

Public Libraries and Houseless Patrons: A Defense of Libraries as Social Services Providers

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On any given night in Canada, 25,000 to 35,000 Canadian citizens experience homelessness (Stroble et al, 2021), while in the United States, the estimate is over 500,000 people per night (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). A variety of community organizations seek to provide support to those experiencing homelessness, including public libraries. Historically, public libraries have provided a place of connection for those who are homeless, provide free technology resources and training, and safe spaces to escape from the elements (Velji, 2020). Furthermore, libraries unapologetically provide the same level of service to marginalized patrons as to those who are privileged. Consequently, public libraries must continue to support and expand services to those experiencing homelessness, despite potential customer opposition or resistance from within the library community itself. In doing so, libraries will honour their code of ethics and fulfill public service mandates to all members of their communities.

Apprehension towards houseless patrons may be rooted in fear or ignorance, but oftentimes, patrons may be leery because of prior negative interactions within the public library space. The Ottawa Public Library (OPL), for example, had to revise an open-door policy whereby the foyer of the main branch was open to the public three and a half hours before the library opened at 9:00am. This allowed many houseless patrons to stay warm for several hours before the branch opened. However, leading to the decision to shutter the policy were increased incidences of “public altercations, threats of violence against women, graffiti in lower washrooms, increased drug use, and urination in lower hallways” (Laucius, 2020, para. 7). Moreover, the cost to provide security for those early morning hours was calculated to be an extra \$90,000 per year (Laucius, 2020), making the option untenable for the OPL. In 2022, The Edmonton Public Library observed a significant increase in security incidents and social unrest compared to pre-pandemic statistics. In fact, “the number of ‘customer distress’ incidents, which include opioid poisonings and mental distress, increased 69 per cent — from 340 in 2019 to 573 by the end of November 2022” (Cummings, 2023, para. 4). Pilar Martinez, EPL’s CEO, lists “mental health, addiction and homelessness as factors contributing to the increase” (Cummings, 2023, para. 11). Leeder and others have noted that “libraries aren’t homeless shelters or counseling centers and homelessness is [a] complicated problem that libraries alone don’t have the power to solve” (2010, para. 4). Why, then, should libraries continue to support and serve those experiencing homelessness? Simply, libraries, out of necessity, have evolved to become community outreach hubs and the demand for support houseless patrons receive there is not likely to diminish anytime soon.

Increasingly, as world economic systems continue to favour the wealthy and disadvantage the marginalized, houseless patrons have come to depend on libraries “as a source of shelter, compassion, and assistance” (Corrigan, 2020, para. 5). To encourage libraries to engage with

and cater services to disadvantaged patrons, the American Library Association created Policy 61, entitled “Library Services for the Poor” (ALA, 2007). The policy encourages libraries to collaborate with other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to “develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people” (ALA, 2007, Policy Objective 12). In Canada, the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) includes a section entitled “Responsibilities towards Individuals and Society” in its Code of Ethics (2018). It states that equitable services are to be provided to all patrons, regardless of physical or mental ability and income (2018). Mark Giesler, professor of social work at Saginaw Valley State University, asserts that libraries and homeless shelters have reason and opportunity to partner in serving houseless patrons, but instances of these types of collaborations are uncommon (2019, pp. 41-42). However, there are many instances of partnerships between organizations and libraries in serving houseless patrons. An affordable housing project in Hamilton, Ontario, for example, has partnered with the Hamilton Public Library to provide a library branch within the development (Mann, 2020). The Free Public Library of Philadelphia instituted a project called Reaching HEALthy whereby a nurse and social worker are situated in the library to help houseless patrons access much-needed healthcare services (Mariano & Harmon, 2019). Additionally, many libraries, including the Toronto Public Library and the Edmonton Public Library, have hired full-time social workers (Velji, 2020) and several libraries have even partnered with post-secondary academic programs to offer practicum placements to social work students (Wahler et al., 2020). This arrangement provides a creative way to provide critical support to those experiencing homelessness irrespective of library budget constraints.

Libraries may also better serve those who experience homelessness by tweaking existing policies and expanding programming options. For instance, many libraries have a “no sleeping” policy, which specifically targets houseless patrons. A softer approach might be to adopt a “no snoring” policy if a patron is found to be asleep but otherwise not bothering fellow patrons (Corrigan, 2020, para. 12). The Toronto Public Library runs a Coffee and Conversation program as a way for houseless patrons to learn more about the social services offered as well as to connect with library staff and others (Velji, 2020). The Kitchener Public Library and the Edmonton Public Library both employ community outreach workers to develop programs specially tailored around literacy, education and social connections. Programs include resume creation, searching for affordable housing, learning software and the introduction to innovative technologies (Corrigan, 2020 and EPL, 2020). Because information and digital literacy remain core skills necessary for success in almost every area of society, public libraries continue to expand their program offerings creatively and necessarily so those on the margins of society have the opportunity to develop these competencies.

Public libraries have become valuable and essential community hubs for those experiencing homelessness. Although it may appear that houseless patrons use the library primarily to escape the elements and to use the internet, the public library contributes much more than even these important services. Libraries have evolved to offer a multitude of services to their unhoused patrons in response to an overwhelming demand for support. Moreover, as the world continues to face economic challenges stemming from Covid-19, and government and non-profit agencies are thereby stretched, libraries will be compelled to provide help for a variety of complex needs shouldered by disadvantaged patrons. Libraries will accomplish this by being

open to working alongside outside agencies and by being flexible and willing to adopt a wide range of responses. In doing so, libraries have a unique opportunity to legitimate their patrons' "presence in prime rather than marginal spaces" (Velji, 2020, para. 1) as well as to validate the dignity and worth of their marginalized neighbours.

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