

Developing a Model Policy for Public Libraries to Address Homelessness & Mental Illness

Mariekie Barone, Stacie Fifelski, Alexandra Stocker, Thomas Worm, Ashley Patterson, Jessica Braamse, & Robert S. Lathers, MSW, LMSW¹

1. Senior Adjunct Professor, Grand Valley State University Graduate School of Social Work

Introduction

Public Libraries across the United States have become places of respite and sanctuary for increasing numbers of people who are homeless and/or struggling with mental health issues. The issue has been highlighted in the past few years in popular literature, especially in Susan Orlean's recent New York Time's Best Seller, "The Library Book," as well as in Emilio Estevez's 2019 Movie, "The Public," which was filmed at the Cincinnati Public Library. State Library Associations, including that of Michigan, have developed active workgroups to address these populations in an inclusive fashion. Many libraries across the country have begun to hire social workers to be on their staff. Addressing homelessness and mental illness, from a local library perspective, is a relatively new and emerging practice area for both libraries and community agencies. Best practices to address these issues have not yet been systematically developed. Only one book, *Whole Person Librarianship: A Social Work Approach to Patron Services* is currently available in print that addresses the issue.¹

Methodology

In early 2020, a Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Graduate School of Social Work class, Introduction to Social Policy, committed to spend an entire semester researching and examining the issue of Michigan public libraries' response to patrons who were homeless and/or mentally ill. The goal was to develop a comprehensive draft model policy for libraries to consider in order to enhance community collaborations, especially with local homeless and public community mental health organizations. The project was intended to be a non-traditional, interactive, educational experience for first year graduate policy students. To that end the Michigan Library Association and the Community Mental Health Association of Michigan committed resources to the project and proactively scheduled workshop presentations at their annual spring conferences that would feature student presenters from the class project. In addition, a Michigan state senator who had pending legislation regarding library safety agreed to work with the class. Contact was also made with the Niles Public Library which had received a \$200,000 Federal grant to develop outreach services regarding rural homelessness.

The class of thirty students was divided into ten workgroups. Each workgroup was assigned a specific area of policy analysis to focus on. These included: identifying draft policy language and articulating the purpose of the policy; definitions of policy words and concepts; a literature review; survey current attempts to address the issues of homelessness and mental health issues in libraries from across the United States; identifying the benefits and consequences of developing and implementing a comprehensive library policy; a political analysis comparing conservative vs. liberal support for the policy; a cost-benefit analysis of implementing vs. not implementing the policy; a policy feasibility assessment; and finally an ethical analysis of the draft policy

utilizing the American Library Association and the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics respectively.

COVID-19

The first several weeks of class in January through March 2020 were productive for most of the workgroups. Each group was required to interface with other workgroups and adjust their work accordingly. The project showed promise and students were engaged in its success. Each class period focused on understanding key elements of how to make good policy and applying the concepts to the “Library project.”

Then in March, Covid-19 shut down GVSU classrooms, Michigan’s Public Libraries, and in-person services of Community Mental Health Centers. Staff of public libraries as well as community mental health were furloughed or laid off. GVSU shifted all classes online, a technology that was new to many faculty who were fundamentally unprepared. Consequently, students in the Policy class were offered an alternate unrelated assignment to meet the goals of the course. Eighty percent of the students (24) who were enrolled in the course accepted the alternate assignment.

However, the six remaining students (co-authors of this article) were determined to follow the project to its conclusion and declined the alternate assignment. However, by the end of the semester the library project had not been completed. The students all received a final grade of “A” for the course due to evidence that they understood the fundamental concepts of social policy. Surprisingly, they requested to extend their work on a volunteer basis in order to complete the project. A literature review had been completed, work on surveying libraries across the country had received positive results, a survey of Michigan mental health agencies was still being pursued and recommendations for a model policy were emerging.

This article summarizes an abbreviated version of the final information and qualitative data that was collected, as well as recommendations of the essential elements that should be considered in the development of a Model Policy for Public Libraries to Address Homelessness and Mental Illness.

National Survey of Library Policies and Services Regarding Patrons Who Are Homeless

At the beginning of this project, it was clear that it would be important to connect with libraries across the country in an effort to learn more about what programs and services were in place to serve those experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness. Initially, the focus was to be on about twelve metropolitan library systems, however, it was decided that an effort to connect with a library from every state in the country would be valuable. This group reached out to 106 library systems in all fifty (50) states and in Washington D.C. Each library was asked:

- What specific policies were in place that pertain directly to individuals experiencing homelessness?
- What was the general experience of front line staff with the homeless population?
- What type of training did they receive in this area?

- Did their branch(es) had a social worker on site and what community collaborations were in place to better serve the homeless population?

Of the one-hundred-six (106) inquiries, sixty (60) libraries responded. Every library reported that all their policies must be equitable for all people. Many said that there were some policies in place that affected those experiencing homelessness more so than others, e.g. policies regarding body odor, the size and storage of personal items, “no sleeping” rules, and “no bathing/shaving/washing clothes in public restrooms.” Many libraries shared information on programs and collaborations in place to serve those experiencing homelessness. However, there were several library systems that stood out as leaders in this area of practice. The exemplary efforts of library systems in four of these states are described below.

Delaware

The Delaware Division of Libraries’ Social Innovation mantra is ‘help people take the next step.’ Several Delaware Libraries staff have taken both the Mental Health First Aid and Ryan Dowd’s Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness training in addition to library trainings offered to both the public and staff in regards to NARCAN intervention and drug use, along with various programs around Trauma Informed Care. Social workers and social work interns serve in twenty-one (21) libraries so far across the state through the Department of Health and Social Services’ (DHSS) Community Partner Support Unit, operated within the Division of Social Services.

These social workers establish collaborations with hospitals, mobile medical testing units, employment services, veteran services, and community mental health organizations in the community as well as the programming already established in the library system, utilizing the AmeriCorps VISTA program and local ties. The public libraries utilize Unite Delaware, a coordinated care network of health and social care providers, which keeps data on how a person has been helped and what else they might need. Additionally, the newest library being built will have showers for use by patrons that may need this service.

San Francisco

The San Francisco Public Library is the first library in the United States to have an on-site social worker. Library staff were seeing a lot of patrons experiencing mental health issues, substance use disorders, poverty, and chronic health issues and determined that libraries were not trained to work with these vulnerable populations. They reached out to the Department of Public Health and ultimately decided to recruit a social worker to provide direct service to library patrons, support the front line staff with building relationships, direct patrons to the support services they needed, and to develop a program of peer outreach workers. A trauma-informed approach to working with patrons was implemented that has proven very effective and has since funneled into other parts of the library. The San Francisco Public Library system has numerous collaborative relationships within the community. Onsite social workers are able to connect individuals to a variety of services including medical, mental health, food, housing, and employment. Onsite showering facilities and a pop-up care village, which brings in about thirty (30) community organizations on a bi-monthly basis, serves patrons needs thereby reducing the need for patrons to travel great distances to obtain services.

Houston

The Houston Public Library in Texas created the Senior Library Service Specialist position in lieu of a social worker position. This person works to develop programs to serve individuals experiencing homelessness, arranges for staff training on relevant topics, and works with community partners to get resources and direct services to the library. Programs include housing assessments and services, partnering with Mental Health America to receive Mental Health First Aid training, and trauma-informed training for library staff. The library has also established a partnership with a Workforce Solutions Homelessness Specialist. This specialist visits the library regularly to assist individuals experiencing homelessness and/or unstable housing with a goal of obtaining employment. The specialist provides connections to necessary employment services like bus passes, clothing for interviews, and vocational training. Finally, the library has also created a Social Services Guide Binder.

Maryland

The Charles County Public Library-Waldorf West in Maryland partners with Lifestyles of Maryland, an organization that supports people in crisis by providing emergency services. The library has public showers available for use by individuals who are experiencing homelessness. They also host a program called “Safe Night” where patrons can call and reserve a place to sleep, especially in the winter months. The Waldorf West library provides free non-perishable lunches in the summer primarily for school-aged children, but makes them available to anyone who needs them. The Waldorf West library has a JobSource Mobile Career Center and a Mobile Veteran’s Center that visit the library once per month to offer job seeking assistance and other resources.

Community Mental Health Centers and Libraries

Libraries throughout the country are seeing needs that are oftentimes overlooked by other organizations and mental health professionals. Many libraries that responded to this project shared that in their experience, mental health organizations did not understand what libraries had to do and how they dealt with homelessness and mental health. However, once invited to come to the library to observe, nearly all mental health professionals understood the gravity of the situation libraries are facing and readily collaborated with the library to provide services to these patrons in need. A list of all the collaborations and services that libraries in this country are providing or working to create exceeds the scope of this article. However, this project did focus on Michigan and how libraries across the state work with all forty-six (46) Community Mental Health Service Programs that collectively cover the eighty-three (83) Michigan counties. Libraries are generally left to their own resources to address the issues of their most vulnerable patrons.

Public libraries are not usually included in discussions about improving population health, let alone mental health. However, public libraries are extremely common areas in which individuals experiencing mental illness or homelessness may use to seek shelter. “Public libraries are trusted institutions that have broad population reach and untapped potential to improve population health.”² During research of community mental health service programs (CMHSPs) interactions with libraries, only twenty-two out of forty-six Michigan CMHSPs responded. Several efforts were made to contact the twenty-four (24) non-respondents. It is important to note that due to Covid-19 stay-at-home orders, many CMHSP staff were not available to respond to the survey.

While researching the roles that some of Michigan CMHSPs play with libraries, several commonalities were found including training for library staff as well as providing information and resources to library patrons including Mental Health First Aid, NARCAN training and kits, as well as crisis line services.

Eight (8) of the forty-six (46) Michigan CMHSPs reported that they provide Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) to library staff. “MHFA is a standardized, psychoeducational program developed to empower the public to approach, support and refer individuals in distress by improving course participants' knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to mental ill-health.”³ Four (4) CMHSPs reported that they provide Narcan training and/or kits. This is a tool that is not widely used in libraries at this time. “Naloxone (Narcan) is a fast-acting opioid antagonist that can be used to reverse the agonist effects of opioids to stop an overdose. In the past decade, there have been increasing efforts to equip non-medical persons with naloxone and train them in its administration to reverse an opioid overdose.”⁴ Four (4) CMHSPs indicated that they do not have any interactions with the public libraries in their county. While these CMHSPs reported that they do not provide any services or information to their public libraries, they did indicate interest in beginning to implement services after hearing what other CMHSPs are doing.

Collaborations currently in place between CMHSPs and Public Libraries in Michigan:

- Provides information to libraries about CMH (Berrien County, Genesee Health Services, Ionia County, Lapeer County, Lifeways CMH, Calhoun, West MI CMH, Montcalm, Ottawa, St. Clair)
- Host events at libraries (Berrien County, Lifeways CMH, Livingston CMH, Calhoun, Ottawa, St. Clair, Washtenaw)
- Outreach at libraries (Berrien County, Saginaw)
- Drop-In Center (Lapeer County)
- Community collaboration including library staff (Ionia County, West MI CMH, Montcalm, Saginaw, St. Clair)
- Case management (Allegan, Central MI, Berrien County, SW MI Behavioral Health)
- Meet individuals at library (Allegan, SW MI Behavioral Health, Detroit/Wayne?, West MI CMH, Saginaw, Washtenaw)
- Street Outreach Programs (Kalamazoo CMH, Ottawa, Saginaw, Berrien County)
- Shelter (Kalamazoo CMH, Livingston CMH)
- Naloxone/Narcan training to library staff (SW MI Behavioral Health, Montcalm, Available in Saginaw, St. Clair)
- Offer MHFA training to libraries (Lifeways CMH, Livingston CMH, Pathways CMH), Calhoun (in community, but libraries can access), Network 180 (library can access), Montcalm, Ottawa, St. Clair, Washtenaw)
- HAP is with all CMH

- Transitional housing (Cass, Central MI, Kalamazoo CMH, Northern Lakes, Macomb)
- Screening and referral (Allegan, Central MI, SW MI Behavioral Health, Kalamazoo CMH, North Country CMH, Northern Lakes, Macomb, Newaygo)
- Information (Allegan, Cass, Clinton-Eaton-Ingham, Southwest MI Behavioral Health, Kalamazoo CMH, Lapeer County, Hiawatha Behavioral Health, North Country CMH, Northern Lakes, Macomb, Newaygo, Oakland)
- Strategic planning around homelessness (Central MI, Detroit/Wayne, St. Clair)
- Would like to do more with library (Central MI, Network 180)

Recommended Essential Elements of a Model Policy

The following are recommended essential elements of a model policy to address patrons who may be experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness based on communication with libraries across the United States, a review of the literature, and additional research of the project authors.

Purpose of Policy

A statement focused on how the specific policy will address the interface of libraries, homelessness and mental health. Specifically identifying areas of service needs, existing programming, collaboration opportunities, and deficits in current services for the marginalized homeless community.

Authority of Policy

Libraries develop their policies as individual agencies, separate from the American Library Association (ALA) and state library associations. Therefore, libraries can and should develop policies that are relevant to concerns that impact their individual functioning, one of which is the issue of homelessness and how it interfaces with the library's system. Policies should adhere to reasonableness, non-discrimination, equity, current legal practices, and measurable enforcement.

Implications of Policy

Enclosed herein are well-researched and well-intentioned policy initiatives. This tool is meant to be used as a guide for future initiatives and policy implementations engaged as the library sees fit and is able. This is also meant to be a measure against which the library can compare their current policies.

Definitions

The following definitions of homelessness, mental illness and library depict the basis of conversation for the rest of the article.

Homelessness. An individual or family with a primary nighttime residence in a place not meant for human habitation, living in temporary or emergency shelters designed to provide temporary living arrangements, or living in a place where they have resided for ninety (90) days or less and who has resided in a place not meant for human habitation or emergency shelter immediately prior to this living arrangement; individual or family who will lose their primary nighttime

residence within fourteen (14) days, with no identified subsequent residence, and lacks supports to obtain other permanent housing (HUD definitions of Category 1 and 2 homelessness).

Mental Illness. The American Library Association uses definitions from Mental Health America, National Alliance of Mental Health, National Institute of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, and Mental Health Administration to develop an overview of mental health and a tip sheet, accessible on the American Library Association's webpage, for how to interact with those experiencing a mental illness episode in the library. Generally, it is assumed that people who live with mental illness are patrons of the library and it is the responsibility of the library staff to ensure professional interaction and provide reliable information for those experiencing mental illness and their families.

Library. As defined by the American Library Association: A public library is established under state enabling laws or regulations to serve a community, district, or region, and provides at least the following:

- An organized collection of printed or other library materials, or a combination thereof;
- Paid staff;
- An established schedule in which services of the staff are available to the public;
- The facilities necessary to support such a collection, staff, and schedule; and
- Is supported in whole or in part with public funds.

Ethical and Professional Standards

The ALA has developed a Professional Ethics Guideline that is similar to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics. The Committee on Professional Ethics is encouraged to develop a more concrete Code of Ethics. The following are tenets of both guidelines that may be incorporated or encouraged within the library.

All-Inclusive. The library is encouraged to support creating responsible and all-inclusive spaces that serve and represent the entire community, by decentering power and privilege and facilitating conversations around access and identity as they impact patrons and professionals.

Confidentiality. A basic tenet of the library is privacy. To uphold their privacy standards is abiding by confidentiality principles. Confidentiality is when a library has possession of personally identifiable information about its users and keeps that information private on their behalf in line with current confidentiality practices.

Anti-Stigma. The library is responsible for presenting factual representation to correct misinformation about stigmatized groups or topics, and correct misperceptions about those groups or topics.

Library as Sanctuary. Many people perceive libraries as a sanctuary and as a respite during their daily experiences, especially from interpersonal and environmental dangers experienced by people experiencing homelessness. It must be recognized that the role of the library is a resource and a sanctuary for all people.

Informational Resources

Libraries may ensure the right of all citizens to participate to the best of their ability in a fully democratic society through ensuring equity of access to information and knowledge of community resources.

Libraries are encouraged

- To provide day passes to patrons who are not able to prove permanent residence. This day pass may include internet accessibility. In lieu of day pass, the library may develop a library card program allowing patrons to identify temporary residence locations;
- To develop a document of community resources/sources of information for patrons to access in both physical and electronic methods.

Collaboration

Libraries already work with other organizations to bring information about the community within one hub of information.

Libraries are encouraged to:

- Work in tandem with existing community programs and services to enhance access to these services and programs for library patrons;
- Collaborate with local community mental health agencies to serve as a point of access for emergent mental and behavioral health needs;
- Identify local partners who provide no-cost showering locations for patrons who may not otherwise have access to showering facilities (for example, the YMCA);
- Identify community partners that offer laundry facilities for reduced or no cost;
- Bring community resources to the library to present to patrons on relevant topics (for example, the VA and an adult GED program);
- Collaborate with local Graduate Schools of Social Work to request Masters of Social Work (MSW) interns to be placed in the library to provide support and develop services for patrons.;
- Develop written memorandums of understanding with community organizations, including local law enforcement and community mental health agencies.

Training Opportunities

To ensure equitable practices and a positive experience for patrons and staff, the following list offers suggestions for training opportunities.

A library is encouraged to train staff in:

- Drug overdose intervention, specifically opioid overdose – this may include training in Narcan/Naloxone administration;
- Trauma-informed interventions;

- Topics such as crisis intervention, verbal de-escalation, emergency response, all-inclusive practices, gender identity, homelessness, community resources, etc;
- Mental Health First Aid, which can be accessed through local Community Mental Health Organizations;
- Training for administrative staff regarding managing staff who interact with disadvantaged and high-risk populations;
- Compassion fatigue, burnout, and vocational awe for librarians.

Interface with Individuals

Recognizing the role of the library in serving the needs of a diverse patron population, the library may develop all-inclusive practices that utilize library resources and facilities to ensure appropriate and responsible interactions with individuals of all life experiences that utilize library resources and facilities.

The following suggestions are attributed to the training developed by Ryan Dowd.⁵ Libraries are encouraged to:

- Maintain or develop identified courses of action for library patrons whose behavior impacts the experience of the library environment for others. These behaviors include but are not limited to: direct confrontations with other patrons, excessive noise, or preventing others from using space in the library;
- Verbally interact with patrons who appear to be sleeping no less than every fifteen minutes, and to contact emergency services if the patron is unresponsive to verbal interaction. If individuals are found to be sleeping, the library could offer multiple warnings to the patron before taking next remedial steps;
- Assume a non-threatening stance (open body language, facing slightly away) in approaching patrons.

The following are not attributed to Ryan Dowd's training. Libraries are encouraged to:

- Provide a sanitized or single-use set of headphones to patrons free of charge or through a rental process to discourage noise complaints;
- Maintain policies that prohibit panhandling on library property, the library should not infringe upon the right of individuals to panhandle in the vicinity of the library;
- Address a patron who presents with overwhelming odor (perfume, cologne, body odor) that impedes the experience of other patrons. Library staff may ask the patron to return after addressing the odor and refer the patron to community resources that provide hygiene facilities if the patron identifies a need for this resource.
 - This recourse shall only be utilized if a patron specifically identifies a concern with overwhelming odors.

Infrastructure

Ideally, library spaces are physically structured so as to meet the needs of the diverse populations that they serve, while meeting the needs of patron confidentiality and patron safety to the best of the library's ability.

Libraries are encouraged to:

- Have spaces identified for use by only children/teens and to clearly identify that this space is not to be used by adults without children;
- Have at least one single-stall, unisex bathroom. If no such bathroom exists, one may be installed for patron use if the library undergoes remodeling or building modification. Sharp item disposal containers should be placed in all restrooms;
- Identify possible points of physical contact between patrons and between patrons/staff, and place antibacterial/sanitizer in those places for both staff and patron use;
- Identify local public transportation methods and routes, and be able to identify stops nearest the library for patrons use;
- Identify space for patrons to store and secure belongings upon arrival to the library dependent on community and patron need and available spatial resources. Signage shall be posted with regard to the length of time that items may be stored for and what will happen to items that are stored beyond the identified length of time;
- Direct patrons to store belongings that exceed the size of a traditional backpack in storage space provided in order to ensure that belongings do not infringe on the library experience of other patrons;
- Provide charging stations that are available for patron use;
- Library is encouraged to have identified resources for the LGBTQ+ community.

Staff Accommodations and Requests

Policies regarding staff activities should ensure safety and professionalism of library staff, while recognizing staff abilities and the limits of staff training. Activities that request a staff member to operate beyond the scope of their training and beyond their comfort should be referred to other library staff.

Conclusion

People experiencing homelessness may use the library as a safe haven as well as a resource. It would be an incredible opportunity for the population of people experiencing homelessness to find everything they need for a safe, clean, and informational life within the place they already come. The services that may be provided within the library are an excellent example of how a society may care for their vulnerable populations.

References

1. Zettervall, S., & Nienow, M. (2019). Whole person librarianship: A social work approach to services. Libraries Unlimited: Santa Barbara, CA

2. Morgan, A. U., D'Alonzo, B. A., Dupuis, R., Whiteman, E. D., Kallem, S., McClintock, A., . . . Cannuscio, C. C. (2018, May). Public library staff as community health partners: Training program design and evaluation. *Health Promotion Practice, 19*(3), 361–368. [PubMed https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839917735304](https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839917735304)
3. Hadlaczky, G., Hökby, S., Mkrtchian, A., Carli, V., & Wasserman, D. (2014, August). Mental Health First Aid is an effective public health intervention for improving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour: A meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry (Abingdon, England), 26*(4), 467–475. [PubMed https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2014.924910](https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2014.924910)
4. Dunn, K. E., Barrett, F. S., & Bigelow, G. E. (2018, November). Naloxone formulation for overdose reversal preference among patients receiving opioids for pain management. *Addictive Behaviors, 86*, 56–60. [PubMed https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2018.03.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2018.03.011)
5. Dowd, R. (2016). Practical skills for working with patrons experiencing homelessness. Retrieved from: <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1493>

Copyright (c) 2020 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.