A place to call home?: A qualitative exploration of public librarians' response to homelessness

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A place to call home?: A qualitative exploration of public librarians’ response to homelessness

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ABSTRACT
Labeled “third-sector” community organizations, public libraries serve homeless individuals by default. Using focus group interview data with library personnel, this qualitative study explored how public libraries in 8 urban and suburban communities in one Midwestern state perceived and served homeless patrons. Three themes emerged: (1) the recognition that libraries serve as makeshift shelters, (2) the inconsistent implementation of code of conduct policy regarding homeless patrons; and (3) innovative “under the radar” responses by administration and staff to resolve the tensions enacted by the presence of homeless persons in library facilities. Recommendations for staff training, internal policy revision, and enhanced collaboration between social service agency and public library staff are provided.

KEYWORDS
Access services; building security; homelessness

Traditional responses to homelessness from the social services and government sectors have gravitated between care and concern (DeVerteuil, May, & von Mah, 2009). The “care” has come from an increase in the provision of emergency services, such as shelters, drop-in centers, or soup kitchens, in response to a decreasing state welfare response to the social issue. The “concern” is personified in the tendency to view homelessness from a punitive perspective, which has focused on the purification of public spaces through the banishment of those perceived as homeless: In DeVerteuil et al.’s words, the “collapse of homeless spaces under the weight of measures that criminalize homeless survival tactics (e.g., scavenging, panhandling) and clear homeless people from prime urban areas (e.g., parks, railway stations, streets)” (p. 647).

An absent voice in public policy discourse related to the provision of services to the homeless population comes from such so-called third-sector organizations, agencies whose mission and function are not social services-related, but operate in that capacity. Public libraries, for example, have been characterized as de facto daytime shelters for the nation’s homeless (Ward, 2015). Numerous library
science journals and popular magazines have acknowledged the complex relationship librarians have with their homeless patrons. According to Wong (2009), the requirement for libraries to uphold these individuals’ First Amendment rights collides with difficulties in enforcing library guidelines regarding patron behavior and usage and the embarrassment, discomfort, and/or lack of knowledge librarians have about this vulnerable population. This article explores the experiences of public library staff and administrators in one Midwestern state who face this tension on a day-to-day basis.

**Review of the literature**

There have been few empirical studies of this topic. One study that has broached the issue confirms the aforementioned ideological strain. Torrey, Esposito, and Geller (2009) surveyed 124 public librarians about their experience with individuals with mental illness. Their respondents indicated that people with serious psychiatric disorders use a disproportionate amount of staff time and resources, that such patrons often disturb other people, and that they have had to call the police to assist with the behavior of such patrons. One theme that resonated in the authors’ study was the difficulty in negotiating the balance between the rights of the homeless and the rights of other library patrons.

Other researchers have taken homeless patrons as their subjects. In one of the earliest studies on the topic, Hersberger (2005) considered the experience of 25 homeless patrons and discovered that while they suffered from lack of resources, public libraries had information that was readily available to them. More recently, Kelleher (2013) surveyed over 100 homeless individuals in the state of Michigan and assessed their use of library resources. The majority of the researcher’s respondents reported positive feelings toward libraries and the services offered them, including the perception that libraries and library staff cannot necessarily provide more services or resources than they already are.

Non-empirical articles have attempted to identify the needs of homeless individuals who utilize library services. Many such persons, according to this body of literature, turn to public libraries to seek safety. Homeless patrons, according to Ruhlmann (2014), come to the library because they need support services and they are not sure where else to go. Nieves (2013), noting the outsider status of many homeless individuals, has dubbed libraries “sanctuaries for lost souls, lonely hearts clubs for the odd and the awkward, community centers for the elderly and infirm, respites from an indifferent world for those out of work and out of options” (para. 11). Grace (2000) concurred, noting that library patronage is related to a basic sense of safety: “It is a matter of survival for them” (p. 55).

The public library response to attempts by homeless patrons to meet their needs has trended in two opposing directions. Some libraries have set stricter rules designed to ban activities and behaviors in which homeless individuals typically engage. Other libraries, perhaps motivated by the professional organizational response to the issue and the perceived lack of coverage of the issue in library
science training programs, have contemplated proactive, “out of the box” methods to compassionately serve the population.

Popular periodicals have documented prohibitive policies that some U.S. libraries have implemented in regards to homeless patrons. The Orange County, California City Council, for example, passed a series of regulations in 2012 that included bans on sitting, sleeping, or occupying furniture. The bans also covered a lack of personal hygiene and sleeping bags/blankets (Nieves, 2013). Similarly, the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania Area Public Libraries instituted over two dozen rules for patron behavior, including prohibitions on sleeping bags, bringing in more than two bags, and offensive body odor, in response to an influx of homeless individuals who were dropped off every morning by a shelter program (Nieves, 2013). Ruhlmann (2014) reported that complaints from patrons have prompted the Chicago Public Library to post policies that prohibit sleeping, loitering, panhandling, bathing in bathrooms, carrying in large or multiple bags, and offensive hygiene. Other libraries have library card usage policies that restrict homeless persons from borrowing library materials because of their transient living situations and inability to verify residency (Landgraf, 1991).

In part as a response to such activities, professional library organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) have attempted to address the issue of homelessness from a policy perspective. Acknowledging that homeless people are “forced to live and dwell in public places …because of the failure for our institutions to create adequate, dignified shelter and affordable housing options that provide private space” (p. 175), the ALA (1991) adopted Policy 61, recommendations for its “Library Services to the Poor” policy statement. These include the provisions that libraries remove barriers to accessing services, improve services to the poor, and train their staff about the needs of poor people. The policy additionally encourages libraries to actively advocate for community services for these populations. The group continues to advocate for the homeless population by calling to task libraries that “criminalize poor people” through the enactment of “odor policies” and the banning of other types of behavior (ALA Task Force, 2005, p. 175).

The literature has additionally noted a gap in library science training programs. A recent article addressing the topic asserted that contemporary library education typically includes no coursework in mental illness. Rather, it focuses on the techniques and technology of library services to meet the needs of all patrons for access to information (Gunderman & Stevens, 2015). Recent library science periodicals (for e.g., Grace, 2000, Ruhlmann, 2014) have attempted to fill this information gap in their explication of what homelessness is, who the homeless are, and what libraries “should do” about this burgeoning problem. There are some who believe it is not the responsibility of preservice training programs to prepare librarians to serve the homeless. In his blog TomDispatch.com, Ward (2015) opined, “Even if we did understand and had been trained for such situations, healing the homeless is not our mission. Taxpayers expect us to provide library services and leave the homeless to social workers. They give us resources only for one mission, not two” (para 25).
Despite the sentiment shared by Ward (2015), some public libraries have attempted to serve the urban homeless to address this education gap, respond to restrictive bans, and adhere to the ALA’s directive. These pursuits have taken the form of legal challenges, internal policy revisions, and “out of the box” solutions that expand the mission of the public library system.

Legal challenges to prohibitive library policies involving homeless patrons have on the whole succeeded. An early, important decision that upheld First Amendment rights was Kreimer v. Morristown, in which a homeless man successfully sued a New Jersey library system when the library enacted and enforced new rules enabling the expulsion of certain patrons (Grace, 2000). Homeless Bills of Rights have been adopted into law in Connecticut, Illinois, and Rhode Island (Ruhlmann, 2014). Such bills contest city ordinances that ban activities such as sleeping and loitering in public spaces. Among their protections, they state that homeless people cannot be denied access to public spaces solely because of their housing status.

Other challenges to restrictive policy around this issue have come internally from changes librarians deem necessary. Landgraf (1991) recounted an early effort the San Francisco Public Library took to waive its address requirements for homeless persons seeking library cards. Library officials partnered with homeless service providers, who agreed to issue statements on agency letterhead affirming that homeless individuals desire a card and reside in the city. Some public libraries have intentionally revised their patron codes of conduct to make them more amenable to homeless patrons. Bob Harris, recently retired director of the Helen Plum Memorial Library in Lombard, Illinois, for example, spearheaded an effort to reduce a “set of policies that read like the 10 Commandments” to one main rule: “If you’re doing something that interferes with someone else’s use of the library, it’s not allowed.” Anything else,” Harris stated, “You’re probably okay.” (p. 948) The library system in Santa Cruz, California recently decided against the sleeping ban that had been implemented, arguing again that unless a patron is disturbing others, the humane thing to do is to let him/her be (Nieves, 2013).

Finally, riding on the wave of a more progressive response to homelessness in general, certain libraries have introduced more proactive methods to decrease the perceived stress and strain caused by the needs of homeless persons. Whereas early attempts consisted of libraries doing outreach to spaces where homeless populations congregated in the interest of improving their literacy rates (Pearson, 1988), more recent efforts have seen librarians institute in-house services designated to serve homeless patrons.

Ruhlmann (2014) outlined four such efforts in which libraries from across the country have engaged. Some libraries (Lombard, Illinois system, for e.g.) have partnered with service providers to create community educational forums. Other libraries have brought resources in-house. In 2009 the San Francisco Public Library hired a full-time social worker on staff, the first such position in the nation (Fox, 2015). Other public library systems (in the cities of Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and San Jose, for e.g.) have since followed suit. In 2012, the Pima County Public Library in Tucson, Arizona hired a public health nurse, which has forged a collaboration
between the county health department and the library (Fox, 2015). Other public library systems, strapped by budgetary restrictions, have invited social service agencies to participate in resource fairs in public library spaces.

Architectural renovations that create more welcoming spaces represent yet another effort to address the issue of homelessness. The Madison, Wisconsin public library, for example, reorganized its work areas to look more like pods, an arrangement that Ruhlmann (2014) noted provides more privacy, a valued commodity for homeless persons. Finally, targeted programs that intentionally invite homeless persons into public library spaces have cropped up in certain libraries. The Dallas Public Library, for example, instituted a program called “Coffee and Conversation,” where homeless patrons and staff members convene and talk about issues relevant to both parties (Fox, 2015). Such conversations, according to the library’s community engagement administrator, helps library staff gain a better understanding of the needs of some the regular homeless patrons who visited the library every day.

Both empirical studies and non-empirical literature about the public library response to the issue of homelessness indicate that the tension between First Amendment rights of patrons and the library’s right to create a safe environment for all patrons persists. Despite recent attempts by some public library systems to intentionally service homeless individuals, most remain committed to the mission of serving all patrons, an ideological approach that may ignore the specific needs and challenges that homeless patrons present.

The goal of this study was to contribute to the literature that explores this tension. Though a few studies have examined the dispositions of librarians regarding their perceptions of homeless library patrons, no studies to date have explored the intersection between formal library policy about homelessness and informal attitudes and views endorsed and carried out by public librarians. To fill this gap, the following research question was proposed: Do public librarians express “care,” “concern,” or both in their interpretation and execution of library policy related to homeless library patrons?

**Methods**

**Justification for methodology**

The present study utilized a grounded theory approach. According to Corbin and Strauss (2007), this qualitative methodology moves beyond description of a phenomenon or case and generates a “unified theoretical explanation” (p. 107) of that phenomenon or case. Key to this tactic is that a theory is “grounded” in the “actions, interactions, or processes [of participants] through interrelating categories of information based on data collected” (Creswell, 2013, p. 84).

**Sample and interview protocol**

After obtaining IRB approval from his university, the primary investigator, accompanied by two student co-investigators, gathered a convenience sample of public
library personnel from nine urban or semi-urban areas in one Midwestern state to participate in the study. These cities, while not representative of the entire state, signified most geographic areas and have been cited in the media as sites where policy makers have considered and on some level addressed the issue of homelessness.

Email contact with library directors in the chosen cities precipitated phone conversations to set up in-person focus group interviews. Before the investigators arrived on site, library directors assembled a wide spectrum of staff members to participate in the study. Job positions represented in the focus groups included assistant director, branch head, HR staffing supervisor, customer service coordinator, outreach manager, security, custodian, and page. In addition, personnel and their supervisors representing the following areas in the library were represented: technical services, reference, circulation desk, history and special collections, and youth services. Altogether, a total of 47 participants were interviewed.

One library director asked that the investigator interview her alone without staff present. In this case, the primary investigator complied via a phone interview that was not audio-taped. In the remaining eight study sites, library directors collected focus groups comprised of three to ten members. One site hosted two separate focus groups. The rest assembled one group.

Focus group interviews lasted on the average 1 hour and 15 minutes. All interviewees signed informed consent documents verifying their employment as a public library staff member and their age (over 18) before meetings with focus groups ensued. With the permission of the interviewees, the investigators recorded the interviews using an audiotape device. Data from the interviewee who did not consent to being audiotaped took the form of written notes taken by the interviewer during and after the interview. Investigators used a semi-structured interview process, achieving data saturation. The protocol is indicated in the Appendix.

Creswell (2013) noted that other forms of data, such as observations, documents, and audiovisual materials, are often collected in grounded theory research. For the present study, the investigators downloaded copies of the Code of Conduct policies from the site libraries’ websites. These documents were used to inform questions 5 and 6 of the interview protocol (see Appendix).

**Data analysis**

Analysis of data followed the pattern of Taylor and Bogdan’s (1998) constant comparative method and Strauss and Corbin (2014) axial coding. Using the constant comparative method of open coding, concepts are simultaneously coded and analyzed; the research “refines these concepts, identifies their properties, explores their relationships to one another, and integrates them into a coherent explanatory model” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 126). Axial coding emerges from this process: The researcher identifies one open coding category to focus on (called the core phenomenon) and then goes back to the data and creates categories around this phenomenon, which become the basis for a theoretical model (Creswell, 2013).
These two processes were executed in the study as follows: Each investigator was assigned three transcripts on which to do initial coding of the identified core phenomenon, the response of library personnel to the experience of serving homeless patrons. At a subsequent meeting, and after two more interviews, three different transcripts were assigned to each team member and the process was repeated. The result was 16 initial codes. After two more interviews, the team met to combine and narrow the list down to eight. Each team member was then assigned three different transcripts and asked to “chunk” the data into the various codes. The process was repeated until seven subcategories emerged. Further consultation among the investigators resulted in three themes for the study. See Table 1 for a visual depiction of this iterative procedure.

The investigators then met to develop propositions that interrelated the three themes culled from the open coding process. A visual model was created, comprised of a series of categories around the core phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 2007): causal conditions (what factors caused the core phenomenon), strategies (actions taken in response to the core phenomenon), intervening conditions (broad and specific situational factors that influence the strategies), and consequences (outcomes from using the strategies). Figure 1 is a visual depiction of the results of this process.

Table 1. Iterative process of data analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASE 1 Iteration</th>
<th>PHASE 2 Iteration</th>
<th>PHASE 3 Iteration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Demographics</td>
<td>(a) Identified behaviors of homeless patrons (1, 2)</td>
<td>Theme 1: Library as “ Makeshift Shelter” (a, b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Policy violations of homeless patrons</td>
<td>(b) Location as a determinant of homeless presence (5, 7)</td>
<td>Theme 2: Policy/Procedural Implementation (c, e, f)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Staff interactions with homeless patrons</td>
<td>(c) Guidance/ training re: how to interact with homeless patrons (2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 15, 16)</td>
<td>Theme 3: Personal Advocacy/ “ Under the Radar” Responses (d, g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Supervision of staff re: interactions with homeless patrons</td>
<td>(d) Role of security guards (8)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) Internal (in-house) resources for homeless patrons</td>
<td>(e) Tension with library staff to “ serve all” (9)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(6) External (community) resources for homeless patrons</td>
<td>(f) Connections with outside agencies (6, 12, 14)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Location/ environmental factors</td>
<td>(g) Solutions to the challenges of serving the homeless (13)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) Role of security</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(9) Library mission and relationship to homeless patrons</td>
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<td>(10) Staff communication issues</td>
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<td>(11) Public reaction to homeless patrons</td>
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<td>(12) Advocacy for homeless patrons</td>
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<tr>
<td>(13) Solutions to the “ problem” of homelessness</td>
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<tr>
<td>(14) Interaction with community resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>(15) Code of Conduct formation/ usage</td>
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<td>(16) Library card privileges for homeless patrons</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note: (11) was deemed an outlier in phase two.*
Tensions Related to Serving the Homeless

Researchers have adopted measures of reliability and validity specific to qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) used the term credibility, which refers to the confidence that the results of the study accurately represent the phenomenon being studied. Among the several techniques the authors cited in their work, this study utilized prolonged engagement, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

The purpose of prolonged engagement is to “render the inquirer open to the multiple influences upon the phenomenon being studied” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). In this study, the investigators spent several hours in the site libraries memoing their observations. In addition to the focus group interviews, they annotated architectural choices, layout of building, and interactions between library personnel and patrons. In doing so, the investigators were better able to assess the culture and social setting of the phenomenon of interest. Matching self-observation with the data gleaned from focus group interviews allowed the researchers to question their preconceptions of the problem (Kamrath, 2015).

Credibility was further established through triangulation of the data. Triangulation involves using multiple sources to produce a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied (Patton, 2015). Data was triangulated from two primary sources: (1) transcripts from semi-structured, in-depth focus group interviews with library staff and administrative personnel; and (2) an analysis of Code of Conduct policies and procedures that addressed explicitly or implicitly interaction with homeless patrons. Investigators used the Codes of Conduct as a framework by which to analyze the narratives of the study’s participants, which became the basis of the theory as it evolved.
The third form of credibility demonstrated in the study was peer debriefing. Creswell (2013) cited intercoder agreement as a form of peer debriefing that contributes to reliability of qualitative research. Reliability, per the author, refers to “the stability of responses to multiple coders of data sets” (p. 253). In this study, the primary researcher and his assistants met after each interview to discuss impressions and thoughts connected to the data. Through an iterative process of independent and conjoint coding, investigators came to agreement on the codes and categories elicited in the study.

Results

The iterative open coding process described above produced seven subcategories (see Table 1). Further collapsing of the subcategories ensued as part of the axial coding process, resulting in three interrelated themes. These themes formed the basis of a theoretical model that described the typical response public library personnel in the study sites have towards homeless persons. Narratives of the themes are explained in the following section.

Theme #1: Library as “makeshift shelter”—forging a comfortable co-existence

All study participants confirmed the presence of homeless persons in their facilities, but to varying degrees. While librarian personnel cited difficulty sometimes in identifying exactly who was homeless, they could identify “regulars” who were part of this demographic. Despite the presence of negative behaviors, many of these patrons stayed under the radar. Library location was a factor that determined the depth and response to the issue.

When asked to describe homeless persons with whom they interacted in the workplace, participants noted patrons who came to the library frequently, “smelled like a campfire,” wore the same clothing on multiple days, brought in an excessive amount of belongings, stayed in the facility for long periods of time, waited outside before the library opens, slept on the grounds outside the facility, and failed to show an address when asking for a library card. Participants additionally noted evidence of damaged books, drug/alcohol use, patrons bathing and washing clothes in restrooms, prolonged foul odors, excessive sleeping, individuals talking loudly, and individuals using the Internet inappropriately. Participants recognized the inconvenience these negative behaviors sometimes caused staff. Dorothy, director of an urban library, shared that the day before the interview the men’s restroom in her facility had to be closed down for a biohazard overflow. Jolene shared her frustration with calling the police in an incident where a patron stole a wallet out of another person’s bag. Still others expressed dissatisfaction with the draining of resources that resulted from the presence of homeless individuals. Cynthia, who supervised the computer stations in her facility, recognized that homeless patrons who used the maximum time using the Internet prevented others from accessing computers.
Despite the frustration shared by some library personnel, most noted that not all homeless persons engaged in negative behaviors. “Very few of the homeless actually give us any difficulties,” said Roberto, a director of security in an urban library. Participants recognized that even when homeless individuals stayed for long periods of time, they would “keep to themselves” and “not bother anybody.” Shari, a library director in a downtown branch, suggested that they did so to “stay under the radar” so as not to jeopardize the possibility of being asked to leave. The security supervisor in that facility agreed:

In my experience, the homeless population needs this place, and they recognize the resource. And oftentimes people who are homeless will be asked to leave for the day for whatever reason and the biggest thing they want to know is can they come back tomorrow.

Nearly all participants acknowledged that problem behaviors are not the sole domain of those who are homeless.

Focus group participants recognized that the locations of their libraries had much to do with how many and what types of homeless individuals frequented their facilities. Mitigating factors that appeared to decrease the presence of homeless individuals were limited access to bus lines, city planning policy designed to keep homelessness less visible, and how rural or suburban the branch location was. A librarian in a city with a large number of homeless persons speculated: “Why we don’t have more, because there certainly are more homeless people. I think part of it is in the location that we’re at. Even though we are downtown, we’re in a little sort of secluded area.” The library director of a resort town recognized that city planning officials had kept homeless individuals out of the downtown shopping area, which resulted in fewer “obviously homeless” persons using library resources. A director of IT services at another library system noted the urban/rural dichotomy in comparing its branch locations: “We have a branch in the suburbs that has a very small, low, low, low percentage of people who are homeless at that location. And then the 3 other branches are more urban settings, and I would say they’re probably very similar.”

On the other end of the spectrum were libraries within walking distance of shelters, public parks, and other locales where homeless individuals populated. These facilities saw the largest number of homeless persons. Kelly, branch manager of a library located in a downtown area, noted that the community homeless shelter “sends a lot of people [here], I guess. So, a lot of times, when people get out of prison, they’ll get a bus ticket, or they’ll get dropped off here and then they’ll stay at the mission while they’re starting their life over again.” Kelly further distinguished these individuals, experiencing transient homelessness, from “the homeless we see on a regular basis.” Linda, manager of security, connected the number of homeless patrons with the large number of service agencies in the area. Lauren, coordinator of special education services at a branch library, said, “My branch is adjacent to a city park where people do live during the day. We’re also in the center of where all the, many of the homeless shelters are, and social service agencies. So, folks are put out through the day, and they have to do something.”
Theme #2: Policy and procedural response—clear intent, vague implementation

Librarian personnel were asked to articulate their procedural response to the challenges that homeless patrons presented. The answer articulated by each site participant indicated an intention to adhere to the facility’s overall mission: to serve all patrons equally and without discrimination.

One clear indicator of this egalitarian perspective concerned library card usage policies. Nearly all library facilities in the study had policies that allowed patrons without permanent addresses to access library materials. Most facilities accepted valid identification and a note on letterhead from the director of the city mission as proof of residency. In one case, the letter superseded the need for a photo identification and other proof of address. Acknowledging that not all homeless persons feel comfortable staying in shelters, another facility accepted a local mission’s address as proof of residency for transients who lived on the streets.

Further evidence that policies were intended to apply to all library users stemmed from a

review of the rules of conduct at the participating sites. This examination revealed no explicit mention of homeless patrons. Participants repeatedly remarked how behavioral expectations promulgated on websites and posted in common areas applied to all patrons. One administrator’s response was indicative: “Yeah, the rules of conduct are, are just very, you know, generic, pretty generic, that would apply to anybody, you know, of any age, whether you were homeless, not homeless, you know, just basically acceptable.”

Yet, this stated objective belied a tension that underlay it, evidenced in three ways throughout the interviews: (1) disagreement about the interpretation and implementation of code of conduct policies involving behaviors of homeless persons, (2) primarily uncoordinated communication systems that sometimes minimized the effectiveness of a procedural response, and (3) lack of or limited training about how to engage homeless patrons.

Despite the lack of mention of homelessness, certain code of conduct rules implicitly indicated awareness of its presence. For example, one library’s policy manual stated that “all bags and other containers must fit completely under a library chair.” Several libraries mandated “no sleeping” rules and “proper attire,” the latter of which included, but was not limited to, “shirts and shoes required.” Nearly all code of conduct policies included an injunction against harassment, intimidation, or threatening behavior. One library clarified these behaviors in specific terms: “Persons may not behave in a rowdy manner, stare at another person, follow another person about the building, play audio equipment so that others can hear it, sing or talk loudly, use profane or abusive language, or behavior in any manner that can reasonably be expected to disturb others.” Three libraries referenced “inadequate personal hygiene” as interfering with the use of the library by others.

When asked about implementation, staff in nearly all the facilities indicated that behavioral norms referenced in the codes were not consistently implemented. In some instances, this inconsistency translated into not enforcing the rules at all. Hal,
member of the security team in his library, expressed his frustration with patrons violating the “no bag” rule: “Sometimes it can be frustrating that people have made it to a different floor [with a bag], and they would have had at least three staff people, two circulation people, one reference person. And no one is like focused.” A security guard at another site pointed out the dilemma that staff choosing not to enforce the “no sleeping rule” created: “We allow people to sleep here, but also, you’re not allowed to detract from other people using the library. And I don’t see how you can reconcile the two.”

Other focus group members shared an uncertainty about their role in utilizing the code of conduct policies to make decisions about confronting problematic behaviors. Wanda, a library aide who worked at the circulation desk, said, “In terms of what our actual role is in addressing those [behaviors], it’s very vague. Like, do I take initiative to go and do this? Who, like, what is the process?” Another participant admitted that some staff members at her library did not know when they were authorized to ask a person to leave the building. Often these staff would “leave the matter to the security guards.” An assistant director of library services concurred with this perception in his view of “low level bad behavior.” He acknowledged that not being sure how to handle infractions not serious enough to warrant expulsion as “the kind a thing that wears you down throughout the winter every single day as a staff member.”

Some participants admitted to not enforcing the rules if they perceived an impending encounter to be risky. Wendy, head of circulation department, observed that among her staff, “sometimes it depends on the person, how comfortable they are.” Rebecca, reference desk librarian, said:

I work upstairs. We do not have a lot of staff members up there, so I will not approach a sleeping person, even though I get complaints about snoring … I think it could be dangerous, you know. They could just flip out if you tap them, or I don't know.”

Similarly, some participants claimed that homeless individuals were given preferred treatment over those deemed not to be homeless. Kelly, circulation librarian at an urban facility, remarked that the “no sleeping” policy was applied more to patrons who were not homeless than patrons who were. At another facility, staff admitted that the “no sleeping” rule was reserved for those patrons who “have actually gone on the floor. If they’re sleeping, you know, sitting up, with their head down, we leave them alone.” Similarly, Bill, circulation desk worker at one of the smaller libraries, noted, “If you have a regular patron, and you kick ‘em out, they can go home. If you’ve got the [homeless] person and it’s January and it’s 0 degrees out, we kick ‘em out in 0 degrees, you know.” He, among others, admitted the difficulty he experienced in implementing policy that caused distress or discomfort to those who were homeless.

A second factor that complicated the directive to apply library policy equally to all involved the internal exchange systems designed to inform staff members of patron behaviors and infractions. While all library personnel articulated some system of inter-communication, they varied in terms of their formality and effectiveness. Only
one library had a comprehensive system to keep all staff members on the same page when it came to giving warnings and expelling library users.

In some cases, the system of enforcement simply did not work. Reference librarian Rhonda blamed the problem on the lack of communication between administration and staff:

> It’s not consistently enforced. I’ve been cut off at the knees several times by administration … where we had bad behavior in here, and the police wrote a citation for them, and they were supposed to be booted out of here for 6 months, and they were allowed back in here.

A director at a larger library system noted the difficulty in having the record of patron infractions tied to the library card system. She articulated a system of making the user’s card delinquent, including a note in the circulation department’s correspondence, yet acknowledged that there is little she can do if the patron does not have a library card. Another large system noted the near impossibility of effective communication with all its branches: “It’s a big issue. So if they ban somebody at [branch library name], they may not be checking out books, so you can’t know who they are, and see that they were banned.”

Personnel from two libraries articulated a solution for the challenges associated with tying a patron’s behavioral infractions to his/her library card: A camera system that takes a snapshot of an individual who is placed on a ban list. Yet, interviewees noted the limitations of this system. Desiree, head of circulation of one of the libraries, stated, “It’s harder to enforce. So it becomes the responsibility of the staff to recognize these people as, you know, somebody we just banned last week.” Branch library head Sally indicated measures her facility put in place when a snapshot did not pan out: “If that’s not possible, we’ll try to look them up, even on Facebook, any kind of social media to try to find them and get some kind of picture of them. We aren’t always successful with that.” Marcia, acting security manager at yet another library, shared her frustration with a camera system designed to enforce bans: “There was a book of pictures, of people that were banned from the library. I know that currently we’re not allowed to take pictures. So we’re still workin’ on that aspect, because that’s something we need across the board.”

An unintended consequence of the stated mission to “serve all equally” was the lack of training of both new and veteran staff around the issue of homelessness. No staff members admitted to engaging in specific training related to homeless resources and/or needs during their orientation. Administrators in the study confirmed their assertion. While some library staff recounted confidence in addressing such issues because of their “on the job” training, others articulated the inadequacy they experienced in their day-to-day interactions with homeless patrons.

Participants interpreted training specific to the needs of the homeless as “learning how to deal with difficult patrons.” Dorothy, HR coordinator at her library, acknowledged the value of the shadowing process for her new hires. She justified her decision:
‘Cause, we want staff to be prepared and we want patrons to get, so that they don’t put you in a situation where, where all of a sudden you’re kinda shocked and that you didn’t know this kind of stuff happened in the library.

Desiree lamented the fact that her library “throws these people [new hires] to the wolves.” She noted that the library at which she worked recently increased its training period to 20 hours, a change that allowed staff to cover “dealing with difficult patrons.” She admitted, however, that “difficult patrons” were not necessarily homeless.

Other library staff noted that training came in the form of connections to community agencies who served homeless populations and, therefore, were knowledgeable about their needs. Kelly, manager of her site, recalled a time when a community organization representative who spoke at the beginning of staff meeting. An employee of Community Mental Health, for example, “sat down with a few of us to talk to us about homelessness in our branches and what we can do to help.” The administrator of another more urban-centered library also saw the importance of maintaining connections with the mental health agency in her community. Both administrators confirmed what participants in the study as a whole articulated: In Kelly’s words, “It really didn’t go that far.”

**Theme #3: Personal advocacy—“under the radar” responses**

The narratives that constructed the official policy/procedural response to the needs and concerns of homeless patrons revealed a tension that belied the lived experiences of most participants in the study. While library personnel committed themselves to serving all patrons equally, they noticed how difficult this was to do on a day-to-day basis. An offshoot of this tension was a more informal and less explicit reply that manifested in the interviews in three ways: (1) library administrators’ proactive responses to the issue; (2) informal connections with social welfare agencies and homeless patrons themselves; and (3) the infusion of security staff who assumed a compassionate front line presence for homeless persons.

In contrast to the confusion and frustration some front-line workers expressed in regards to the implementation of policy regarding the homeless, library administrators provided a more structured and thought out perspective. Aware of their public role as the face of the library for the community, they articulated a clearer, more cogent, and in most cases, more compassionate response to homeless patron interaction and related infractions.

Administrators in the study all mentioned that they and their support staff were readily available for workers who might have questions about how to confront questionable patron behavior. Front-line employees confirmed this protocol. Yet, the common answer to “What is the procedure in place when you have to confront a patron about a potential rule violation?” was “It depends.” Wanda’s perception was typical. An aide who worked at the circulation desk, she noted a hierarchy of behaviors that might call for supervisor intervention: “I mean, sometimes, if something
like escalated, or someone seems like dangerous, we'll, you know, we would absolutely bring it to a supervisor.”

Administrators in the study affirmed their libraries’ mission to serve all equally as instrumental to their vision of policy and procedure implementation. Yet, many provided evidence of making exceptions to this rule in a way that usually benefited homeless patrons. Andrea, for example, emphasized that “two people [who] engage in the same behavior, they get the same treatment. No matter whether it's your city councilman or somebody who comes in with a big garbage bag full of stuff.” Yet, she quickly acknowledged that “because of human nature, you know, you could apply the rules differently to different people.” Andrea mentioned the frequency of encounters with homeless patrons (as opposed to city councilpersons) naturally created a situation where leniency might be in order. Patty, an administrator in a more rural setting, admitted that she was likely more compassionate than the police who might respond to calls from her staff: “We probably give people much more leniency than maybe we should, but I also think that whenever I go places and I hear how well we treat all of our patrons, the homeless are not our only difficult patrons.”

Other administrators in the study cited instances of going “above and beyond” in addressing homeless patron behavior. Jolene told the story of encountering in a grocery store an alcoholic who had been banned from the library. She gave him her business card, referred him to a treatment program, and coached him on how to appeal the ban. Kami, head of the library that sees 40 homeless individuals a day, deemed it her obligation to help the homeless: “We need to know what's out there, you know, to help these people. If I know the resources in the community, you know, that could help ‘em.” James, head of branch and IT services at an urban library, saw as part of his job to advocate for the needs of the homeless population. He spoke of bringing a culture of compassion toward the homeless into the workplace: “And that culture translates into like the rule enforcement of it. I speak with security staff at other public libraries across the nation and a lot of ‘em have a lot more problems with the homeless than we do.” Administrators in the study recognized that paying attention to the needs of homeless patrons was a worthwhile endeavor because, in Kami’s words, “It will minimize my problems.” As spokespersons for their front-line staff, library administrators in the study tended to minimize the day-to-day conflicts and focus on the bigger picture, which embraced the third sector organizational capacity of their facilities.

Personnel from all libraries in the study noted the absence of formal connections to social welfare agencies and other community resources that served the homeless and housing compromised. Staff explained this lack in part by privacy laws to which library staff must adhere. As stated by IT librarian Keith, “So, it's tricky having any formalized relationship because technically and legally we can't call up a social service agency and say Joe Schmoe is here and needs your help, because technically that's against the law.” Kendra, Director of Special Education services, made the challenges associated with this phenomenon clear:
A lot of social service agencies have downsized to such a point that their clients come to the library now. And so many people are now relying on the library staff to assist them in, including benefits and aid. So we're pulled in a lot of directions that we never were traditionally.

Several participants cited the paucity of social services in the community due to budgetary restrictions and “staff being stretched thin” as barriers to forging links with agencies.

Despite this stated reality, participants noted numerous ways that they advocated informally for homeless patrons that frequented the library. A common way administrators in the study took steps to connect with area social service agencies involved creating an informational handout that staff distributed to those in need. In one case, the library staff relied on a card created and disseminated by downtown area businesses. In another case, community resource information was created in-house and continually updated: “Any staff person can put information on there, edit information, so we have lots of resources that are available.”

Another way that library personnel advocated on behalf of the homeless involved intentional programming offered to the community. At times this programming took an educational bent. Branch director Pamela justified her decision to host a photography exhibit featuring life-size cutouts of homeless people and their situations, designed to raise awareness about the plight of homelessness in her community. Another study site arranged a panel program “targeted at the general population to educate them on what’s happening in the community [in regards to homelessness].”

Only one library in the study offered programming designated for homeless patrons themselves. The director justified her creation of a weekly movie night: “With so many people hanging out here all day long, you know, we thought they’d like to come to movies.” On another occasion, prompted by the local social services department, she described her efforts to host a summer free lunch program: “She [the social services department worker] wasn’t that confident she had a good downtown location. I hated telling her no, because we have a ‘no food in the library’ rule, and I just, I don’t have staff.” She added, “But I finally just got over my issues. Now I feel guilty for not doing it sooner.”

Rather than hosting events for homeless patrons themselves, libraries more likely opened their doors to community social service agency representatives who provided resources for clientele who needed them. Yet, these connections tended to be haphazard and inconsistently offered. In one case, the library teamed up with a local sorority to sponsor a “basic needs fair and food drive” in the library parking lot. Other services that were offered to the homeless included food assistance, community mental health treatment, and tax preparation.

More likely, library personnel developed informal relationships with staff at community agencies on behalf of their homeless patrons. Kendra, director of Special Education services, admitted to contacting staff from a youth shelter because, in her words, “some of the folks who are residents there, come in and create a situation in the library where we’ve had to ask them to leave.” She added:
And the same thing with people who are from the [adult] shelters. We know where they’re staying, we let them know he got sick today at the library, we had to call 911, and let them know, so they’re aware that their client had a problem.

A reference desk worker in a rural facility spoke of the relationship she had developed with a social worker from a local warming shelter: “We have an excellent social worker now, and she has connected with the reference desk, so we know her. We have her phone number if she needs to call us.”

In one case, the library’s connection to the local homeless shelter was not welcomed by staff. Circulation desk worker Bill described how the shelter staff dropped off its clients at the door of the library when its doors open: “They come right when we open and usually stay until 6:00 when they catch the shuttle bus and go to whatever church is hosting them for the night.” The assistant director of that library confirmed Bill’s assumption: “They [the shelter] tend to plan their hours around our hours.” When asked if a formal connection had ever been attempted between the library personnel and shelter staff, he said, “[Our director] gives them our code of conduct so that they know what’s expected of their clients here.”

Finally, library personnel in five sites indicated more “under the radar” advocacy for homeless patrons. Sometimes these efforts transcended their day-to-day work. In several instances, library staff volunteered in community agencies that served the homeless. In other cases, library staff coordinated fundraisers among their staff with proceeds benefiting local homeless shelters. Linda, branch manager, organized a holiday potluck, whereupon staff was asked to give a donation to eat. She stated:

We’re really mindful of our neighbors who don’t have the things that they need to get through. And, as a staff, not as a sanctioned library program these are things that we’ve come up with to help the people in our community.

At one library some staff members noticed that patrons entered the library with holes in their shoes. The result was a community sock and hat drive: “And this is just something the staff decided that they wanted to do. Because we see these people every day.”

Still other staff cited instances of becoming more personally and quietly invested in the lives of patrons in need. One administrator in the study admitted that she violated a strict non-solicitation rule by allowing healthcare navigators to sign up patrons for Affordable Health Care Act health insurance. Another library cleaned and donated “lost and found” clothing to homeless individuals who frequented the facility. Deidra, head of circulation at her branch, confirmed buying a bus ticket for a homeless person who needed to get home. Another staff member at the same facility admitted to scanning the obituaries to keep tabs on certain clientele. HR staffing coordinator Helen admitted allowing certain patrons to access her phone, even though staff phones are not for public use.

A third “out of the box” method of connecting with homeless patrons evident in the study involved the utilization of security staff of the site libraries. Seven of the nine libraries conceptualized security guards as an important “front-line” point of contact with individuals who were homeless. Yet, the roles they played enacted a
friendlier, more interactional approach that defied the stereotypical view of security guards as strict enforcers of policy and procedure.

Library personnel interviewed were consistent in the way they described the role of security in their facilities. All made clear the intention that these staff members not be perceived negatively—in the words of one security supervisor, “walking around barrel-chested, tryin’ to keep people under control out of fear.” By contrast, security maintained a quiet, behind-the-scenes demeanor for the twofold purpose of promoting safety and as back-up for desk workers and other staff members who had more direct interaction with customers.

Marcella, security supervisor in a library with a larger homeless population, noted that one of the jobs of security guards was to be the eyes and ears for areas not generally populated by patrons. Kelly, a branch manager, confirmed this depiction of the security guards positioned in her building. “They are responsible for making sure that the buildings remain secure. They kind of wander around and keep an eye on things, and they assist the library in, more than enforcing anything on their own.” For these librarians, public perception was integral to the role security played. In the words of Calvin, “When you have your guards roaming around and talking to people, they, we’re gonna be a safer place.”

This behind-the-scenes monitoring role did not preclude security guards from enforcing policies and procedures when they needed to. Participants affirmed the importance of security as back-up to other staff who encountered a problematic patron rather than being the front line of defense. Kelly stated, for example, “What we don’t want to do is put people off by sending a security guard after them for minor infractions. We like to handle that more with the librarian. That uniform can be intimidating.” Bob discussed the comfort security guards provided him in his work as a reference desk librarian:

If there is something going on that is a rule violation, and we’re not exactly sure how that falls into the policy or the procedures, we can pick up the phone and call them. There’s always someone right on the other end of the phone.

The branch manager at a suburban library noted another way security guards assume a back-up role to supervisors: “They make me aware of various people who have been banned [from the main branch]. So, we’re all in the loop.”

Equally integral to security guards’ role in their workplaces was the way they presented themselves in playing that role. Participants from the seven libraries who discussed security’s presence in their facilities indicated the importance of the guards acting and appearing in a way that minimized their policing role. Two administrators pointed out that the uniform of their security guards did not identify them as such. “We want them to be in plain clothes,” Ronald said. In another facility, what one participant designated as “concierge staff” greeted patrons as they entered the building. When asked what the function of this staff was, she stated:

They are supposed to step in and say, ‘Hey, are you—you seem a little off today, you’re kind of all over the place, are you okay?’ Get a sense if there’s alcohol and then they usually will call a supervisor or security.
While this two-tiered approach to security was unique to this facility, it signifies the general need of the libraries in the study to put a friendlier, non-threatening face on security.

Yet another way this persona was maintained came from the demeanor of the security guards as described by nearly all participants. Kelly used the word “very gentle” to define the approach security guards at her facility used. Her co-worker concurred in her opinion: “The guards that we do have here make a very conscious effort to smile, to be friendly, to say hello, to greet people.” Security supervisor Daniel depicted the interactions between his staff and homeless patrons as “very friendly.” He added, “We try to do a lot for ‘em.” As the security supervisor Bob from that facility explained:

We see ‘em every day. And we get concerned when we don’t see ‘em. Sometimes some have come and talked to us, the security guards let ‘em know that one of ‘em has passed, or somethin’ happened to another individual, ‘cause they are a part of the community.

His coworker Amanda, security supervisor of a different branch, added, “Dealin’ with the homeless, you have to be, you know, you have to have a certain outlook. You can’t treat them like they’re the bottom of the barrel. It’s the way you interact and deal with ‘em.” Perhaps Bob summed up his approach, one shared by many other security personnel in the study, the best:

What I do, every morning when I open the door. I speak to every customer that comes in, regardless of who they are. Hey, how you doin’, John? And I got one guy I call Pops. Pops comes in every day. He has a problem, you know, holdin’ his head down, but he knows who I am. And he’ll talk to you every day, I’m okay. So, you know, it’s a good feeling that you got to know some of them, you know?

In both their roles and demeanor, security guards in seven of the nine libraries in the study played an integral role in facilitating smooth interactions between homeless patrons, staff, and the general public. It is noteworthy that the one library facility without security guards on staff noted the most frustration with the homeless population.

**Discussion: Explication of model**

As purveyors of “makeshift shelters,” library personnel in the study noted the presence of homeless persons; yet, how much they perceived homelessness to be a problem varied. A variety of factors appeared to determine the nature and level of the response to the perceived problem of homelessness in their facilities. Taken as a whole, these factors enacted an often unspoken, yet viable tension that mitigated against a coherent response to the issue and prompted informal forms of advocacy on behalf of homeless patrons. Figure 1 is a visual depiction of this process.

One such factor was location. Libraries located in areas of the city heavily populated by homeless persons indicated a greater presence of homeless persons,
and, concurrently, staff at these institutions expressed greater frustration with negative behaviors exhibited by these patrons. Yet, other factors external to the library also impacted this response. The absence or deficiency of community social welfare agencies to serve the homeless and city planning decisions, for example, were just as likely to inform the presence of and response to homelessness in the facility.

Another factor relevant to the study’s inquiry was the perception of the effectiveness of the code of conduct policies in addressing issues related to homeless patrons. Participants noted the pressure to adhere to the stated mission of the library—to serve all equally and without discrimination. At the same time, they recognized that day-to-day implementation of policies and procedures belied this intended mission regarding homeless patrons. Librarians in the study tended to view most homeless individuals as non-problematic because they “stayed under the radar.” Yet, participants’ reflections indicated less than equal treatment, in either a positive or negative direction, that homeless patrons received compared to non-homeless patrons. The need to facilitate a comfortable co-existence between homeless and non-homeless patrons proved to be a source of tension for library staff.

Two other factors that regulated the response to homelessness and those impacted by it were internal communication constraints and specific training around the topic. For the most part, these indicators were sources of anxiety for participants as they recognized the limitations they presented. A technical services librarian in the study summed this concern up well:

I am not a social worker. I’m not a medical professional. I can’t tell if someone is having a mental breakdown or is on drugs. So I think from a library’s perspective, it’s helping employees understand what they can do and cannot do, and when it’s time to refer to someone else who you should be referring to.

The desire to reconcile the aforementioned tensions resulted in “out of the box” methods to address the needs of the homeless. While formal policy and procedure designated “no special treatment” of customers identified as homeless, informal interactions indicated otherwise. Administrators who were voices of advocacy in the community, staff members who worked privately and sometimes on their own time to assist those in need, and security guards who actively worked to maintain a supportive environment all played a key role in allowing homeless patrons and others to comfortably co-exist.

As valuable as they seemed to be for staff in the study, informal “out of the box” responses to the presence of homeless individuals were not universally recognized in the facilities. Rather, they were driven by the immediate needs of a staff member or members concerned about the issue at the time. The need to formalize these processes, while at the same time honoring the lived experiences of staff who encounter homeless patrons daily, can inform recommendations to library administration about how to address “the problem” of homelessness in public libraries.
Implications for library administrators/staff

Study participants were asked the question, “If you had a magic wand that you could wave that would address the issues concerning homeless patrons raised in this interview, how would you use it?” Informed by the literature and the ALA’s directive, their responses aligned with three general topics: (1) enhancing staff training around issues regarding homelessness and homeless patrons; (2) purposefully connecting to community agencies/resources that serve homeless populations; and (3) reflecting on internal policies that address homeless patrons with more intentionality, while continuing to retain the library’s mission. The following discussion expands upon the above areas of focus.

Enhancement of staff training

According to the literature, library science education programs on the whole tend not to prioritize the needs of the homeless in their curricula, a perception confirmed by the interviewees in this study. Yet, participants generally agreed that this gap in knowledge should be addressed in their workplaces. This sentiment is reflected in the American Library Association’s (1991) Policy 61, which recommends, “Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people’s needs and deliver relevant services.” ALA describes this education as sensitivity training that addresses “attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people’s use of libraries.”

Educating about the psychosocial needs of homeless individuals is one way to address attitudinal bias, per ALA’s directive. Yet, library administrators may not want to spend valuable continuing education time on how to engage these patrons. One notable exception to this suggestion is recognizing and addressing patrons’ mental health diagnoses, conditions that statistically are more prevalent in homeless individuals (Grace, 2000). A public service coordinator interviewed in the study recognized how identifying signs of mental illness “changes the conversation” with the consumer: “I can look in somebody’s eyes and think to myself, ‘oh, he’s not doing good. And then once you realize they have a mental illness, you’re like, I can’t help you really.” Addressing gaps in knowledge about mental health issues can assist library personnel in understanding their limitations in fulfilling the library’s overall mission of providing information resources equally to all patrons.

Having a better understanding of basic needs of homeless persons, especially in regards to mental illness, necessitates training in knowing how best to fill in the gaps left by social service agencies who might serve them. Noting the ever-changing world of funding in the social services arena, Janet, a circulation desk worker who used to work in social services, cited the need for libraries to “keep their pulse on all the resources that people need.” Administrators can keep an updated list of relevant community resources and regularly communicate them to staff.
There is also need to address the attitudinal bias that exists around agency provision of services. Kathleen, branch manager of a library in a particularly impoverished area, stated, “There are all those agencies out there who are supposed to be helping people who really make it almost impossible for anyone to actually get the help that they’re promised.” Citing overly complex applications and lack of computer knowledge as barriers, Kathleen hoped for “human dignity to be brought back into the whole process of receiving benefits.”

Training library personnel to understand their role in helping homeless patrons navigate the often-complex world of social service agency benefits can be quite practical. One library in the study, for example, purchased scanners with the intention of helping homeless patrons upload and submit required documents, such as drivers’ licenses and social security cards. Another, less tangible, form of training can come in the form of knowing how best to assist patrons seeking resource assistance. Janet articulated this sentiment in describing her approach: “We might not fill out the application at DHHS for them, but we might take ‘em to a computer and get ‘em to the file they need to start and then come to them every few minutes.” Clarification about how to assist without enabling patrons in need of resources can help libraries stay true to their mission of providing information services, while still addressing the specific needs of homeless individuals.

**Purposeful connections with agency resources**

ALA’s (1991) Policy 61 calls libraries to promote “networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.” Recent evidence of libraries hiring social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals, as indicated in the literature, is one manifestation of this charge. Five libraries in the study put this intention on their wish lists, but all recognized the budgetary restrictions that prevented it from coming to fruition.

The next best thing to a social worker on site may be more intentional links to social workers in the community. Some library staffs in the study maintained these connections, but they were not formalized in any way. To appeal to funding sources that might see social workers as superfluous to a library’s mission, administrators might do well to reconfigure this position as “manager of outreach services,” as one library in the study did. This staff member described her position as “essentially developing relationships in the community.” Though sometimes perceived as a PR person, she noted her goal of interfacing with social service agencies. For example, she became the liaison between a community treatment services agency that specialized in treating homeless persons with mental health diagnoses and the library staff:

So over time we’ve developed a relationship with staff in that organization who come here a couple of days a week and have regular hours so that people can access their services. We’re providing for them to be here, and they show up.
Clearly, this staff person saw her role as host to agencies that can do the work needed to serve the homeless, an intention that falls more directly in line with the public library mission. The impact such a role might have on front-line staff was indicated by a reference librarian in that system. Citing an encounter with an 18-year-old man who came up and “needed direction ‘cause he had no place to go,” this librarian took advantage of the outreach services department: “Because of these connections, because of how well communicated they were, I was able to say, ‘Here are some places that you can go. And he was able to walk away confident that, that his life wasn’t over.” In this facility, the manager of outreach services not only connected to social service agencies, but empowered staff in the facility to make these referrals.

In lieu of somebody to meet homeless persons where they are, a more realistic goal is to bring the services where homeless people reside (i.e., homeless shelters). Other than occasionally and informally inviting social service agencies to occupy space at health and resource fairs, the libraries in this study did not proactively to so. One group of administrators offered some ideas, however. This library’s location prevented a large influx of homeless presence in the facility, but these participants recognized how important the issue was in the community in which they resided. Barbara mentioned the need to get more feedback from the shelters about how they could coordinate services: “I would go out and start talking to them, and asking them what their clientele could use. So it would be outreaching, what we can provide to the shelters.” Citing a program that places books in barber shops to reach inner city children, Kathleen, another administrator at this facility, indicated the ease of putting up bookshelves in homeless shelters: “I’m thinking of a model, a little bit expanded from that might work for a shelter. And have a reading library where the librarians, it’s been professionally selected, the collection.” Bringing the library to the shelter, instead of the opposite, can be a cost-prohibitive way of effective service coordination. More important, perhaps, it would enhance the personal relationships with staff members of shelter facilities.

A final means of connecting to the community in a more intentional way involves something that some library administrators in the study were already doing: serving on advocacy and advisory boards concerned with the prevalence of homelessness in their communities. Linda, administrator of a more suburban community rich in resources for homeless populations, confirmed her presence on a board consisting of the chief of police, health and human services coordinator, and shelter staff. In her words, “We are all people who can get things done if we need to, and we make decisions.” Linda spoke of her voice being important in adding more beds at a shelter and encouraging Churches to take a role in addressing the issue. In addition, she was spokesperson for the library to the city council, testifying to the growing heroin epidemic in the community: “And now I’m supposedly the one who knows a lot about heroin and addiction.” Linda’s example suggests the need and importance of library administrators and other relevant staff to be at the table in discussions of how best to serve homeless individuals in the community-at-large. Given its frequent encounters with homeless persons on a day-to-day basis, the library’s perspective is a vital part of that conversation.
**Internal policy revisions**

As mentioned, from the policy perspective, participants overwhelmingly spoke of the importance of treating all patrons, homeless or otherwise, alike. Yet, ALA (1991) makes clear its recognition that poor persons encounter barriers that other library consumers may not. It recommends examining and possibly altering policies related to “fees and overdue charges” as one way to remove such barriers. All libraries in the present study made some accommodations for homeless individuals when it came to library card privileges, which can be considered a nod toward this recommendation. Yet, other internal policy revisions and additions can be instituted that would make public libraries more user-friendly to homeless individuals.

First, staff can solicit information from individuals who may be homeless about the needs and resources the library can provide for them. The ALA (1991) recommended that this endeavor involve both anti-poverty advocates and poor people. Dallas Public Library’s “Coffee and Conversation” is one such model for bringing together library staff and individuals designated as homeless or housing compromised in an informal capacity (Fox, 2015). One library in the present study hosted a movie night, another possible forum for this assessment to occur.

Second, library administrators can re-envision the philosophy of library lending as a part of its mission. For example, Kathleen, an administrator from a more urban facility in the study asked, “Should we think of library lending, and collections of books in a different way?” While acknowledging that “free books for free kids to keep at home” is not fiscally responsible or practical, there may be policy revisions related to lending privileges that are more user-friendly to homeless consumers. Kathleen suggested “providing homeless shelters with 3 shelves of kids’ books. And they’re not checked out to a particular person. And we know there’s gonna be a shrinkage of a certain amount over a period of time.” She added, “One book with one person responsible for it may not be the way this works for this population.” Kathleen’s idea appears to be an offshoot of the free library concept, with the caveat that homeless persons may not have a book to give.

Third, public libraries can think more creatively about architectural space in a way that welcomes all consumers, but acknowledges the unique needs of homeless persons. In the spirit of the Madison, Wisconsin public library system, which reorganized its work areas to look more like pods (Ruhlmann, 2014), one library staff commented on the renovation methods they adopted to accomplish this aim. One project involved transitioning from, in the words of a staff member, “a kind of dumpy environment to a computer environment, more well-lit.” Her observation is key: “People raise their behavior up to a higher standard with the environment that they’re in.” In a similar vein, this library reorganized its front lobby area, and in the process, prevented individuals from sleeping and “laying their bags down.” This staff member recognized that a clean, open, well-lit environment both enhances positive patron behavior and deters negative patron behavior.
Limitations and areas for further study

Qualitative research in general has limitations that require reporting. Generalizability is an issue. The public libraries in one state have needs specific to the region in which they reside. Budgetary restrictions, for example, posed a barrier in all the libraries represented in the study. These concerns impacted the libraries’ policy issues around homelessness. Public libraries in other parts of the country may not have this barrier. A mixed methods research project involving a sample from public libraries throughout the country could produce more generalizable data.

In addition, there are limitations related to the data collection process. In most cases, library administrators and their staff participated in the same focus group interview. This power dynamic likely inhibited certain staff members from being completely transparent in their assessment of the policy response initiated by their administrators. Likewise, library administrators may have been biased in their responses in their desire to appear competent in front of their staff members. In a similar vein, administrators selected participants based on their discretion. It is possible that they chose individuals that might have been slanted in one way or another regarding the issue. A future study could assess the perspectives of administrators and staff separately, thereby minimizing the potential for bias.

Homelessness is a complex issue. Procuring a narrow view from individuals who are not community policymakers might have precipitated inaccurate or shortsighted aspects of the social problem. A more comprehensive exploration of the topic, including a study that considers the perception of agencies that serve homeless populations and how they coordinate those services with the public libraries in their communities, would provide a more nuanced exploration of the topic.

Conclusion

The present study confirms what many public librarians in urban and suburban areas have noted in their day-to-day work: Libraries serve as third-sector social service organizations, what Ward (2015) labeled “de facto daytime shelters for the nation’s street people” (p. 1). The participants in this study of public libraries in one Midwestern state articulated how complex that reality is for all.

Trying to stay true to their mission requires some “out of the box” responses that do not serve all stakeholders well. Policy implementation inconsistency, frustration due to limited knowledge about homelessness and its psychosocial impact on society, and lack of coordination between libraries and the agencies that can assist the homeless are part and parcel with the mission of serving all in the public interest. Remaining open, tolerant, and inviting facilities requires ongoing soul searching of both administrators and staff. Yet, it is an endeavor that these libraries, it would appear, feel worth pursuing. As one administrator noted about her facility:

There frankly is no other place like that in this community, and not in most. There’s no community center that’s this wide open. In other places around the community there’s breathalyzers given, but not the public library, because it’s the public
library. They don’t feel watched, they don’t feel any of those things. And to be honest with you, I’m glad about that.

References


Appendix

Interview Protocol

A Place To Call Home?: A Qualitative Exploration of Public Librarians’ Response To Homelessness

1. What is your position title? What duties does that position entail?
2. About how many homeless people do you think visit the library per day?
3. How do homeless patrons typically spend their time at the library?
4. Describe in general terms your interactions with homeless patrons.
5. Tell me about any library policies you are aware of that deal with the library’s interactions with homeless patrons.
6. How do these policies help guide your interactions with these individuals, if at all?
7. Describe the support you receive from supervisors and colleagues about your interactions with homeless patrons.
8. Tell me about the connections your library has with social service agencies in the area that serve the homeless. What barriers do you see, if any, to these collaborations?
9. What programs or events that benefit homeless patrons are in place in the library?
10. How could the library better serve their homeless patrons?
11. Anything else you would like to add?