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Nanci is currently reading *Heart Shaped Box* by Joe Hill and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua.

*Perspectives offers varied viewpoints on subjects of interest to the public library profession.*

# Public Libraries and the Homeless

The American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Literacy and Outreach Services' (OLOS) subcommittee on Library Services to Poor and Homeless People helps library staff who serve the poor and homeless understand the issues surrounding this constituency and better serve it. They do so through ALA's Policy on Library Services to the Poor and Homeless, providing lectures, and through the collection of resources.<sup>1</sup>

According to a January 2011 report, the nation's homeless population increased by approximately 200,000 people from 2005 to 2009.<sup>2</sup> Public libraries and librarians can no longer pretend that the poor and homeless are not a severely underserved community. It is time that each of our libraries steps up to the plate and develops a plan of service for these patrons.

What follows are stories from four different public librarians about how they have identified the need for these services and the actions they took in order to develop and deliver them. I hope that their stories inspire you to take that first step in your own library.

## Our Homeless Customers and Social Workers in the Library

*Deborah Estreicher*, Reference Librarian, San José (Calif.) Public Library, [deborah.estreicher@sjlibrary.org](mailto:deborah.estreicher@sjlibrary.org); *Francis Howard*, Reference Librarian, San José State University, [francis.howard@sjsu.edu](mailto:francis.howard@sjsu.edu); and *Peter Lee*, Acting Director, School of Social Work, San José State University, [peter.a.lee@sjsu.edu](mailto:peter.a.lee@sjsu.edu)

"Libraries are a haven for the homeless. They are dry, warm, have bathrooms, services, and a sympathetic staff."—*Maury Kendall, representing the Emergency Housing Consortium at a September 28, 2001, multi-paneled staff workshop on homelessness*<sup>3</sup>

### Statistics on the Homeless People of San José

The City of San José is the tenth largest city in the nation, with estimates of more than one million residents. The cost of living in San José and the surrounding areas is among the highest in California and the nation. Housing costs are the primary reason for this high cost of living. It is, therefore, not surprising that the primary reasons residents become homeless are the lack of affordable housing and the lack of sufficient income. According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the 2012 Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a one-bedroom apartment in Santa Clara County is \$1,350. Fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,623 and \$2,334 for a three-bedroom apartment.<sup>4</sup> Although 16 percent of the homeless population in Santa Clara County said they work at least part-time, it is likely that the vast majority still cannot

afford Silicon Valley rents. Someone who works full-time at the California minimum wage earning \$8.00 per hour (\$1,280 per month) could not afford a two-bedroom, market-rate apartment in San José on their own. A single parent raising two small children and employed in a minimum-wage job would earn \$16,640 annually and therefore be living below the poverty line of \$17,600 for a family of three.<sup>5</sup>

According to statistics provided by the Emergency Housing Consortium (EHC) LifeBuilders, more than 20,000 people each year have experienced homelessness in Santa Clara County:

The 2011 annual estimate for the number of homeless people in San José was 10,844 persons. This was a 21 percent increase from the 2009 annual estimate of 8,941 persons. Based on the 2007–09 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates population profile, this annual estimate of homelessness represented approximately 1 percent of the City of San José's total population of 948,244 people.<sup>6</sup>

Twenty-five percent of this population is under the age of eighteen. Families make up 41 percent of the homeless population and are the fastest growing segment. Homelessness has no set profile. Individuals, families, and children are homeless. The homeless include those who hold jobs and those who are unemployed. The homeless can include those with drug and alcohol dependencies, the disabled, and the mentally ill, but not all people experiencing homelessness live with these conditions. Lack of affordable housing and financial instability are the two main causes of homelessness. However, many factors can contribute to each individual situation. These factors include unemployment, underemployment or loss of a job, flight from domestic violence, or illness.<sup>7</sup>

There also exists a need to make connections with homeless and at-risk children, who may have dropped out of school and are in need of the help of social workers. The number of homeless and at-risk

youth is increasing. There is much need of social workers to assist these children in getting back on track in their lives and education, so that they may become viable citizens in our globalized society. Government and corporations must step up to the plate and recognize that libraries are where people go to get help. If we want to meet the needs of this growing population, we must act by appropriating funding to libraries in order to sustain and increase services to an increasing homeless population, due to budgetary constraints across the nation. A need exists for better cooperation between our nation's libraries, governmental agencies, and the corporate world, in order to create an environment of human connectedness throughout our nation, as we prepare for the twenty-first century and an increasingly globalized economy. How better these collaborations would make for a more efficient, cost-saving, and economical way of sustaining human life, which at some point in time will have sustained our corporate and governmental systems.

To be without a home is to be without stability. Children cannot function well at school. Adults have difficulty finding and sustaining work and caring for their children. To be a public librarian is to see many walks of life and listen to many life stories. As outreach librarians, we bring library materials and programs to homeless shelters and food pantries throughout the city. These experiences as well as others including working on 'Helping the Homeless' committees and research led to the concept of Social Workers in the Library (SWITL). Harnessed to the successful program model of Lawyers in the Library (pro-bono legal information) and the willing ear and enthusiasm of Peter Lee, acting director of the School of Social Work at San José State University (SJSU), and his graduate student, Kristine Chavez, as well as the support of Cyndy and Glenn Thomas of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the SWITL concept became a reality. Since then, several other volunteers, staff, professional social workers, and social work graduate students have contributed to SWITL.

A partnership of SJPL, SJSU's school of social work, and NASW, SWITL is now in its second year of operation at SJPL. Anyone can make an appointment and receive twenty minutes of information/referral and advice from a NASW member, who volunteer two hours in service to the community. SWITL sessions are currently held twice a month at the King Main Library and once a month at Biblioteca Latino Americana (a branch of SJPL), where a bilingual Spanish-speaking social worker has volunteered to share his expertise.

Individuals and families learn of SWITL through flyers, the library's website, from staff, or via the LED screens placed at the entrance of the library. A dedicated phone line is used to screen callers and schedule appointments. A reception center is assembled prior to each SWITL program. This consists of chairs and tables placed comfortably within a designated area having relevant book displays and a free-for-all table of resources materials. Each visitor is asked to sign a liability waiver.

A meeting space for consultation is provided by the library, enabling privacy. It includes Internet access and an AT&T translation line, when needed. A children's table is present and equipped with paper and crayons for younger guests. Kleenex, water, and chocolate are present to comfort the SWITL customers. Those needing assistance are provided with a twenty-minute, face-to-face consultation regarding information and referrals to local social services; relevant program and contact information; an immediate response to their referral and information needs; and follow-up via opportunities for future appointments if the customer has additional questions. After each session, both the customer and the social worker are asked to complete a brief evaluation.

In 2010, Lili Luo, from SJSU's school of library and information science, and Lee were awarded a research incentive grant, sponsored by SJSU's college of applied sciences and arts. The specific aims of this grant were to examine the effectiveness of the SWITL program model, to investigate opportunities to expand the program model, and to explore other interdisciplin-

any program models that could increase community access to information regarding social-service programs and resources.

Homelessness, or the potential threat of homelessness, although not the sole issue faced by people who have visited SWITL, were subjects discussed by our customers in eighteen out of the twenty-six sessions we have held to date. Corroborating the statistics provided by EHC, SWITL customers in need of housing are families, women, and men and of all ages and backgrounds, that for a variety of reasons have found themselves homeless and forced to live on the streets, in cars, parks, shelters, or riding on buses.

The City of San José's *Homeless Services Guide*, produced in four languages, is an essential tool in our arsenal of referrals. A binder of current and viable community-service agencies is ever present at the consulting table.

SWITL has held several in-services in its two years of operation. By inviting community agencies to share information of the services they provide with SWITL members, we have enriched our referral potential and added a face and name to the agencies we connect our customers to. A few of the individuals from these agencies have also been added to our roster of volunteers.

Building on connections SWITL has made with social-service providers throughout our community, in particular to First 5 Santa Clara County and San José's Sacred Heart Community Service, we have been able to successfully provide referral of food and shelter to families with children under the age of five.

There are three memorable stories of homeless individuals that we would like to share. One, a woman in her late sixties—intelligent, educated, formerly of very comfortable means—came to SWITL in search of shelter. She travels in buses when she has fare, on foot if she does not, along the downtown streets, to her appointments with ever increasing baggage. She is always careful of library property and speaks to me disparagingly of those she sees eating over books and carelessly utilizing library property.

When she came for her appointment, she sat in our makeshift reception area and listened as those waiting with her shared the situations they were in that brought them to make an appointment with the social workers of SWITL. She listened and then offered advice. It was so beautiful to witness this great kindness and generosity from one person who, materially, now had so little.

A second story is about a young woman with three children who attended several of the library's family programs. A victim of domestic abuse, new to the country, and not fluent in English, she binds her family together with such visible love. At one time in an apartment infested with fleas, at another moving between a Palo Alto shelter and San José so that her children would remain in their school, and at other times sleeping in a park.

The third story is about a senior—a man and veteran of foreign war—who, although eligible for several services, chooses to sleep in his car. A former scientist, he is exceedingly kind and generous with his knowledge of chess and other matters. At one point he stepped in when witnessing the escalating temper of another customer. He calmed her and had her reappraise the situation she was so furious about.

Every individual has a story. The homeless customer may not be bathed, perfumed, or dressed in clean clothes. The library provides shelter, a temporary place of warmth, a space for verbal or electronic interaction, or the quiet solitude of dreams or thought in the pages of books or magazines. Our job is not to be distracted by smells or appearances, but to focus on the question asked and respond with a referenced answer. As much as we would like to, individually we cannot provide a shelter to all in need, we can provide services of information and referral that will lead to that shelter. At SJPL's King Library, we try to ensure that all of our customers are listened to and treated with respect.

## Connecting With Our Invisible Families

*Vikki C. Terrile, Coordinator of Young Adult Services, Queens (N.Y.) Public Library, vikki.c.terre@queenslibrary.org*

It is five o'clock on a brisk, blustery October afternoon and, after an unexpectedly hectic day, I am an hour late for a library visit to a family shelter. Despite repeated assurances from the family assistant that whenever I arrive is fine, I am rushing, trying to stuff all my supplies into an already packed polka-dot tote bag without it getting stuck in the backseat of my tiny car. Like many of the family shelters in Queens, this one is located in a former motel near one of the two major airports that bracket our borough at the north and south. As I bump my way up the sidewalk, airplane engines and city buses roar, mimicking the sound of rushing water and I cannot help but smile, frazzled as I am. The staff must have been alerted to my visit because they are waiting when I push through the doors; the lobby is painted in bright pastels that always remind me of *Miami Vice*. I follow the staff member through the maze of hallways until we see the family assistant who dismisses my apologies and helps me set up in the small recreation room. She offers to stay with me to keep the littlest kids from grabbing at the incentives and supplies I have set out on the table, but I caution I will likely need her more as a translator since this site tends to have many Spanish-speaking parents. Sure enough, the second mother who comes in sits down and immediately launches into a story, in Spanish, about the problem with her and her child's library cards. Once the family assistant stops laughing, she asks the mom to switch to English and we piece together both the problem and a happy solution. My mind is made up, though; my goal for 2012 is to take Spanish conversation classes.

When we talk about "the homeless" our libraries serve, it is probably single adults who come to mind. It is often a shock to realize just how many families and children are experiencing homeless-

ness in the US, with the numbers rising as the economy continues to falter. We are all seeing these families in our libraries, ones who may be living doubled up with other families or friends, in temporary or emergency housing, or even in a car or on the street, but we rarely realize what they are experiencing. I have been bringing library services to the family shelters in Queens since 2009, most often through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education's Queens Office for Students in Temporary Housing. There are fifteen shelters for families experiencing homelessness in Queens, geographically the largest of New York City's five boroughs. The city's daily population of people living in temporary housing reached a record of more than 41,000 people at the end of October 2011, a number that includes 17,000 children under the age of eighteen.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with the McKinney-Vento Act (the Federal law that protects the educational rights of students experiencing homelessness), each family shelter with school-age children in Queens has a family assistant who helps parents with enrollment and transportation issues, provides after-school support for kids, and acts as a liaison between the shelter, the Department of Education, and individual schools. Each family assistant runs her on-site program a little differently, so my visits are planned to meet each residence's needs. One site has me visit during the dinner hour, setting up in the cafeteria so that when the families come in to pick up their dinners, they can also stop at my table. Another site with a large after-school program, both for residents and the community at large, has me come in at school dismissal time so that parents can apply for library cards and receive information before they leave. Yet another program is very strict about after-school being just for kids, so I do the session directly with the children and teens (and the occasional adult brave enough to sneak upstairs). I visit each residence at least twice a year, in the fall and the spring, attend special events, and always have a table at the end-of-the-school-year celebration for all of the families in temporary housing in the borough.

Most of my visit is spent registering kids, teens, and parents for library cards, and answering their many questions about the cards—how to fix old problems and how to prevent new ones. Many of the parents had library cards as young people and haven't been back to the library since their youth because of lost books or owed fees. Their relief as we work out a solution so that they and their children can take advantage of the library is palpable. A good number of the families are not originally from Queens, so I also talk about our different community libraries, what they offer, where they are located, and how to get to them from where we are. I am most interested in helping them feel connected to the community through the library. Although these are supposed to be temporary housing situations, many of the families I see in the fall are still there in the spring. There have also been a few families that I have served at multiple residences. Whatever their individual situation, I want the parents and young people I see to feel welcome in our libraries and invested in our communities for however long they are here.

At every visit, I bring goodies—including pencils, library card holders, pencil cases, and stickers. This year we had bubbles left over from the summer reading program. They were a huge hit. Often, the parents are as eager for the goodies as the kids, so I make sure I have more than enough to go around. I bring lots of information with me about the wide range of programs and services we offer everyone in the family. These include everything from concerts and story times to pre-GED and ESOL classes. Sometimes, I'll encounter a parent who wants library cards for her children but is adamant that there is nothing at the library for her. Aware that many of the services parents who are homeless receive can undermine their authority as parents; I try to give examples that might change her mind without pushing too hard or trampling her dignity. Often, I am struck by how young so many of the parents are, and am always touched by the handful of parents at each visit who just need to sit and talk for a while. Recently, I had a mom

who desperately wanted a library card for her daughter but was afraid to have her address at the shelter on record because she was in a domestic violence situation. We were able to come up with a solution that protected the family's safety while also allowing her daughter to take full advantage of what the library has to offer.

Despite having experienced hardships in their young lives most of us can barely imagine, the kids and teens I meet at visits are just as curious, chatty, shy, tough, silly, and excited as any other young person I know. I have had kids at visits draw me pictures and tell me the best stories. Just before Halloween, one young girl thanked me for the plastic wallet for her new library card because she was sure it would protect her card from monsters. I have learned from the teens I meet at visits that they feel safe and welcome in our libraries. Their only suggestion is that we serve snacks all the time. This past summer, I did a weekly summer-reading visit at a residence with a group of kids who ranged in age from four to thirteen. We shared books, made art projects, and toured our new children's library and discovery center. At my first session, the older children had prepared a healthy lunch for everyone, and insisted I stay and eat with them. I know the kids enjoyed themselves and learned a lot through the program, but I am certain I had the best time of all.

A few days ago, I was walking down a busy retail avenue near the central library where my office is and a man started calling, "Hello! Hello!" I kept going as the excited greetings continued and, out of curiosity, I turned around. An older man with a heavy accent greeted me with such warmth and enthusiasm and gratitude that I panicked because I did not remember him at all. He kept saying, "I remember you! My sister remembers you!" Looking in his eyes, I could see how certain he was and I spoke with him for a few minutes while frantically racking my brain to remember where we could have met. I eventually recalled that in one of my earliest shelter visits, I had helped an older man and his sister get library cards. His acknowledgment was humbling, a reminder

that we often don't know just how much we touch people through our work.

Recently, I had the privilege of attending the annual conference of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY). I met homeless liaisons and educators from across the country that surprised and delighted me with stories of how their local libraries serve the families and youth who are experiencing homelessness in their communities. I heard about a library that allows unaccompanied youth (teens who are runaways or who have been abandoned by or thrown out of the homes of their parents or guardians) unlimited computer use and free printing. Another liaison talked about how her local library had hosted an annual resource day for families and individuals experiencing homelessness in their community until the event grew too large for the library's meeting space. I also met other social workers and liaisons who hadn't thought of reaching out to their local libraries but after hearing what was possible, couldn't wait to get home and get started.

If you would like to share stories about your work with our most vulnerable families and youth, please e-mail me. I am looking forward to learning more about the great work so many folks are doing.

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## My House Just Burned Down: Libraries Serving the Homeless

*Leslie Edmonds Holt, CEO, Holt Consulting, leholt@aol.com*

On the first day of a new job in a major city library, I was told that there was a problem with the phone. It turned out that the city had renumbered all city agencies so that each agency would have consecutive phone numbers. That seemed like a good plan until I realized that only days before, my number had been the one the fire department gave out to people whose house had just burned down. On my first phone call, the voice at the other end said "My

house just burned down. Where can I sleep tonight?" Ever since that time, I have had an interest in being able to answer that question and to help the homeless solve their problems.

Communities differ greatly on how, or if, the homeless are helped. Urban centers attract the homeless as many services for the homeless are in cities. Suburban communities have some homeless people and rural areas have the fewest people with no place to live. Thus, some libraries have both the homeless and policies and services developed to help them and others see few homeless day-to-day and may be less well prepared to cope. In St. Louis, we were within walking distance from more than ten homeless shelters, so we had men, women, and children who needed a place to be during the day and services to help them improve their situation. Our suburban and rural neighbors saw homeless people occasionally, but generally referred these people to us or other service agencies within the city.

We succeeded in serving the homeless because we were prepared. We knew about the homeless themselves, we identified the helpful services we could offer, we partnered with other agencies and had policies in place to deal with unacceptable behavior. This worked for us and would work for any library that either has had the homeless thrust upon them, or acknowledged that the homeless have legitimate library needs. Service to the homeless should fit within the mission of the library and be in the context of serving other poor constituencies.

### Who are the Homeless?

One thing you learn quickly is that the homeless each have their own story and that there are various reasons people find themselves even temporarily without a place to stay. What follows is an overview of homelessness in America.

According to the most recent official estimate, approximately 675,000 people are homeless on any given night. In any given year, 2.5 to 3.5 million people will experience at least one night of homelessness. Though the numbers are difficult to

track, it is estimated that roughly one million more people will become homeless as a result of the current recession.<sup>9</sup>

### Statistics on the Homeless

- Fifty-eight percent report having trouble getting enough food.
- Twenty-three percent are veterans, compared with 13 percent of the general population.
- Twenty-two percent have serious mental illnesses or are disabled.
- Thirty percent have substance abuse problems.
- Three percent report having HIV/AIDS.
- Twenty-six percent report acute health problems other than HIV/AIDS such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, or sexually transmitted infections.
- Forty-six percent report chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or cancer.
- Fifty-five percent report having no health insurance (compared to 16 percent of general population).
- Forty-four percent report having worked in the past week.
- Thirteen percent say they have regular jobs.
- Fifty percent say they receive less than \$300 a month in total income.
- A little less than 30 percent have not completed high school.
- Forty-one percent are single males.
- Fourteen percent are single females.
- Forty percent claim to be part of families with children, which currently is the fastest growing segment of the homeless.
- Five percent are under eighteen and unaccompanied by an adult. One estimate says that kids are undercounted, and that their figure is closer to two of five of the homeless.<sup>10</sup>



The public library should have a staff member who keeps track of homelessness in the community and represents the library on the homeless task force or coalition. Not all staff members need to know what the community response to homelessness is, but someone should be assigned to be the expert and to keep the rest of the staff informed.

To get started, contact your local United Way or visit these sites:

- **US Interagency Council on Homelessness** ([www.ich.gov](http://www.ich.gov)) represents more than twenty federal agencies that provide support for the homeless.
- **US Department of Housing-Homes & Communities** ([www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/resources.cfm](http://www.hud.gov/offices/cpd/homeless/resources.cfm)) is a federal agency that provides funds and information on services for the homeless.
- **National Coalition for the Homeless** ([www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)) is a nonprofit group that advocates for the homeless and identifies services for the homeless by state and local organizations.
- **National Alliance to End Homelessness** ([www.endhomelessness.org](http://www.endhomelessness.org)) collects data on homelessness and provides data state-by-state.
- **Salvation Army: Adult Rehabilitation** ([www.salvationarmyusa.org](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org)) provides shelter and services for the homeless. This site has links to local services.

Also contact local food pantries, food banks, veteran's organizations, homeless shelters, housing agencies, Salvation Army, Catholic Charities USA and other religious service groups, immigrant-serving agencies, subsidized after-school and recreational programs, Head Start, and other income-based educational programs. As well as sharing information, the library should look for ways to do joint programs and community outreach with these community partners.

Homeless people need a lot of help. By

definition they need a place to stay and they often need food and other basic services. Many homeless people depend on the library to know where these services are and how to access them. The library should know the answer to these questions or be able to refer people to those who do. The local United Way may have a 2-1-1 information and referral service that will help people in need of housing. If there are no services in the library's community, staff should know where the closest help is to be found.

Many homeless people need to gain skills and find work. Some libraries offer GED classes and have a job center where the unemployed can get help finding and applying for jobs online. Many companies only accept applications electronically, so many homeless need to use the library's computers to get jobs. Many will also need to set up an e-mail account and be shown how to do this.

Homeless people often need somewhere to be in the daytime because shelters are not open until evening, or friends won't let their homeless friends or family stay around during the day. So they need a place to relax and be entertained. The Internet provides entertainment, as well as a chance to communicate with family and other homeless people, so this is a very attractive public library service.

Other services libraries can provide include:

- Résumé/job manuals
- New adult reader (low literacy) collection
- Storytimes for shelter families
- Tax help for low-income individuals
- Computer instruction at veteran's center
- Day passes for computer use with no library card required
- Lockers for storing belongings

Libraries can reach out to the homeless by being open when the shelters are not, by being closely situated to bus stops, by providing deposit collections at shelters, by posting library fliers at homeless shelters and at food pantries, and by advertising on buses and other forms of public

transportation. Libraries should provide both customer-service training and language training for those who work with immigrants.

Public libraries need to create programs that are related to the library's mission. Libraries do not provide housing or food or counseling, they help people find these things. Libraries are not daycare centers. Homeless people need to work independently at the library, just as all patrons do. Libraries that are successful in serving the homeless know their limitations as well as how to design and offer programs that help.

No users challenge the librarian's ability to treat every visitor with respect more than those who visibly act out their pathologies. Their dirt, smell, plastic garbage bags, old luggage, or even shopping carts filled with their stuff are the overt conditions that patrons bring with them. Then, too, there are the behavioral issues: no interest in library materials or computers, incoherency in speech, apparent narcolepsy, staring vacantly into space for hours on end, or staring at a female staff member unpleasantly. If these are not enough to attract staff attention, some visitors manifest symptoms of acute illness that require staff to drop attempts to deliver library service and instead call for emergency medical service.

The prior paragraph, of course, is not specifically about the homeless but marks some of the behaviors that state and local law denote as prohibited or regulated by nuisance law in our state and in many other states as well. Those who behave as nuisances in public places, including libraries, are subject to the same penalties. Those include temporary and long-term exclusion from the institution, or arrest and prosecution under specific prohibitions or under the more general public trespass law. To sum up, in most states and most locales there are laws and ordinances that deal with aberrant behavior in public places. Library staff and the users who visit libraries are protected under workplace and public health and safety laws. Persons with whom librarians have to deal with as public nui-

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sances may or may not be homeless.<sup>11</sup>

The library needs to have written policies approved by its board that comply with local and state laws. These policies cannot discriminate against the homeless and should describe inappropriate behavior for any library user and what the consequence of that behavior will be. The library shouldn't have a "homeless" policy. It should have policies that define and manage bad behavior, no matter who those policies address. Library staff needs to be trained to enforce library rules fairly. Some homeless patrons will comply with the rules once they are explained to them and some will not or are unable, but if the rules are fair and applied to everyone, the library has a chance to both serve the homeless and control disruptive behavior.

Joshua Jackson, reference librarian

at Emerson College, in a 2006 Web Junction essay on the homeless in the library, wrote:

While it is incumbent upon libraries and librarians to constantly strive to meet the needs of all of their actual and potential user populations, it is also equally important to develop programs and services that are sensitive to the particular, distinct needs of special user populations such as the homeless. In the final analysis, there is no better test of the profession's dedication to equal and democratic public service than the extent to which the needs of the "least among us" are recognized and fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

As Jackson suggests public libraries should take on the challenges and help the homeless. Action will be based on more

than exhortation if the focus, cooperation, planning, and resourcing for service is in place as well.

## Teens, Public Libraries, and the Homeless

*Rebecca Renard, Teen Employment Program Coordinator, District of Columbia Public Library, rebecca.renard@dc.gov*

As the District of Columbia Public Library's (DCPL) teen employment program coordinator, whenever I'd ask teen employees about their experience working at the library, one of the biggest complaints I'd hear was about the fact that there are a lot of homeless patrons. "They stink," they'd say. Or, "They talk to themselves. They're

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crazy.” Frequently, parents would echo these sentiments, calling me to express concern for their children’s safety. “Aren’t there a lot of homeless people there?” they’d ask.

It’s true—DCPL, like many urban public libraries, has a high population of homeless patrons. And some of these patrons have serious mental or physical health challenges that might make others uncomfortable. At the same time, because of our library’s efforts to strengthen and improve our service to youth, we also have an ever-growing population of teen patrons. Both groups deserve to feel welcome and safe in this space, and part of the safety comes through developing understanding.

When teens talk about the homeless, they’re typically talking about homeless adults. And more specifically, they’re talking about patrons who are visibly homeless (dressed in layers of clothing, disheveled, often foul-smelling, and so forth). The visibly homeless do not account for the majority of homeless adults, but since this is the population the teens are most challenged by, this was where our conversation had to begin.

In 2009, I set out on what became a nine-month project to help DCPL’s teen employees put a face to homelessness. If our teens could learn more about the homeless as people, perhaps they would be more understanding and accepting of them. Thus, the *Your Story Has a Home Here* project ([www.dclibrary.org/node/10660](http://www.dclibrary.org/node/10660)) began.

Funded by a Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) mini-grant, DCPL’s Teens of Distinction employees were trained in professional digital portrait photography and oral history interviewing techniques so they could take photographs and collect the stories of DC’s homeless residents. We partnered with the National Coalition for the Homeless, which has a Speakers Bureau made up of formerly and currently homeless people who are willing to share their experiences. Every other week, a Speakers Bureau member (most of whom were also frequent patrons of the library) would come

to our central branch for their session with the teens.

Teens alternated crew roles—interviewer, photographer, photographer’s assistant, and interviewer’s assistant. They did everything from greeting the subjects to setting up the lights and backdrops, to making the subjects feel comfortable in front of the camera, to asking good follow-up questions to flesh out a story. After each session, they wrote reflections about what they thought and experienced during the session, and those reflections were posted on a blog page on our library’s website.

As they worked, team members often talked about their subjects:

- “Dang, I can’t believe Constance went through all that. And she’s still kickin’—and happy, too! That’s some strength, right there!”
- “That’s crazy that David didn’t even know he had schizophrenia. I wonder how many other people out there have something like that and don’t know it.”
- “Boy, Eric could talk! I’m already on my fourth page of logs with him!”

In all, the teens conducted nine powerful interviews, shot hundreds of photos, and coordinated a moving exhibit of portraits and stories for the public. The culminating exhibit was mounted for one month, outside the library’s teen space. It was a perfect location for the display, as the large, colorful prints invited a lot of attention. In fact, as we were setting up the exhibit, after struggling for a while with the layout, a pair of ninth-graders coyly approached, from inside the teen space. “We like the way you had it before,” one said. “That photo is just so, like, in your face. It should be in the middle.” Others paused, “What’s this for?” When the teen photographers explained the project, some reacted, “They’re homeless? They don’t look homeless.”

Both the teens who participated in the project and the public who viewed and listened to the exhibit seemed to experience a shift in consciousness, regarding

their perceptions of the homeless. In a post-program survey, one teen wrote, “I admit that I had negative thoughts concerning homeless people and did not realize that many people become homeless because of factors they cannot control.” Another said, “Homelessness could affect or happen to anyone. Homelessness doesn’t have a specific résumé; it is not an acquired job.”

*Your Story Has a Home Here* was a great start in helping break those barriers of understanding between teens and the homeless, but as a discrete project it was not enough to have broad impact. I wanted to find a way to formalize this conversation and incorporate it as a regular part of our work with teens.

Each year through our city’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), the library engages upwards of 115 additional teenagers in summer work. While the Teens of Distinction program is highly competitive and works with teens that are selected through a three-tiered process, the SYEP youth are coming to us from all areas of the city, with many backgrounds and education levels, and different levels of connectedness to structured programs. In other words, our SYEP youth are sometimes deemed harder to reach. Because of this, SYEP affords us an opportunity to see and work with teens that we might not normally see in our libraries.

To start the 2011 program, I decided to invite National Coalition for the Homeless back to do a special workshop for our summer youth. It was a mandatory part of the teens’ orientation to their library work. The workshop was set for the time block immediately after lunch—not ideal, as the teens are generally more rambunctious. I intentionally didn’t tell them what the afternoon’s session was about, until our guests had arrived. Two speakers came: one who was a noted homelessness advocate who has eschewed offers of housing so he can stay more connected to the population he serves, and the other a formerly homeless woman who experienced incestuous sexual abuse as a teen, and who since has recovered from depression and substance abuse.

As the speakers talked, I expected there to be some snickering, heavy eyelids, and massive amounts of illicit texting and side conversation. Almost without exception, the entire audience of teens was rapt. When the two presenters were finished, they encouraged the teens to ask questions. They said no questions were off limits, and they'd try to answer everything they felt comfortable sharing. Again, I expected a few "jokester" questions—just so certain teens could get easy laughs from their peers. The teens responded maturely and respectfully. One teen had questions for the woman, about whether she got treatment for the sexual abuse. Another young man stood up and thanked the two for sharing their stories. He asked his peers to give them a round of applause.

"It was really brave of you to say those things," he said.

More than anything, the teens seemed in awe of the incredible struggle for survival that the presenters faced, both in their home lives before becoming homeless, and during their experiences of homelessness. They were concerned for the presenters. It was truly a touching thing.

Though I'm under no delusions that this one experience eradicated whatever biases they may have held against the homeless, I will say that this was the first summer that I didn't hear any comments of frustration, disgust, or condescension about our customers without homes. In their post-summer evaluations, not one teen mentioned the homeless as one of the top three things they disliked about the library, when in years past it was regularly mentioned.

These two experiences demonstrate the power of personal story in helping to break down barriers of understanding. They show the level of compassion that teens can develop towards those unlike themselves. This is particularly critical, especially in today's society. There is another reason this understanding gap needs to be bridged. As I alluded to before, homelessness is not only an adult experience.

In many urban areas, there are significant numbers of homeless youth. The population in Washington, D.C. is estimated to be anywhere from 1,500 to 3,000, though this number fluctuates constantly. With the worsening economy, the city's rate of homeless or "unstably housed" youth and families is growing.<sup>23</sup> Because of this, the chances are increasing that "that homeless person" a teen talks about could be another teenager, perhaps even the teen sitting next to them in a summer homelessness workshop.

Educating teens about issues of homelessness is important to help sensitize them to an adult population they'll encounter in the library. It also helps normalize an experience that teens themselves might increasingly face. This is critical to creating a safe and supportive environment for those teens and their families.

Incorporating personal stories and dialogue about lived experiences into regular teen programming, inviting community based organizations into the conversation, and providing information resources for vulnerable youth and adult populations are all ways that libraries can promote understanding, develop compassion, and build a healthy community. **PL**

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