The Homeless and Public Libraries

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**Abstract**

The public library has both legal and ethical obligations to allow their facilities, services, and collections to be used by all. Homeless community members, often deemed as “problem” patrons deserve the right to use the library, the same as any other group. Though homeless library patrons have been traditionally underserved by this institution, it is clear that this user group will continue to rely on the many services, programs, and collections it has to offer. Instead of ignoring this population further, libraries have a responsibility to reduce various barriers to access of this group. Additionally, libraries should not only provide reactive measures towards this group, but also proactive measures to advocate and meet their various informational, recreational, and educational needs. Homeless library users have become a group that the public library can no longer ignore. Libraries that have implemented innovative programs to assist these users and to make the community stronger overall, through collaboration and partnership, should serve as models for every public library that has homeless library users. By promoting equal access to information and advocating for the poor and homeless, the public library can uphold its philosophy as a truly democratic institution.

**Introduction**

The Library Bill of Rights, a document produced by the American Library Association (ALA), outlines several key philosophical and foundational tenets that guide the rights of library users in the United States. Notably, section V of this document states that, “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views” (American Library Association, 1996, V). While public libraries in this country constantly strive to make this tenet a reality through open access to information through programs, services, and collections, there are undoubtedly groups of underserved populations which have fallen into cracks. One group that has been consistently ignored and underserved by libraries for the past 30 years is the homeless. Homelessness in urban cities across the country has been a social problem since the late 1970s and the early 1980s, when a myriad of political, economic, and social factors combined and led to an increased number of people living on the streets (Simmons, 1985). Public libraries, with their open door policy to all, have been used by this population as not only a place of safe haven and shelter, but also as place to satisfy informational, educational, and recreational needs.

Having worked in a busy urban public library for almost 8 years, I have seen first-hand the many ways that homeless library users depend on our space and services. In this paper I will examine several issues related to the homeless and public libraries. I will overview who the homeless are in this country, and their various and diverse information needs. I will also discuss how the homeless use public libraries, in addition to what ethical and legal obligations the library has to serve this population. Next, I will outline and discuss several barriers to access facing homeless library users in the public library. Lastly, I will also provide possible solutions and suggestions gathered from library research and literature on how to best serve the homeless in libraries, in addition to providing examples of model public libraries that have innovative programs to meet the needs of this population.

**Who are the Homeless?**

Before we can delve into a discussion of the needs of the homeless, and how the library can serve them, we must first understand who this group is. Though often treated as such, the homeless are not a homogenous group (Hersberger, 2005). In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a rise in homelessness due to a myriad of factors. The deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, coupled with the Regan Administration’s reduction of federal low-income housing support from $32 billion to $7.5 billion, led to a drastic number of people without a place to call home (Ayers, 2006; Murphy, 1999; Simmons, 1985).

According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, a person who experiences homelessness “is one who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and has a primary night-time residency that is either provided by a shelter…or a place not designed for use as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings” (Wong, 2009, p. 399). People can become homeless for many different reasons. These can include poverty, mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, natural disasters, job loss, and the loss of one’s home (Hersberger, 2005).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2014), there are approximately 610,042 people “experiencing homelessness on any given night in the United States” (“The Big Picture”). The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (2014) estimates that, “1 million persons are served in HUD-supported emergency, transition and permanent housing programs each year. The total number of persons who experience homelessness may be twice as high” (“Who Needs Homelessness Assistance?”). Of this number, 222,197 are people in families, and 387,825 are individuals (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2014). It is estimated that single men comprised 51% of the population, single women 17%, families with children 30%, and unaccompanied youth 2% (Wong, 2009). Additionally, the racial and ethnic breakdown of the homeless is estimated to be “42% African American, 39% White, 13% Hispanic, 4% Native American, and 2% Asian” (Wong, 2009, p. 400).

In addition to experiencing homelessness, many of these individuals also face other challenges. It is estimated that 26% of the homeless are considered severely mentally ill, 16% of the homeless are physically disabled, and 13% of single homeless people are victims of domestic violence (Kelleher, 2013). Additionally, 30% have substance abuse problems, 26% report acute health problems (other than HIV/AIDS), and 46% report chronic health conditions (Hill, 2011). A common misconception about the homeless is that they do not work or have an income, but 44% report working in the past week, and 13% say that they have regular jobs (Hill, 2011).

It is extremely difficult for the government and other agencies who work with the homeless to tally the exact number of these individuals because of the transitory nature of this population. As such, the true number of individuals who experience homelessness may be much higher than the numbers we have seen here reported from various sources. Additionally, Julie Hersberger (2005) notes that the “time one spends being homeless is a critical issue” (p. 200). She classifies these different timeframes as: chronic, periodic, temporary, and total homelessness (Hersberger, 2005). Chronic homelessness is experienced by individuals who spend long periods living on the streets. Periodic homeless, which is categorized as having the largest number of homeless, happens when various circumstances result in lack of housing. Temporary homelessness is usually the result of natural disasters or relocated to a new area. Lastly, total homelessness is defined as “those who have no only lost their shelter but also suffer from a loss of other important social supports such as family connections or public assistance” (Hersberger, 2005, p. 200).

As can be seen, homelessness is a complex issue that has the capacity to be experienced by many types of people, caused by different reasons, felt at different levels of severity, and faced for different lengths of time. As Patrick Grace (2000) states, “homeless people are not stereotypes; they are members of our society. They are men, women, and children. They come from all national and ethnic backgrounds. They are native-born and immigrant” (p. 54). As such, it should come as no surprise that the various needs of these individuals are equally as diverse and assorted. We will discuss these different needs of the homeless in the next section.

**The Information and Other Needs of the Homeless**

Due to the nonhomogeneous nature of people who experience homelessness in this country it is understandable that they in turn have diverse and unique needs. Just like any other user group, the information needs of the homeless can range from the more basic and immediate to the more complex. Some of these needs are informational in nature, and others are not. In this section we will take a look at these different levels of needs.

In one of the largest studies of the homeless, a survey was given to participants located in Lansing, Michigan to determine their library use habits, and pressing information and service needs (Kelleher, 2013). It is not surprising that in this study it was determined that the number one information need of respondents (57.3% of total) was to find long-term housing (Kelleher, 2013). Also important to homeless respondents was the need to find a job (49.5% of total) (Kelleher, 2013). Other information needed by respondents included information on, “child support, information on spousal abuse or relationship violence, and information on how to get furniture and clothing” (Kelleher, 2013, p. 26). Other everyday life information needs often required by the homeless are outlined by Hersberger (2005) as including: finances, childcare, health and health care, education, transportation, and public assistance.

Most of the existing library research and literature focuses on the basic and more immediate informational needs of the homeless. In a 2012 research study, Thomas H. Muggleton and Ian Ruthven were particularly interested in exploring how homelessness affects access to information, especially in terms of serving higher-level needs, which include identity formation and social interaction. The researchers note that current research has neglected to explore the higher-level needs of the homeless such as self-esteem issues and identity concerns. The study found that “homeless people are generally neither circumstantially nor emotionally excluded from mainstream sources of information” (Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012, p. 228). In fact, participants used many forms of mass media from the informational mainstream including, television, newspapers, the Internet and books. Additionally, it was revealed that among study participants, not only was access to the informational mainstream not curtailed, but that information sources were important means used to pass the time, provide escapism, act as a therapeutic device, and boost self-esteem (Muggleton and Ruthven, 2012). This study is quite noteworthy because it was shown that participants used mainstream information sources, not just to gather information, but also to facilitate escapism and relaxing, boost self-esteem and confidence, and ultimately to participate in society.

In the next section we will take a closer look at how and why the homeless use the public library, the dilemma of the homeless in the public library, library services provided to the homeless, in addition to the ethical and legal obligations of service to the homeless.

**The Public Library and the Homeless**

Now that we have taken a look at both the diverse makeup of the homeless and at their basic and more complex needs, we can now examine the specific library needs of the homeless, how the homeless currently use libraries, the types of library services to the homeless, and the legal and ethical obligations libraries have to serve this population.

Those experiencing homelessness often rely on shelters and other types of temporary, night-time housing. During the day, these facilities are usually unavailable, so these individuals must fend for themselves on the streets. Because of the open door philosophy of public libraries, many homeless people use the library for non-informational purposes which include using it as a safe haven from the streets, a place to escape the elements, a place to sit and rest, for bathroom facilities, and to meet with friends (Grace, 2000; Wong, 2009). The homeless also use the library to meet many of their informational needs discussed in the previous section. The library is a resource in many ways as it can provide information about nearby social service agencies, shelters, food banks, job information, parenting, and education (Ayers, 2006; Hersberger, 2005). Additionally, the library provides many programs and services that can be used by homeless patrons such as literacy training and classes, ESL classes, parenting classes, access to computers and the Internet, and computer training (Ayers, 2006).

In her study of homeless library use and information needs, Angie Kelleher (2013) found that 58% of respondents visited the library at least once a week. Additionally, she uncovered several reasons why the homeless use libraries, which include reading for entertainment (58.4% of respondents), using the Internet to look up information (38.1% of respondents), and using the Internet to correspond with people (33.6% of respondents) (Kelleher, 2013). Other reasons for using the library including using it to study, to do homework, to look for a job, to look for a place to live, and to check out movies and CDs (Kelleher, 2013). Interestingly, the study also investigated reasons why some homeless individuals did not use the library which included having no materials of interest, feeling welcome, owing late fees, or the inability to read (Kelleher, 2013).

As can be seen, homeless users utilize the library in a multitude of ways, just as many other library users groups do. Despite this, library literature is wrought with examples of homeless library users being described as a whole as “problem patrons”, and generally are approached as an issue needed to be “dealt” with (Hersberger, 2005; Wong, 2009). While we have seen that the homeless are often subjected to problems besides a lack of permanent residence, such as mental illness and alcohol and substance abuse, it is discriminatory for this group to be denied access to the library simply because of their status (Hersberger, 2005). Though public libraries have a mission to protect and promote equality and equal access, “few libraries, if any, have written policies that clearly safeguard the interests and rights of the homeless” (Lan, 2002, p. 77). As such, public libraries deal with what Shen Lan (2002) describes as the “dilemma” of library service to the homeless in which they strive to “balance rightful service to the homeless and the necessity to protect public interest by maintaining their legal and safety regulations” (p. 77).

Public libraries are obligated both legally and ethically to provide equal access to information and services to homeless library users. As Amy Mars (2012) discusses, “two legal cases provide important precedent in discussion the legality and constitutionality of conduct code targeted at homeless patrons” (p. 32). The first case, *Kreimer v. Bureau of Police for Town of Morristown*, was brought to the District Court of New Jersey in 1992 by Richard Kreimer. Kreimer sued the public library after he was kicked out of the library based on appearance, hygiene, and behavior problems, citing a violation of his First and Fourteenth Amendment rights. It was ultimately decided in the Third Circuit Court of Appeals that the library is considered a limited public forum, meaning that “the library is open to the public for certain, limited purposes, and… have the right to bar conduct that inhibits other patrons’ ability to utilize the library for these intended purposes” (Mars, 2012, p. 33). A second case, *Armstrong v. District of Columbia Public Library*, was brought to court by a homeless man in 2001 when he was denied entry to a library based on his appearance. In this case, the court ruled against the library’s policy against “objectionable appearance” as it was too vague and its application violated Armstrong’s Fifth and First Amendment rights (Mars, 2012). These two cases, “demonstrate that it is not illegal to regulate behavior and appearance if it interferes with other people’s utilization of the library. However, policies must be applied in an equal manner…so as to target the *behavior* and not the patron” (Mars, 2012, p. 33). Additionally, as many homeless patrons also have mental and physical disabilities, their rights are further protected by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). As Julie Murphy (2009) notes, there “may be additional legal issues that could arise in this area e.g. certain patron behavior may result from a disabling condition as defined under the American with Disabilities Act” (p. 57).

In addition to the aforementioned legal obligation that public libraries have for allowing the homeless to use their facilities and services, there are also ethical obligations that librarians have to provide equal access to information. The American Library Association (ALA), a professional library organization, provides libraries with a set of standards and guidelines on ethics. Adopted in 1990, Section 61 of the ALA’s policy manual entitled, “Library Services to the Poor”, commonly known as the Poor People’s Policy, makes several recommendations. These include suggestions that “libraries remove barriers to accessing services, improve services to the poor, and to train their staff about the needs of poor people” (Kelleher, 2013, page 22). In 1996, members of the ALA Social Responsibilities Roundtable (SRRT) formed the Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force in order to promote Policy 61 (Gehner, 2010). Additionally, this group has published recommendations for action, and “urged modification of library policies, better staff training, increased library funding of services for low-income patrons, and outreach to antipoverty organizations in communities” (Kelleher, 2013, p. 22).

As Julie Murphy (1999) states, “any patron can potentially become a problem. Because of disheveled appearance, however, it is easier to assume that the homeless person is a problem” (p.55). What is important is to “distinguish between a truly problematic patron and the nuisance of a homeless one” (Murphy, 1999, p. 55). Homeless people are frequent library users, and rely on many of the programs, services, and collections of the library for informational, educational and recreational purposes. Public libraries and librarians have both legal and ethical obligations to serve this population, and cannot and should not discriminate these users on appearance or other factors. Additionally, public libraries and librarians are urged by professional organizations to not just allow homeless library users into facilities, but also to actively advocate and improve services for this group.

In the following section we will take a look at some of the barriers to access that currently exists in libraries for homeless library users.

**Barriers to Access**

Traditional public library services can present some unique challenges to the homeless user group. In order to better serve this user group, “libraries should evaluate their service for potential barriers they may present to homeless patrons” (Mars, 2012, p. 34). In this section we will examine some of barriers that present challenges or make it difficult for homeless library users to fully take advantage of services, programs, and collections. Barriers to homeless library users include those, “relating to costs, transportation, lack of permanent residence and staff attitude” (Mars, 2012, p. 34).

A common barrier for homeless use is lack of funds to pay for fines and service fees (Ayers, 2006; Wong, 2009). Because homeless patrons lack a permanent fixed address, often loss of items or library cards can create an insurmountable hurdle that effectively bar them from checking out items and using library cards (Wong, 2009). In an account of working on the streets with Operation Safety Net (a program that provides medical care to the homeless) in downtown Pittsburgh, Beth A. Lawry (2009), recounts the story of a homeless woman who was more distraught over the loss of her library card, than the theft of her other possessions. As Ayers (2006) notes, “while ALA policy promotes removing fees and overdue fines as barriers to the poor, it is up to the individual libraries to decide how to do it” (p. 70). Public libraries may be reluctant to completely remove these fines because they often serve as necessary sources of income during financially difficult times (Mars, 2012).

Other barriers affect homeless library users due to their lack of permanent residence. Many library systems require users to have a permanent residential address in order to obtain a library card (Wong, 2009). Obviously, this creates a big barrier to homeless users who often rely on shelters and other temporary housing. Having a library card allows for a world of access to a library user. Often library cards are required to check out items, use paid databases and resources, and often are a requirement to use public computer terminals. Some libraries allow the use of a shelter address to obtain a library card, but this still leaves out a large population of the homeless who may not live in shelters (Mars, 2012; Wong, 2009).

Lastly, a less commonly discussed barrier to access is library staff attitude (Mars, 2012). In fact researchers such as Julie Hersberger (2009) maintain that this is the biggest barrier for homeless library users. As we saw in previous section, homeless individuals who reported they did not use the library cite feeling unwelcome as a main reason (Kelleher, 2013). As a demographic that has consistently been labeled as a “problem” and often deemed unworthy of basic services, it is no surprise that this mindset has seeped into the negative treatment of this group. Branching from this attitude are some policies in place in public libraries, such as “odor” policies, which when not uniformly enforced unwittingly target and discriminate against the homeless (Hersberger, 2009; Murphy, 1999).

The preceding barriers are just a few examples which limit homeless individuals’ access to information. As Hersberger (2009) states, “libraries should strive to remove existing barriers to service access and to improve services provided…poor people, especially the homeless, are marginalized populations already denied or struggling for full participation” (p. 200). In the next section we will explore possible solutions and suggestions to some of these barriers as discussed in the library literature and research.

**Solutions**

Library literature and research outline a multitude of solutions that libraries can take to reduce the number of barriers to the homeless in order to provide more equitable access. In this section we will explore some of these solutions which include reactive and proactive measures, adopting a lens of social exclusion, viewing librarians as gatekeepers, effective library policy and planning, increased outreach, and the need for further research and advocacy.

According to Randall Simmons (1985), there are two different ways to implement solutions, reactive and proactive. Reactive solutions “tend to be slightly negative and focus on the library itself. Solutions are created and implemented internally” (Murphy, 1999, pg. 58). Solutions that fall into this category include hiring security staff, creating a code of conduct, or the creation of an incident log (Murphy, 1999). Proactive solutions, “include greater community involvement by the library and are generally more positive in tone” (Murphy, 1999, p. 59). These types of solutions include providing resources needed by the homeless population, such as information about social service agencies. Additionally, procedures such as allowing homeless individuals with “non-traditional addresses” to obtain library cards fall into this category (Murphy, 1999). Lastly, assigning social workers to work in the library itself is also an example of a proactive solution to barriers that prevent or limit the homeless to use the library (Simmons, 1985).

John Gehner (2010), former coordinator of the Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force, suggests five actions for engaging low-income people. An interesting solution he discusses in, “Action 1: Look Beyond Income Level to Understand Deprivation”, is to view homelessness through the lens of social exclusion that has been adopted by governments in the European Union (Gehner, 201). Social exclusion acknowledges the interconnected nature of problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor housing, and high crime can have on individuals and the “pattern of disadvantage” it can create (Gehner, 2010). Gehner (2010) believes that libraries should focus on the causes of social exclusion, remove barriers that alienate socially excluded groups (such as the homeless), and participate in community building as solutions to provide better services to groups effected the most by social exclusion. By looking at solutions to homelessness through the lens of the social exclusion/social inclusion framework, “we don’t have to dwell on one particular aspect of a person or community…but simply on the fact that many people are force to live on the margins and cannot participate in society as equals” (Gehner, 2010, p. 45).

In an exploratory study of the relationships between library staff and homeless library patrons, researchers Keith Anderson, Chaniqua Simpson, and Lynette Fisher (2012) applied the theoretical framework of the gatekeeper model to understand them better. This model, developed in the 1970s, was originally intended as a method to “organise and train community-based non-professionals to recognize problematic situations for older adults and to refer these individuals to formal service providers” (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012, p. 180). The model recognizes that informal social exchanges take place more often than formal ones, and that “informal contacts many have greater opportunities to identify problems and provide helpful solutions” (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012, p. 180). The researchers (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012) found that while library staff were willing to help homeless patrons, they generally lacked the skills to do so. The study suggests that the development of training programs for library staff to identify problems presented by the homeless, in addition to linking them with programs and services in the community, are needed to for library staff to become effective gatekeepers to formal systems (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012).

Other key areas that must be addressed by libraries are in evaluation techniques and policy creation. Public libraries, first and foremost, must understand who exactly the homeless populations in their communities are, and what their specific needs are in order to best address them. This can be done through surveys, interviews, or focus groups (Mars, 2012, p. 34). This in turn is connected to the creation of clear and consistent library policies regarding access and user behavior. As mentioned in previous sections, these policies must follow the legal and ethical obligations required by law and as outlined by professional organizations. In addition to these clear policies, another key aspect is that they must be enforced and applied equally and equitably (Hersberger, 2009; Mars, 2012). As Hersberger (2009) notes, “patron behavior policies that determine access to information need to be focused on behaviors that are specifically delineated and then equally enforced” (p. 200). This important provision ensures that homeless library patrons are not unjustly discriminated against when using public libraries.

Libraries and library professionals must conduct more outreach to the homeless populations in their communities. This can be done through increased collaboration with nonprofit groups and government agencies that already work with the homeless in the community (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012; Ayers, 2006; Wong, 2009). As noted in previous sections of this paper, the homeless have many needs which are informational, recreational, and educational in nature. Some of these needs may fall beyond the scope of the library to provide (Hersberger, 2009). Libraries that work together with other agencies that are already involved with the homeless can provide better referrals and more meaningful connections. As Hersberger states (2000), “Not all of the information needs of the homeless are best answered by public librarians…but librarians ought to be able to know where in the community such information is known” (p. 200).

While there has much written about the homeless in regards to public library use, most of this literature is based on anecdotal stories and solutions. There is an acute need for increased research to study in-depth what the informational, recreational, and educational needs of the homeless are, both basic and higher-level, in addition to how the homeless use the library and other sources to satisfy these needs (Anderson, Simpson, & Fisher, 2012; Kelleher, 2013; Muggleton & Ruthven, 2012). With this research, libraries can have a better foundation to base their evaluation, policy, and outreach techniques, which in turn can help to provide more meaningful services, programs, and collections for this user group. Lastly, libraries and library professionals should not treat the homeless as a problem that needs to be dealt with, but rather should become proactive advocates for this group. Patrick Grace (2000) suggests that libraries can function as advocates for homeless people, who can “act as intermediaries between homeless people and the establishment world” (p. 81). He suggests that “a member of the library staff could serve on a community agency or board in order to understand better ways in which libraries can help” (Grace, 2000, p. 81).

In the last section of this paper, we will take a look at some of the innovative ways that libraries across the nation have structured services to meet the needs of the homeless in their communities.

**Model Library Programs**

Though the idea of social workers in libraries had been proposed by library scholars of homelessness since the 1970s, it was not until 2009 that a full-time social worker was hired in a public library (Lilienthal, 2011; Simmons, 1985). San Francisco Public Library became the first library in the country to hire a full-time social worker to assist homeless and other patrons in need. This innovative approach at reaching and helping library users was formed in partnership with the San Francisco Department of Health. Additionally, the library has a Health and Safety Associates (HaSA) group, which is composed of formerly homeless men and women who were clients of the city’s Homeless Outreach Team (HOT). Together the social worker and HaSA members walk through the library several times a day to assess users “to determine their need for government assistance and treatment of health and mental problems” (Lilienthal, 2011, p. 31). In addition to providing referrals to social services, the social worker will also highlight library programs and services offered by the library to these individuals (Lilienthal, 2011, p. 31).

The joint San Jose Public Library and San Jose State University Library also created a model program that brings social workers into the library to link users with services. Modeling their program after their successful Lawyers in the Library program (LITL), in which volunteer lawyers provide 20-minute consultations with library users, the SJPL began a Social Workers in the Library program (SWITL) in 2009. Once a month, National Association of Social Workers members serve as volunteer counselors for this program. This program, while more limited than the full-time social worker present at the San Francisco Public Library, is a concept that “could be taken advantage of by any public library, even those with quite limited resources” (Lilienthal, 2011, p. 33). The success of this program is highly dependent on the partnerships with professional associations and social agencies, which come together to provide services where they are needed most.

Lastly, two truly inspiring programs to meet the needs of the homeless in the community were created at the Free Library of Philadelphia (FLP). The FLP, in conjunction with Project H.O.M.E., a nonprofit organization dedicated to ending homelessness in Philadelphia, launched an innovative program that helped to solve the potential abuse of bathroom facilities of the library. Formerly homeless people were trained by Project H.O.M.E. as bathroom attendants, in which they had the responsibilities to “report any illegal activity to library security, perform light cleaning, and serve as a friendly referral service to homeless people in need of outreach services” (Price, 2009, p. 33). This partnership was positive in several ways. First, the FLP benefited by ensuring that their bathroom facilities were not being abused, and that referral services could be offered to library users who needed it. Second, it provided job training and opportunities for formerly homeless individuals, which also helped to fulfill the mission of Project H.O.M.E. There are currently nine part-time attendants employed by the program, and success is measure through, “employment retention, personal growth…and successful movement to employment outside of the Project H.O.M.E. system” (Price, 2009, p. 33).

Based on the success of this program, FLP and Project H.O.M.E. launched another program, called the H.O.M.E. Page Café, which officially opened in 2008. With grant money from Bank of America, and collaborations with Starbucks and Metropolitan Bakery, a program was developed were “the primary purpose of the library’s café would not be to raise money for the library, but rather to provide on-the-job training for formerly homeless people” (p. 34). Again the FLP benefited by being able to provide patrons with a café, and from the positive publicity from the program, while at the same time it was able to help create opportunities for individuals in the community. Again, these programs illustrate how collaboration between the library and social service groups can work together for a positive outcome for all.

**Conclusion**

The public library has both legal and ethical obligations to allow their facilities, services, and collections to be used by all. Homeless community members, often deemed as “problem” patrons deserve the right to use the library, the same as any other group. Though homeless library patrons have been traditionally underserved by this institution, it is clear that this user group will continue to rely on the many services, programs, and collections it has to offer. Instead of ignoring this population further, libraries have a responsibility to reduce various barriers to access of this group. Additionally, libraries should not only provide reactive measures towards this group, but also proactive measures to advocate and meet their various informational, recreational, and educational needs. Homeless library users have become a group that the public library can no longer ignore. Libraries that have implemented innovative programs to assist these users and to make the community stronger overall, through collaboration and partnership, should serve as models for every public library that has homeless library users. By promoting equal access to information and advocating for the poor and homeless, the public library can uphold its philosophy as a truly democratic institution.

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