **equal** access, this is the concept by which all library users are ensured that the librarian attempts to meet their information

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needs. Next, **digital inclusion** refers to equal access to technology and the internet, plus efforts to bridge the digital divide. The **digital divide** is “access to computers or the skills to use them” (Whiteside, 2004, p. 53) and can be framed in terms of “information haves” and “information have-nots” (Hersberger, 2002-2003). **Reference services** are the librarian’s research-based role in fulfilling information needs of library users. **Collection development services** are the library’s acquisition of materials in a variety of formats, including **online resources**, which are any relevant online materials, including e-government. **E-government** is the process by which digital communication and access occur between the government and its citizens. **Outreach services** are the library’s efforts in community building to reach users through partnerships and promotions. **Programming** refers to any recurring or one-time library sponsored, affiliated, or facilitated event that can take place inside the library or elsewhere and is intended to promote accessibility. **Services** are on-going, permanent, everyday functions of the library. Other factors that contribute to access and equity are the **implementation of space**, which is how the physical building and staff of the library are arranged; **training**, which is the enrichment and education of library staff, and **task forces**, which are working groups tasked with specific goals and outcomes in mind. While these library functions are not directly defined as social services, they facilitate and promote access that has the potential to contribute to greater social equity. Some may begrudge the idea that the library has a role in addressing social inequality and it is the duty of other institutions (the police, human or health services, nonprofits or religious organizations, etc.) to address social issues like homelessness, discrimination, substance abuse, etc., but this literature review intends to demonstrate that equal access is fundamental to the values and philosophy of the public library and proving equal access is part of promoting greater social equity.

### **Literature Review of the Basis for Social Equity in Library Programs or Services**

*Who are vulnerable populations?*

Defining vulnerable populations is tricky. Vulnerable populations make up a diverse and occasionally overlapping contingents of library users. It is important not to generalize vulnerable populations based on categorization, even while the library must use generalized categories to develop targeted programming, for statistical purposes and to understand and engage with the community it serves.

Generalized programming and services that are inclusive and accessible to everyone are advantageous to the library and its community. Edwards, Robinson, & Unger (2013) suggest that libraries

serve the LGBTQIA population everyday and “are completely unaware of it, which is as it should be” (p. 179), but that libraries should still consider the role they play in the lives of community members. Programs directed at the community must be as diverse and broad as the community itself, and can be infused with a pluralism of identities and differences. Easy ways to incorporate diverse experiences into generalized programming include movie screenings, legal advice, children’s storytimes, reader’s advisory, parenting concerns, teen events and author visits (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 180-181). Additionally, Luo, Estreicher, Lee, and Thomas (2012) explain that social services in public libraries benefit a diverse range of people with a wide range of needs, including “recent immigrants, homeless populations, migrant workers, unemployed individuals and people with disabilities” (p. 75). Yet, those groups are not strict categories with a fixed set of needs. Even if a user is without a home or shelter, it doesn’t indicate all users experiencing homelessness have the same needs or experiences as that individual. Hersberger (2005) explains that “homeless” is a problematic term, because it is not a homogenous population and gives the example of homeless veterans having different information and service needs than homeless families. Each individual who comes to the library is a unique person with their own background and their own concerns and needs. For example, serving community members with disabilities requires special consideration, because disabilities can affect people of all ages and people with disabilities may belong to other marginalized populations (as is also the case with members of the LGBTQIA community) (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 182). In short, a library hoping to achieve greater social equity aims to infuse generalized and inclusive programming and services with openness to the potential and dynamic of each individual to address the specific needs of vulnerable populations.

Another consideration is addressed by Holt and Holt (2010), who warn of using blanket terminology to define the poor because it trivializes their experiences and it makes other facets of their identity inconsequential. Generalizations are insufficient when people with low-incomes fall into a variety of other categories as well, such as parents, grandparents, children, people with higher education degrees, people with lots of work experience, people with disabilities, people of every race and gender or sexuality, and people who experience mental health issues, may have addictions, may be overweight or undernourished, may have felonies, may have experienced violence, abuse or other traumas, etc. (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 7). These various conditions will affect how patrons use the library and contributes to a professional ambiguity about serving those at an economical disadvantage. As Holt and Holt (2010) note, while the American

Library Association encourages service to the poor and promotes staff training to serve them, the Office of Literacy and Outreach Services complicates matters by including services to the poor and homeless along with its many other responsibilities, including services for adult literacy, bookmobiles, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people, incarcerated people and ex-offenders, older adults, people of color, people with disabilities, rural, native and tribal libraries and so on (p. 15). Holt and Holt (2010) explain these are all significant categories of services in and of themselves and while they sometimes overlap, sometimes they do not (p. 15). Overall, libraries successful at promoting social equity will treat each individual user in accordance with their unique needs, while providing a broad and generalized service-model accessible to all, which is a complex and nuanced goal, but can be done using many of the example programs and services detailed in this paper.

The purpose of outreach has also changed over time to make room for greater fluidity and pluralism. Orange and Osborne (2004) indicate that in 2004 there was a conceptual shift in outreach services, which moved from being about addressing the information needs of the underserved or unserved populations, to focusing on sustaining quality services for all groups at all times, everywhere (in other words, equity of access) (xi). This shift recognized the limitations of outreach as a policy model, in that applying definitions to specific categories of users often ended up segregating rather than integrating vulnerable populations in any community by excluding those services from “normal” library functions. This model of “otherness” failed to recognize the variability of the “regular library user” and their needs (Orange & Osborne, 2004, p. xiii). Outreach became more holistic and focused on equitable services, where sameness and difference were “no longer seen as mutually exclusive, but rather complementary” (Orange & Osborne, 2004, p. xiv). The idea that libraries may strive to serve all people, at all times, and for a variety of potential needs, is the philosophical ideal, but it is also a tension that is crucial to understanding the ways libraries can promote social equity and also the challenges in doing so.

### *What is social equity?*

Social equity is about ensuring everyone is entitled to opportunities for life, rights, self-realization, and well-being. As defined by the 2017 Standing Panel on Equity and Governance of the National Academy of Public Administration, social equity is “The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just, and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy”

(National Academy of Public Administration, 2017). Society has not yet achieved this ideal, but in the meantime some libraries strive to address and alleviate inequality and injustice. Social equity does not entail the elimination of diversity and variety of the human spectrum for the sake of equality. Rather, social equity is the goal of people who hope for a society with more humanity, where all people are ensured human rights and opportunity.

*Why do libraries provide access to social services and, in some cases, services themselves, and how does that work relate to social equity and equal access?*

Common social services provide those in need with food, shelter, or health care. While a library may not directly set out to provide those services, it inadvertently provides shelter and occasionally even food, and some available information and programs do promote health advice and education. Providing those social services is not the goal of the public library, even though the library can and does provide information and resources on how to access such services. It is important to note that even though providing information is central to the traditional public library's mission, information is not the solution to a lack of resources. It can be dangerous to assume providing resources and internet access is a cure-all to the social ills of vulnerable populations. Hersberger's (2002-2003) study on homeless families explores the assumptions made by policy makers about the digital divide. Hersberger (2002-2003) explains that none of the homeless participants in her study answered in the affirmative when asked if they felt they were information poor. The lack of access to digital information does not seem to negatively affect the everyday lives of homeless parents, in part because they have more pressing needs such as access to food and shelter (Hersberger, 2002-2003). It is not a lack of information they suffer from, but a lack of resources, so libraries who want to promote social equity need to do more than just provide information. Homeless participants also consistently sought information from interpersonal resources rather than the internet. Given Hersberger's (2002-2003) findings, the library can go beyond its typical role in providing information by making a more meaningful social impact in the lives of those who value interpersonal resources more than access to the internet.

Rather than solely providing information or offering extensive and comprehensive social services, the library does manage to play a role in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable populations. The public library provides a "softer" form of a social service by providing equal access, which in turn builds community. Edwards, Robinson, and Unger (2013) explain that libraries create community by acting

as civic action centers, centers for sustainability, cultural reflections of the community, community centers for diverse populations, centers for the arts, as universities and as champions of youth (p. 6-21). Libraries sometimes target specific areas of need, such as education, health, food access, safety, employment, housing, family services and technology. Libraries can also contribute to creating more resilient cities. Holt (2013) argues that libraries invest in their communities through construction and employment, job-seeking services, English literacy, e-government, and helping the poor, which in turn helps create a resilient city that can recover from hardship and face challenging changes (p. 37, 47-49). While libraries may not directly provide food, shelter, water and healthcare, they can provide other human necessities such as a sense of community, safety, and access to knowledge and information.

Social services are considered needs-based services, which means institutions intending to serve the public must gauge community needs through a process of feedback from, discussion with, and observation of the community. When libraries are actively attempting to understand and participate in their communities, they can develop services tailored to meet community needs. Pateman and Vincent (2010) propose that needs-based services are universal, in that everyone has needs and those needs are different for each person; needs-based services also involve and engage the whole of the community (p. 118-119). If the public library is to serve the “whole of the community” with needs-based services, it must account for the most vulnerable members of a community and their needs, alongside keeping up with technology’s planned obsolescence, on-demand trends and the endless purchasing of ever-changing popular best sellers. So, while all libraries are subject to market forces and trends, simultaneously some libraries recognize their responsibility in fulfilling the needs of the most vulnerable community members, be it those who struggle to find housing, those who are new to the United States, those who are learning English as a second language, those who do not have adequate education, those who struggle with addiction or mental health issues, and so on.

Library and information sciences have had a slow and imperfect path to becoming more focused on social equity and adopting a framework of social justice, much like society itself. For most of their history libraries have developed hand-in-hand with private business interests. Melvil Dewey himself, namesake of the infamous dewey decimal system, founded a private company, the Library Bureau, to sell libraries equipment and furniture. Many libraries in the United States were built by Andrew Carnegie, a steel magnate, who shaped some of the philosophical basis for libraries for generations, for better or worse. Such business-based relationships were not always in the

service of the communities libraries were in. Much of the static vision of libraries in the public imagination, as places of self-betterment, silence and oak furniture, are a result of these particular influences. Such ideas contribute to a status quo and conformity in contemporary libraries. More recent programs and services in some public library lean towards a more dynamic framework aligned with the aims of social justice, such as job-seeking assistance, literacy courses, children's story time and computer classes, which are "social service activities designed to promote social inclusion and social equity" (Jaeger, Shilton, & Koepfler, 2016, p. 2). Progress has been made from the 19th and early 20th centuries and recent historical examples include librarianship's participation in issues such as the civil rights movement, intellectual privacy, freedom of expression and challenging censorship (Jaeger, Shilton, & Koepfler, 2016, p. 2). No community has achieved a utopian state of perfect equality and engagement, so all libraries have their work cut out for them in attempting to alleviate social problems. This kind of aspirational service-model is ambitious and inevitably imperfect, as services only effectively serve those informed of and engaged in them.

While history, capitalism, and the library's traditional role in solely providing information complicate contemporary efforts to promote social equity, it is important to not totally discount the role of information services, while recognizing their limits. Chatman's (1999) work on "small worlds" and closed communities demonstrates the importance of marginalized and outsider groups having access to information, even if it isn't guaranteed that information will be sought out. Chatman observed information seeking behaviors of female prisoners and noticed they live "in the round" (p. 213), meaning they disregard and deem irrelevant information from outside prison, because they have no agency over it. In turn, the prisoners develop cultural norms about information seeking, and instead rely on insider groups or individuals in the prison rather than seeking out useful or helpful information elsewhere, creating "information poverty" (Chatman, 1996, p. 197-198). Similar to Hersberger's 2002-2003 findings, only information that is relevant to their immediate life and circumstances is deemed worthy (especially if its from an interpersonal source) and seeking outside information is not the standard norm of behavior in small world communities. Our relationships and social worlds greatly influence how we seek and understand information we receive.

In the age of "fake news" and information "bubbles," Chatman's work takes on new meaning, and emphasizes the public library's role in combating information poverty. Buschman and Warner (2016) explain that in the current political climate, it is particularly important for librarians to define their work in terms of community, social justice

and social services (p. 10). The goal of the public library has always been to expand and encourage information seeking habits and information literacy, but to truly do so, Chatman suggests, the librarian must bridge the divide between the two worlds of insiders and outsiders in order to encourage information seeking behavior (Chatman, 1996, p. 197-198). Dialogue and access break down the division between institution and community to create a more integrated and dynamic public library which is constantly changing along with its community, and therefore becomes a part of the community, rather than an outside entity looking in. Holt and Holt (2010) suggest this kind of directed service is inherent in planning library services, but with the added responsibility of needs assessment (p. 100). By attempting to engage “the whole of the community” and meet all their members’ various needs, the library is taking on an ambitious task, but a worthwhile one.

### *How do social services in public libraries build healthy, strong communities?*

Sinikka Sipilä (2015) defines a strong society as one in which individuals are actively participating in their community (p. 95). The role of the library in a strong society as defined by Sipilä (2015) is one that meets the information needs of its communities and is adequately serving the democratic ideal of “freedom of access to information for all” (p. 95). Examples of free and equal access include equal opportunity to lifelong learning, education, research, innovation, culture, and recreation. Edwards, Robinson, and Unger (2013) describe how public libraries contribute to democracy by supporting “not just a citizenry, but an informed citizenry” (p. 136). Social services provided in public libraries can and do promote free and equal access in each of those categories.

Not only do libraries try to support a strong society with democratic ideals, encouraging community connectedness and engagement, but some librarians themselves are actively involved in the political process. Jaeger, Taylor, and Gorham’s (2015a) work emphasize the important potential of librarians in promoting human rights and social justice by informing policymakers, government officials and researchers of the library’s role in promoting social equity. They explain that librarians serve as liaisons between the community and other public servants. This research also encourages librarians to be directly involved in the political process, because the librarian should bring the values of social equity into practice through real participation, action and change for social justice.

Libraries can also prevent social exclusion. Hoyer (2013) explains how social exclusion threatens the health of society by discriminating against people based on poverty in material and social ways (p. 57). By limiting access to services or the ability to participate in social

activities, institutions can create educational and cultural poverty and exclusion based on ethnic origin, gender, sexuality, physical or mental disability, education, employment and economic status (Hoyer, 2013, p. 57). Library staff are key in shaping that experience. Hersberger (2005) explains that information providers are either friends and advocates to users, or create feelings of unworthiness. She suggests that practitioners and LIS students should be encouraged to review ALA's Policy on Library Services for the Poor (Policy 61 in the ALA Policy Manual) that states that "libraries should strive to remove existing barriers to service access and to improve services provided, taking into consideration the information and services needs of poor people" who "are marginalized populations already denied or struggling for full participation in a democratic society, ... [L]ibraries ought to be social institutions of inclusion, not exclusion" (Hersberger, 2005). The effects of such exclusion reduce the quality of life for those discriminated against, limit opportunity for prosperity and weaken the social cohesion of communities (Hoyer, 2013, p. 57). To combat social exclusion, Hoyer cites DeFaveri's (2005) example of removing financial barrier for access, including rethinking fines for low-income individuals and making memberships available to people without fixed addresses (p. 59). The American Library Association's Outreach Resources for Services to Poor and Homeless People recommends much the same, citing ways to promote access to the poor or homeless such as allowing those without a permanent address to get a card and eliminating fine restrictions (American Library Association, 2017).

At the same time "community" does not just refer to the physical boundaries of cities, districts, or towns, and while we've established that internet access doesn't alleviate lack of resources, it does serve important social and connective functions. Since the public library provides free public internet, library users can connect to the online world, which is international in scope. Bertot, McClure, and Jaeger (2008) define internet access in terms of human rights, which is an idea that has traction outside the United States as well. For example, Jain and Saraf (2013) state that in India, internet access and the access to the information it provides are seen as a basic human right (p. 47). Internet access has the ability to connect people to others in their own community, but in the greater world community as well, which can be especially important to immigrants and refugees in the United States.

### **Summary of Equal Access and Social Equity Programs and Services in Public Libraries**

The previous section established a philosophical basis for programs and services in term of information access and social equity. In the following section, I'd like to introduce some examples of libraries

across the United States and United Kingdom that are promoting social equity with specific programs, services, and efforts. Hopefully, readers will be inspired to advocate for similar access to social services in public libraries and engage these examples more deeply by developing ways to take these examples even further.

### *Collection development services*

Luo et al. (2012) explain that collection development needs to be guided by community need. Responding to that need includes examples of multicultural staff, books, media, programming in multiple languages and programs that “increase accessibility of their collections and services to individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities” (p. 75). Ruhlmann (2014), as per American Library Association recommendations, suggests making collections inclusive of materials on poverty and homelessness as a way to cater to those in need. Developing particular collections aimed at those in need is a matter of access. Examples include:

- The Memphis-Shelby County Public Library & Information Center launched the InfoBUS in the 1990s after a significant influx of immigrants and refugees. The mobile branch library offered signage in Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and English, 8 computers, internet access, ESL collections and foreign language collections (Virgillo, 2004, p. 9).
- Enoch Pratt Library houses a special collection of job searching materials at their central branch (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 102).
- Port Washington Public Library in New York has an Art Advisory, Health Advisory, Music Advisory, and Nautical Advisory Council to help with collection development and plan and run events (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 78).

Archives can be important ways libraries house the histories of diverse communities and therefore promote social equity by collecting first person perspectives and community stories and events. For instance:

- Birmingham Public Library in Alabama has a significant Civil Rights archive, SFPL houses a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Archive, and the Denver Public Library includes a Western History and Genealogy Department (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 166).

### *Community partnerships and outreach*

Outreach efforts fight barriers to access with bookmobiles, homebound services, deposit collections, service to residential facilities, hospitals, shelters, jails and target populations (Meadows, 2004, p. 1-2). It can be a challenge for libraries to serve vulnerable and at-risk populations because transportation to the library can be an issue. Many libraries have

partnered with organizations that help bring the library to users rather than users to the library. Examples of outreach and partnerships include:

- The Kootenai-Shoshone Area Libraries of Idaho offered the “From Your Library” program which targeted people in areas who do not have walk-in access to a library for mobile library services that included a van equipped for circulation (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 117).
- In St. Johns County Public Library in Florida there is targeted outreach to the elderly, in which all 31 licensed facilities (nursing homes, senior residential, retirement communities, memory centers, assisted living facilities, adult day cares, etc.) in the county are visited twice a month through the use of an accessible van, which carries a variety of materials (books, dvds, fiction, nonfiction, books on CDs, etc.). The van is low to the ground, wheelchair accessible, and also provides magnifiers and materials for the blind (Karp, 2004, p. 7-8).

Social equity programs can help form connections and bonds between people and organizations. Some libraries create outreach kits or reading rooms for children, teens, and adults in shelters and soup kitchens, which might include small reading collections and other library promotional paraphernalia. Examples include:

- Intergenerational programs provided by St. Johns County Public Library in Florida incorporate holiday theme parties, chapter readings, memoir and mystery book clubs and so on (Karp, 2004, p. 8). In that case, youth, adults and the elderly come together in the library for the benefit of all.
- San Jose Public Library (SJPL) and San Jose State University (SJSU), which are collocated at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library, partnered with the InnVision Shelter Network (now called LifeMoves effective January 26, 2016). InnVision Shelter Network is a Silicon Valley based nonprofit that tries to alleviate homelessness by providing housing. InnVision serves over 16,000 low-income people each year, and the library decided to extend programming into InnVision facilities, by teaching computer classes and hosting storytime onsite (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 111).
- “The Play and Learning Project” organized by Tameside Library in the United Kingdom provides children with books and informational pamphlets and a collection of materials housed at the Homeless Persons Unit (Willett & Broadly, 2011, p. 660-661).
- Willett and Broadly (2011) cite a program called “Your Choice Books,” a partnership between Warrington Library, Museum and Archives Service, and the local YMCA which aims to create awareness about education, recreational, and leisure benefits available

- to the homeless through a collection of books housed at the YMCA.
- The Community Technology Center of the Denver Public Library sends staff to local homeless shelters to provide job training, interviewing tips and technology instruction to low-income women. Bus tokens are given to participants after class as incentive for attending. Staff also offer participants a complimentary tour of the main library and the option to sign-up for a library card (Jaeger et al., 2015a, p. 62).
- Beyond InnVision, SJPL and SJSU are considering other partnerships and outreach opportunities with welfare hotels, Head Start programs, and food kitchens to include nutrition classes, family literacy programs and book discussion groups (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 111).
- Jaeger et al. (2015a) cite the library in Traverse City, Michigan as hosting a book club inside a local shelter (p. 62).
- Willett and Broadly (2011) discuss the “Friends at Christmas” project of Gloucestershire County Libraries and Information Services in the United Kingdom, which was a two-day event that provided internet access, outreach librarians, and computers in a homeless shelter over the holiday (p. 660-661).
- St. Louis Public Library (SLPL) partnered with local children’s museum, which Holt and Holt (2010) describe as “family experiences” (p. 103). For the family experiences, SLPL obtained a grant to pay for buses to evening events at a local children’s museum and the museum waived fees and provided parents with materials about teaching kids about science (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 103).

Public libraries create space for vulnerable populations by hosting programs or social hours and through direct contact with individual community members inside the library.

- San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) hired four health and safety advocates (HASAs), who work to promote services to the poor inside the library and were hired from within the community itself. The advocates are responsible for hosting a monthly health and wellness fair at the library, which offers resources and services that include eyeglasses, vaccines, shoes and haircuts to those who cannot afford them (Ruhlmann, 2014, p. 43).
- Dallas Public Library offers “Coffee and Conversation,” a dialogue between library staff, community members and people experiencing homelessness. All participants share their experience with each other over complimentary coffee. SFPL adopted the same idea, in which homeless users meet to share experiences and problems and talk about the library and its services (Ruhlmann, 2014, p. 44).
- In Seattle Public Library, in-house outreach to vulnerable

populations includes a Teen Drop-In Social Hour geared towards homeless teens to “visit the library for activities and peer group interactions” (Hill, 2016, p. 28).

Social equity-based services in public libraries can eliminate blind spots in targeted services and transform communities. Holt and Holt (2010) cite the SLPL where they two of them served as “user advocates” to a troubled institution that was not serving all community members, demographically speaking (p. 23). SLPL was serving mostly poor white families but African Americans and new Americans in the community were not using the library. SLPL reorganized some of its branches as “equity branches” in poor neighborhoods which used different measurements of success; they were unconcerned with circulation numbers, but focused rather on community outreach and partnerships, provided more after-school programs and cultural enrichment programming (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 103).

### *Democratic participation and e-government*

Many libraries (78.7%) provide direct assistance to users applying for or accessing e-government services and help in understanding and using e-government resources (88.8%) (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 42). The majority of libraries (66.3%) regularly aid in completing government forms and a significant amount (43.4%) contribute to understanding government programs and services (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 42). Civic engagement is promoted in many different ways.

- The joint task force of San Jose Public Library (SJPL) and San Jose State University (SJSU) was formed to recognize the library’s role in assisting vulnerable, at-risk and disadvantaged populations in order to fully engage them in participatory democracy (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009, p. 112).
- The Hartford Public Library in Connecticut provides links to voter registration resources, polling locations, and contact information for elected officials (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 136).
- The Rochester Public Library in Minnesota has a similar website, but additionally includes links to state legislators voting records and websites which track political contributions and fact checking (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 136).
- The Athens County Public Library in Ohio partnered with the League of Women Voters to create voting guides, resources, updated information on candidate forums, election and party issues, sample ballots and election results (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 136).
- Chapel Hill Public Library in North Carolina partnered with the Town of Chapel Hill Justice in Action Committee to host a series called “Civic Engagement and Social Justice,” which

included films, books, and programs about social justice, rights and responsibilities (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 136).

- The Peabody Institute Library in Massachusetts hosted a Teen Mayoral Forum, giving teens a place to voice their questions and opinions about issues, despite their inability to vote (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 136).
- Boulder Public Library in Colorado offers a “Geopolitics Series” with the Boulder Chapter of the United Nations Association, where participants read about current global issues and discuss the issues in a variety of contexts (political, social, ecological, etc.) (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 137).
- Havens and Dudley (2013) speculate about new ways libraries will provide information in the era of climate change in which the “passive democracy with which most of us are familiar” (p. 141) will undergo a shift to more engaged local policy and decision making.

Libraries partner with government bodies to assist citizens with access to government-provided services and resources.

- St. Johns County Public Library in Florida put library computers inside senior centers to expose them to First Coast Help, the St. Johns County social service database maintained by the library, which lists resources for emergencies, employment, food, housing, recreation and other areas of interest (Karp, 2004, p. 8).
- In Queens, New York the Department of State mandated that the Diversity Visa Application process be completed online, so the library partnered with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs to set up times at branch locations to accommodate the completion of the new online application (Jaeger et al., 2015a, p. 58).
- Alachua County Public Library (ACPL) in Florida shares its physical space with local government agencies, so that people using library to fill out documents have access to the actual agencies nearby (Jaeger et al., 2015a, p. 58)
- A partnership between the ACPL with the Florida’s Department of Children and Families provides library space devoted to child welfare with assistance in e-government access, homework help and GED and literacy classes (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 45-46).
- In 2008, Skokie Public Library in Illinois posted information about the forthcoming Chicago Housing Authority Section 8 housing lottery on their community website (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 101-102).
- The next step the SJPL and SJSU task force wants to take is developing “crisis literacy” programs that will provide how-tos for people navigating the bureaucracy of social services (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p.113).

Libraries assist with disaster preparedness and aftermath. Luo et al.

(2012) explain how library space is often used for disaster response; public libraries are typically one of the first local community organizations to provide support following a disaster, as was the case after Hurricane Katrina (p. 76). Public libraries achieved an important precedent in February of 2011, when FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) reversed their decision that libraries were not “essential” in providing emergency services and community support during the natural disaster Hurricane Katrina (Holt, 2013, p. 47). Some examples of library contributions to communities in times of disasters are:

- The public libraries in South Carolina’s Georgetown County partnered with the Department of Emergency Management on Web 2.0 materials to develop “video-game simulations, social media, oral-history video interviews, digital storytelling and the creation of a digital collection of historic hurricane views” for emergency preparedness (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 46).
- In 2008, after Houston was affected by widespread property damage, loss of electricity, and interruption of basic services from Hurricane Ike, the Houston Public Library stepped in to help with relief efforts by setting up a Children’s Zone for families, since schools were closed, deployed the library’s mobile unit to deeply affected areas of the city and provided internet access and stations set up for FEMA claims and Army Corp of Engineers’ Blue Roof Assistance program (Langford, Weeks, & Lawson, 2013, p. 128).

Holt explains that libraries still struggle to achieve stable funding like other national entities deemed essential in times of disaster (like highways) (Holt, 2013, p. 47). It is important to note that the effects of peak oil and climate change will require identifying and securing usable agricultural land, securing alternative and low-energy means of transporting people and supplies, provisioning emergency shelters, and relocalization of the power supply, gardening, and support networks (Havens & Dudley, 2013, p. 141). Libraries could have a future role in addressing these potential disasters.

### *Digital inclusion, technology, and internet access services*

Public access to internet connectivity in libraries across the United States was determined to be at 99.3 % and that the average public library has twenty internet-enabled workstations (Jaeger et al., 2014b, p. 53). These results came out in 2011 after a twenty year study and libraries are still working on bridging the digital divide.

- Pasco County Library in Florida has a program to train technology tutors in assisting older adults with basic computer skills; Old Bridge Public Library in New Jersey provides a specific area to seniors called the Computer Training Center; and Alameda County Library in

Fremont, California offers computer classes and intergenerational technology instruction (Jaeger et al., 2015a, p. 54).

- In St. Johns County Public Library in Florida there is targeted outreach to the elderly, which received a grant to put 10 computers in senior facilities where librarians would hold basic computer classes to connect seniors to technology (Karp, 2004, p. 8). To demonstrate the usefulness of computers, they host an Antiques Roadshow program where participants go online to research the value of their item, which is then auctioned off (one example being a \$250,000 meteorite) (Karp, 2004, p. 8).
- St. Louis Public Library (SLPL) and libraries in the Seattle area were some of the first in the country to receive a Gates Foundation grant to fund computer training labs with a broader scope of services bridging the digital divide (not just for older people, for example). The computer labs featured ways for little kids to play games and access materials for homework; for teens and adults to receive GED prep and learn to use Word and Excel and access adult literacy instruction; the labs seek to especially target workplace literacy problems (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 100).
- The previously mentioned task force at SJPL and SJSU discovered there is a significant digital divide among Silicon Valley residents in terms of socioeconomic status, including many differences in capability of using Internet resources. They found that homeless users frequently utilize the public workstations, but that many of them need computer training. The library had computer skills classes covering computer basics, computer programs and internet use, which combat the digital divide in terms of both age divisions and socioeconomic status (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009, p. 112).
- In 2009, Enoch Pratt Library created computers specifically for job searching (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 102).

### *Educational opportunities and literacy*

While the obvious association between libraries and books can be cited here, literacy comes in many different forms. Luo et al. (2012) cites lifelong learning as a value of libraries which is implemented through “literacy programs, access to consumer health information, GED test preparation” and so on (p. 75). Jaeger et al. (2015a) postulate that librarians end up teaching information literacy and skills for the 21st century on a regular, day-to-day basis (p. 76). Jaeger et al. (2014b) summarize a twenty-year study that included survey findings describing how almost all (96.5%) public libraries provide homework assistance, the majority (55.1%) of public libraries offer online language learning courses and tools, and as of 2012 all (100%) of public libraries provide

free access to online educational databases (p. 53).

Specific examples of educational opportunity include:

- In 2012, King County Library in Washington partnered with Literacy AmeriCorp and Literacy Advocate Designates to provide Adult Basic Education classes in their communities (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 116).
- Librarians at SJPL and SJSU established book clubs and family literacy programs to accommodate low-income and low-education users in comfortable, accessible ways. For example, SJPL and SJSU researched what time shelters open for intake or when soup kitchens are serving meals in order to plan and schedule effective programming that targets homeless populations (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 111). They learned that single-session, focused workshops are effective to combat the lack of reliability some people without transportation have. Because lessons depend on consistency, time slots are important, and SJPL and SJSU made sure to provide consistent weekly classes, as well as drop-in hours with one-on-one skill building (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 113).
- SLPL trained day-care service providers to be children's first teachers by equipping them with tools to help young children get ready to learn to read with particular reading activities. Workshop attendees received continuing education credits through the state body that licenses day-cares. Storytime providers at SLPL were also trained to present models of behavior to parents for early literacy. Project REAL (Read and Learn) was established for low income families and provided reading activities, programs, parties and field trips (Holt & Holt, 2010, p. 101)
- Anderson (2012) cites SJPL and SJSU partnering "with community agencies to provide computer classes, resume workshops, and English as a second language (ESL) classes for their homeless and low-income patrons" (p. 79).
- The Athens-Clarke County Library in Georgia offers "exchange programs" which partner an English and a Spanish speaking family together to learn languages from each other while participating in a fun, hands-on cultural activity (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 177).

### *Employment*

Some libraries are making efforts to directly employ vulnerable populations in outreach positions. Doing so gives people the skills, experience and training to secure future employment. The following are examples of libraries that have gone above and beyond merely providing resources about employment, but directly and actively employing vulnerable populations.

- Philadelphia Public Library collaborates with Project H.O.M.E. to employ community members as library bathroom attendants and food servers at H.O.M.E. Page Cafe in the Parkway Central Branch while also offering job skills training (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 107). Basically, “four formerly homeless individuals serve more than 150 customers daily” and a total of “17 formerly homeless people have been trained and gone on to other employment” (Blank, 2014, p. 14). Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher (2012) describe the same program as “reduc[ing] problems while helping homeless individuals to engage in the workforce” (p. 79). Participants gain experience in customer service, coffee preparation, workplace skills and are required to pass the ServSafe Food safety exam, which also helps them build their resume.
- The BiblioTech STEM program of the Kitsap Regional Library in Washington State offers technology and access to all teens, but beginning in 2013 they offered science and tech classes particularly to teens experiencing homelessness through a Paul G. Allen Family Foundation Grant. For all teens, including those without homes, they also created a 100-hour STEM learning internship and an after-school STEM program with workshops on video design, robotics, computer programming and 3D printers through partnership with Coffee Oasis, a faith-based nonprofit (Hill, 2016, p. 28).
- SFPL hired four health and safety advocates who were formerly homeless themselves (Ruhlmann, 2014, p. 43).

### *Financial stability and support*

Income inequality is a growing issue in most major cities in the United States and to promote greater social equity libraries promote education about finances and assistance in finding tax cuts. While information is not a cure-all to economic stratification, it does help people make better decisions about finances and assists low-income people in saving money and receiving benefits.

- Enoch Pratt Free Library provides a variety of programs in finances including home-buying seminars, financial management, income tax assistance, ways to start a business, perform market research, career and job training and small business owner assistance (Francis, 2013, p. 69).
- In Ohio, the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton partnered with the Ohio Benefit Bank to create information resources about tax credits and work support for low income families (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 141).
- Queens Public Library in New York offers “Financial Literacy in the Community” classes, which were presented in English and a

second language and made available online (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 176).

- San Diego County Library saw its community face a rise in home foreclosures and began to offer Homeowners Mobile Education to help residents learn about mortgages real estate and credit (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 71).

### *Food and nutritional programs*

Rauseo & Edwards (2013) recognize that “libraries certainly cannot address all of the circumstances that lead to individual households being food insecure, they can (and we believe should) play a role in addressing community food security in association with community partners” (p. 89). Providing and sharing food also builds relationships between members of the community who eat together.

- Peabody Institute Library’s Summer Food Service Program provides lunches to youth in at-risk neighborhoods in the summer which partners with a substance abuse program, senior center, local church and workforce investment board (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 106). The Peabody Institute Library in Massachusetts started the Summer Food Service Program, in order to combat food insecurity, but also to increase self-reliance of communities, promote nutrition education and support local farms (Rauseo & Edwards, 2013, p. 89).
- Collins, Howard, & Mirafior (2009) recommend offering food and childcare so families will come to programs they might not get a chance to otherwise, especially adult literacy and educational classes.
- Libraries have provided snacks in storytime or at teen programming, but are now adding cafes and coffee carts to make the library more welcoming (Rauseo & Edwards, 2013, p. 89).
- Watauga County Public Library in North Carolina partnered with the Building Common Ground Project to host a series on food security that featured book groups, films, speakers, local farm tours and a community service fair (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 141).
- The Northern Onondaga Public Library in Cicero, New York utilizes a half acre of library land as an organic community garden, which community members can use to “check out” a plot of land and grow anything they’d like, alongside a shared area where anyone can plant, maintain and pick anything they want (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 148).

### *Health and wellness*

While libraries do not generally provide healthcare services, there are some ways libraries can promote health and wellness. Libraries can

provide information and programming, or actively employ social workers to assist those in need of mental health services or substance abuse.

- The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore partnered with Baltimore City Health Department to create the Virtual Supermarket Project in which areas known as food deserts can receive access to grocery ordering and delivery through the library (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 46).
- SFPL and the San Francisco Department of Public Health hired a social worker who “handled referrals for social services for library patrons who are chronically homeless, mentally ill and those struggling with substance abuse” (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 46).
- Queens Public Library in New York offers an online resource section titled “English for your Health” with exercises and vocabulary for assistance in medical and dental appointments, prescriptions and emergencies (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 176).
- The Baltimore Public Library in Maryland has a webpage dedicated to survivors of domestic violence, suicide attempters, victims of rape, those struggling with eating disorders and other mental health issues. In Saginaw, Michigan the library provides resources on teen parenting (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 141).

### *Immigrant and refugee focused services*

Libraries are doing a lot to work with immigrant and refugee populations and are one of the first friendly places newcomers to the United States can go. Listed here are merely a few examples of how libraries are working to welcome and assist immigrants and refugees, as this is an evolving and growing aspect of public library focus.

- Jaeger, Bertot, Shuler, and McGilvray (2012) describe a partnership between the Austin Public Library in Texas and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency to create “New Immigrants Centers.” These centers provide resources and support for immigrants in multiple languages and include classes on citizenship and test preparation; the Hartford Public Library in Connecticut has a similar partnership and program (Jaeger et al., 2012, p. 46).
- Austin Public Library in Texas provides traditional resources on citizenship to newcomers in the community, but also a digital “Newcomers Guide” which includes information on cultural groups, job searching, legal and social services and how to start a new business, which is particularly noteworthy for its extensiveness (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 178).

### *Legal services*

Legal services are crucial for vulnerable populations like undocumented immigrants and the homeless. In many places across the United

States sleeping outside or loitering is a ticketable offense, yet people experiencing homelessness often have nowhere else to go.

- At SJPL and SJSU, the “Lawyers in the Library” program serves users with 20-minute legal consultations.
- Also at SJPL and SJSU, the “Day of Service” focuses on opportunities for housing, rehabilitation, and educational enrichment, which guide users through paperwork (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009, p. 114-115). The “Day of Service” effort is meant to reach as many people as possible in a brief time frame, which is especially useful to those needing immediate assistance. “Day of Service” attempts to provide legal assistance “lite” through assistance in navigating leases, government assistances forms, etc.
- Jaegar et al. (2015a) describe public library efforts that provide legal support in Texas, Illinois, and Minnesota. The Travis County Law Library in Texas created a partnership with local judges and clerks to develop court forms that are available online.
- A partnership between the Chicago Bar Foundation, Lawyer’s Trust Fund, Illinois Legal Aid Online, and the Chicago Kent College of Law developed technology-based legal self-help centers located inside local public libraries (Jaegar et al., 2015a).
- The Central Minnesota Legal Services got a grant to develop library-legal aid collaborations, which included a statewide webinar series to train librarians on online legal resources (Jaegar et al., 2015a).

### *Programs to improve quality of life and promote diversity and inclusivity*

Many services and programs detailed here target specific financial, health, education, and entertainment needs of vulnerable or marginalized populations.

- Enoch Pratt Free Library provides a variety of programs in general education, literacy, health and wellness workshops and multicultural celebrations (Francis, 2013, p. 69).
- Chicago Public Library in Illinois provides downloadable kits for parents to familiarize children with autism with the library prior to visiting, alongside sensory storytimes and the opportunity to practice reading with a service dog (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 182).
- The Boulder Public Library in Colorado partnered with the University of Colorado and the Arts and Humanities Assembly of Boulder to present a “Communities in Exile” series of panel discussions which featured Sioux/Assiniboine tribe members telling stories, Japanese, Latin American, and Caribbean dancers,

Afghans singing folk songs and West African traditional music (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 179).

- The Skokie Public Library in Illinois hosted a program organized by the local Indian community to explore views on religious traditions and peace and nonviolence (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 139).
- Hill (2016) cites Project Uplift at the Salt Lake City Library, which brings together a variety of local social service groups to host a fair with free haircuts, clothing, meals and raffle tickets for useful goods (which vary based on what is donated) (p. 28).
- Collins, Howard, and Miraflor (2009) suggest that families experiencing homelessness may be attracted to fun, creative programming that engages children, for the same reason anyone else would. Storytimes with songs, reading, crafts and activities promote early literacy for children, but offer entertainment to homeless families. While traditional social services which provide food, shelter, and clothing are essential, all people, regardless of socioeconomic status, also enjoy entertainment.
- Peabody Institute Library in Massachusetts offered a storytime for adults with disabilities and Contra Costa County Library in California hosted a special tour of the library for a large group of adults with disabilities (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 183).
- SFPL has mobile showers outside the library that includes soap, shampoo and towels in a partnership with Lava Mae (Ruhlmann, 2014, p. 43).
- The Earn-a-Bike program for teens at the Peabody Institute Library in Massachusetts was inspired by local nonprofit Bikes Not Bombs (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 79).
- Dallas Public Library hosts a Street View Podcast which is created by homeless users, but includes local social service agency representatives, homeless guests and library staff members, covering many issues including homelessness, drugs and mental illness (Hill, 2016, p. 28).
- SLPL also provided what they characterized as “aspirational programming” such as “How to Make Your Home Look Nice and Be Comfortable on a Very Tight Budget” and “Personal Grooming for Girls” (Holt & Holt, 2010, p.104).

### *Reference services*

Reference services act as social services in public libraries in two ways, through crisis reference (Westbrook, 2015), which are of an urgent or life threatening nature, and information consultations about longer term needs and services (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009). Homeless users have indicated the need for information regarding: finances,

relationships with others, childcare, housing, health and health care (for self and for others), employment, education (for self and for others), transportation and public assistance (for self and for others) (Hersberger, 2005). The SJPL and SJSU task force analyzes programs and found that information needs were heavily dependent on the situational need of the individual person experiencing homelessness (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p.112). These needs included information needs for basic daily life, like having shelter, food to eat, clothing to wear; but also other long-term information needs like affordable housing, psychological services, substance abuse problems, skill building, health care, child care, transportation, employment and education (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 112). The public library is not always the best community resource to find these answers, because libraries “might not have the lists for local subsidized housing available, but librarians ought to be able to know where in the community such information is known” (Hersberger, 2005). One revelation of the SJPL and SJSU task force was that the homeless population can find the reference desk very intimidating, which is another challenge for librarians (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 113). Given these challenges, it is important that a skilled librarian be able to connect users to helpful and useful information through referrals and consultations.

- SJPL and SJSU generated an inventory of library resources for homeless children, teens, and adults and also identified potential partner agencies. The result of this action was a homeless resources page developed for the library web site which refers staff helping the homeless to national and local agencies (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009).
- In Baltimore County, Maryland, the public library and Baltimore County Communities for the Homeless partnered together to create a “street card,” which includes a list of resources for jobs, food, monetary and emergency contact information (Jaeger et al., 2015a, p. 62).
- Blank (2014) explains that SFPL was the first public library in the country to hire a licensed marriage and family therapist. SFPL has an in-house social workers who provides counseling and referrals to homeless and mentally ill users.
- The Pima County Library was the first in the country to hire public health nurses (Blank, 2014).
- Two programs were developed by SJPL and SJSU that utilize partnerships with other professionals as support for crisis reference: “Lawyers in the library” and “Social workers in the library.” Luo et al. (2012) describe in-depth the partnership between SJSU’s School of Social Work, SJPL, and the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, which resulted in the creation of

the Social Workers in the Library (SWITL) program. Bilingual (Spanish and English) social workers volunteer their time for one-on-one consultations in the library and aim to address a broad range of social needs, including family issues like disagreements, death, adoption, child care, elder care, foster care, divorce; economic issues like unemployment, underemployment and homelessness; health issues such as recovery from substance abuse, emergency services for food, clothing, housing and crisis support; the need for education; and the special needs of immigrants, refugees and English language learners including literacy, legal help, housing and support groups (Luo et al., 2012, p. 74-75, 77). These professionals assist users in “negotiating shelter, food banks, employment, child-care, education and transportation issues”. The librarian’s role is to facilitate consultation by offering private meeting rooms for privacy, as well as by setting up appointments for homeless users with social workers or lawyers (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p.113).

### *Space*

Library space should be welcoming and safe for all users. Space can be especially important to vulnerable populations who might not have many other options of free, indoor space where they are welcome.

- Collins, Howard, and Mirafior (2009) believe the architecture of the shared campus of the city-university and public library system consisting of SJPL and SJSU promotes the idea of upward mobility. They claim that the “visual message” of the dual public/academic library, allows a public library user, regardless of socioeconomic status, to access the university’s resources, which can help them “advance socially, economically, and professionally” even if they do not necessarily pursue a degree there (Collins, Howard, & Mirafior, 2009, p. 109).
- Jaeger et al. (2014b) found the majority of libraries (53.3%) offer workspaces for mobile workers, which can refer to either entrepreneurs, people who rely on the gig economy or other non-traditional work situations, some of which can certainly pertain to those struggling with economic hardships such as homelessness, poverty, and underemployment (p. 53).
- To combat social exclusion, Hoyer cites DeFaveri’s (2005) example of using library space for non-library community programming as often as possible (p. 59).
- Madison Public Library made sure to accommodate user privacy when redesigning its buildings, because they wanted to make sure homeless users had access to private workstations given that privacy is rare when living on the streets (Ruhlmann, 2014, p. 44).

- Many libraries have been investing in gardens and green spaces in order to help people experience nature. In Addison, Illinois, the public library has a rooftop garden which also functions as a rainwater abatement system (Jordan, 2013, p.101). Jordan (2013) cites research showing the amount of green spaces in a community is connected with the perceived help and well being of community members because gardens are a source of peace, contemplation, beautification, fundraising and a food source (p. 101, 103-107).

Blank (2014) describes the overlap between the social work and library fields, citing how libraries act as day shelters for those experiencing homelessness. The restrooms, safe spaces and lack of security checks make the library a welcoming place for its homeless users.

### *Sustainability and environmental crisis*

Safety from natural disasters is growing increasingly important in the contemporary age of extreme weather, climate change and rising shorelines. As mentioned, libraries have attempted to help with disaster relief, but they can serve proactive educational roles and adapt to changing information needs.

- The Spokane Public Library in Washington, the Missoula Public Library in Montana, and the Kalamazoo Public Library in Michigan provide online resources about sustainability, energy, and the environment on their website (Edwards, Robinson, & Unger, 2013, p. 141-142).
- Slone (2008) speculates that after peak oil, libraries will fill gaps in information needs about local resources for food, medicine, travel, shelter, talent, experts, native plants, transportation, environmental needs, clean water, alternative energy, self-reliance and health (p. 28-31).

### *Professional training for library staff and hiring practices*

The quality and effectiveness of every library and its services depends on staff training and the hiring of individuals who value social equity as the mission of the library. To combat ignorance of resources and provide crisis reference that addresses the complex needs of vulnerable populations, trauma informed training is key. Westbrook (2015) offers a four-part model of reference service that is centered on users and their crisis situations using interactions with librarians as problem-solving mechanisms. Ideally, trained professionals in the social work or educational fields would be assisting at-risk and vulnerable library users either as employees or in partnership with public libraries, but because of the limited staffing and funding, public librarians and library workers themselves sometimes face crisis situations they are unprepared for. Westbrook (2015) posits “identity studies” as a strategy

for providing the best services to at-risk populations. The identity study takes into account each individual and their specific experience and challenge in order to best serve them. She demonstrates her method using domestic abuse survivors, but suggests the method can be morphed to help any at-risk or special-needs population.

Hersberger (2011) insists that library and information personnel ought not act in a therapeutic or clinical role to address mental health issues, which should be left to trained professionals, but does suggest library staff better attempt to understand stress, resiliency and their effect on information seeking behaviors to better serve users. Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher (2012) present an exploratory study using surveys from library staff in the United States focusing on staff relationships with homeless users and their ability to help them. They determined that “library staff may be in a position to help, yet they are not well trained to address the specific and often complex needs of homeless people” (p.77). They note that library staff is susceptible to compassion fatigue, in which they become exhausted and unfeeling (p. 79). Having a staff trained in sensitivity and special needs is important, but so is having a culturally diverse staff, which can be key to opening up interactions with equally diverse users and making them feel welcome in the library (Hoyer, 2013, p. 59). Having a team-oriented staff who are also respectful of each other is important in a high stress environment. In her experience, Rios Balderrama (2004) found the public library workplace to be characterized by frustration, disrespect, lack of recognition, lack of opportunity for development or advancement, lack of accessibility to management and generally unfriendly attitudes towards coworkers. Furthermore, libraries were found to be experienced as organizations of distrust, elitism, hierarchy, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, divisiveness between departments and job classifications, stuffiness and low morale (p. 110).

Negative attitude and treatment of library users by library staff can be combated with proper training. Hersberger (2005) emphasizes that classifying the homeless as “problem patrons” is outright discrimination and explains that a toddler would never be asked to leave the library for being smelly, loud, or sleeping and that no one would deem them unworthy of library services. Hersberger (2005) warns too of perceptions by librarians which delineate between deserving or undeserving users.

As Hersberger (2005) explains that because of this attitude, homeless patrons are often not treated with dignity by staff members. Hersberger (2005) also admits that individual problematic behaviors are certainly grounds for dismissal from the library, but a “cheerful and helpful attitude goes a long way in making a homeless person’s day,” and that sentiment can certainly extend to any human being who walks in the doors of the public library.

## Conclusion

The modern public library is a vibrant “community-funded public good” (McCook, 2013, p. vii). The public library has the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and changing communities. Public libraries are dynamic and strive to be egalitarian places through their many services and programs. It is evident libraries value social equity when they actively work to achieve a more socially just world. By providing equal access, libraries promote social equity, and no matter how distant or improbable contemporary society seems as nearing that a just and equal society, the public library still has a role in fighting for that future. Stereotyped as quiet, static places with oak furniture, libraries are actually moving deeper into their own communities and positioning themselves as central to the needs of all users, especially the most at-risk and vulnerable. While libraries are not attempting to make people into any one “type,” as in the days of Andrew Carnegie’s self-improvement based facilities, the library focuses on bettering the quality of life for a diverse range of individuals in order to make their communities and society at large better places to live. Social equity-based services in libraries create social bonds and a sense of community through programming and space, promote equal access to as many users as possible and provide essential social support, proving the library to be more relevant than ever.

Two leaders in the contemporary library world sum up well the goals and purposes of the public library and their role in promoting social equity. As Sari Feldman, president of the American Library Association for 2015-2016 explains, today’s libraries “play a huge role in serving all people, in particular, the neediest. We have a great opportunity to create equity and to change lives” (Blank, 2014, p. 12). Carla D. Hayden (2004), former director of Enoch Pratt Free Library, ALA president from 2003-2004, and current Librarian of Congress, states “The commitment to inclusive service delivery means involvement of the entire community and all community stakeholders” (ix). If positive transformation is not the goal of contemporary public libraries, then they have failed as public institutions and as needs-based government organizations. While public libraries often strive to be all things to all people, their essential democratizing purpose and value lies in promoting social equity through providing social-equity based services. Social equity can only be achieved (if ever) by fostering a sense of community, social support, and a safe, egalitarian space for all community members to use and meet their needs, especially those most in need.

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