

LIBRARIES AND THE HOMELESS: CAREGIVERS OR ENFORCERS

JUDI SILVER

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, varied social forces converged, resulting in a devastating downward spiral of the economic capabilities of the middle and lower income classes. The aftermath of urban renewal, deindustrialization, deinstitutionalization, and Reaganomics left a ruin of homeless people in its wake. With limited appropriate shelter available, many uprooted people were forced to seek protection from the elements in public buildings such as airports, bus stations, and libraries. As the homeless sector has grown, the dilemma of management has become an issue in public libraries where individuals bathe and wash clothing in the restrooms, sleep in the reading chairs, and occasionally exhibit offensive behavior toward patrons and staff. Finding creative resolutions to the plight of the homeless is a societal quandary amplified by a growing public backlash against the “problem that won't go away.” As the number of homeless displaying aggressive characteristics increases, the body of sympathetic and compassionate citizens decreases. The phrase “compassion fatigue” characterizes America’s ambivalence to the homeless and other world tragedies (“Libraries for All”, 1991). How we treat people of suffering is a reflection of how we view the afflicted, either as victims or as socially irresponsible people. The concepts we, as individuals have, are collectively demonstrated in the policies enacted at the local, state, and federal levels. Are we care givers and keepers or agents of enforcement?

“Homelessness . . . is the inevitable by-product of urbanization, where the gap between the haves and have-nots is most severe” (McCormack, 1992, p. 794). Its images confound us, for the homeless as a group has only one shared characteristic: “common suffering” (Seltser & Miller, 1993, p. 7). Population statistics vary from 200,000 to 3,000,000 on any given night, with the majority consisting of single men. The United States Conference of Mayors determined in 1990 that families made up 34% of the homeless, single women with children 12%, teen runaways 3%, and the remaining 51% were young or middle-aged men, many of whom were unemployed, suffering from psychiatric problems, and/or substance abuse (Arenofsky, 1995, p. 27). One of four is employed full or part-time (Kroloff, 1993, p. 13), and veterans comprise 33% of this population, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless (McCormack, p. 11). Twenty-five percent of the homeless are children; the fastest growing sectors are families with children. Thirty-two thousand people have either AIDS or dependents with this disease, and the projections for this year are that there will be 100,000 AIDS related homeless seeking shelter (Kroloff, p. 13). How does a problem of such enormous magnitude exist in this country of untold riches?

During the 1980s, government support for low-income housing was slashed from thirty-two billion to seven and one half billion dollars. Urban renewal eliminated low-cost non-subsidized housing, and the Reagan administration suspended Section 8 of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, which had allowed for ample rent subsidies (McCormack, 1992, p. 3). As rental costs rose 13% faster than inflation during the '70s and '80s, the rental units outstripped minimum wage increases. The median house price increased 20% in the years between 1973 and 1987, while family income rose less than 1%. Twenty-three percent of that income covered a mortgage in 1973; in 1986, 51% of a worker’s earnings was delegated to housing (Seltser & Miller, 1993, p. 10). To compound the obstacles of limited financial

resources, the poor were faced with the demolition of single-room-occupancy units. One million facilities were lost in the 1980s half of the total number of rooms available (McCormack, p. 10). In 1983, the Emergency Food and Shelter Program provided public shelters for the growing homeless population. "Welfare hotels" were created, with cities such as New York paying up to \$2,300 per month to house a family (p. 14). The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 transfers money to shelters and social service agencies, and the National Affordable Housing Act provides some assistance, but neither program restores the level of subsidies to pre-Reagan years (p. 14). This year, \$130 million will be distributed among 10,000 non profit and local government agencies (Arenofsky, 1995, p. 27).

The concept of deinstitutionalization was embraced during the 1960s. In theory, the most severely mentally disabled individuals would be moved to total care institutions, and the chronically mentally ill released to community support systems. Mental health clinics and halfway houses were created to provide care for the 79% who were liberated (McCormack, 1992, p. 29). The advent of psychotropic drugs and augmented community involvement should have provided for this population, but in the rapid shuffle to outpatient care, individuals fell through the cracks. Patients found it difficult to adhere to treatment schedules and to survive in communities that ghettoized their custody. There were not enough mental health centers, not enough providers, and not enough enumeration for the providers. The situation today is equally dismal. As a result, 25% of the homeless are emotionally disturbed (Kroloff, 1993, p. 12).

The cycle of debilitating poverty that ensnares families and individuals is a turbulent storm of bad luck, poor planning, nonexistent support systems, and dysfunctional relationships. The public is weary of the demands this segment of the population places on social service and health agencies, and a growing backlash toward the homeless is evident. The president of the Santa Monica Chamber of Commerce spoke against the offensive behaviors exhibited by a group of street people: "Aggressive panhandling, defecating and urinating in business doorways, scaring customers with drunk and loud behavior these are things we can't tolerate anymore" (Seltser & Miller, 1993, p. 127). Individuals and families housed in night-only shelters turn to public institutions for havens during extreme temperatures. It is in this climate that homelessness has become a challenge for the public libraries. How can librarians maintain an atmosphere conducive to reading and research and still meet the needs of the homeless?

Morristown, New Jersey is an affluent suburb with a population of 16,000. The town is home to AT&T and other corporate giants, raising the daytime census to 80,000 people. Many of those who have flocked to this town looking for work were quickly disappointed and just as quickly joined the ranks of the homeless. In the late 1980s, it was usual for two to three dozen homeless people to populate the library during daytime hours. As the indigent population increased, incidents of drunkenness, vandalism, and sleeping in the library also rose (Swarden, 1991, p. 2). Richard Kreimer, one of the homeless, was asked to leave the library because of bodily odors, inappropriate stalking of female patrons, and abusive outbursts. Subsequently, the Joint Free Library of Morristown established rules for the expulsion of patrons whose personnel hygiene or actions impeded other library patrons. The director of the library, Nancy Byouk Hammeke, stated that the policies have "nothing to do with homelessness . . . simply about the rights and obligations of boards of trustees to be able to make rules to protect their patrons and their staff . . . What we were trying to do was prevent patrons from staring at our staff . . . generally harassing and intimidating people" ("Public Libraries Grapple with Issues...", 1992, p. 14). Kreimer and the ACLU sued the library on the grounds that his First Amendment rights were compromised and that "there's nothing to prevent libraries from using their own prejudices to remove someone they don't like" (p. 14). Kreimer argued that the policy was vague and violated the Fourteenth Amendment's due process clause ("Legal Beat: Public libraries...", 1992, p. 7). In May of 1991, Federal Judge H. Lee Saroken ruled that public libraries can't bar the homeless because their "staring or hygiene annoys or offends other library patrons" (Hanley, 1991, p. 1). Libraries could draft specific regulations but their purposes must be "necessary and their effects neutral" (p. 1). The staff lawyer for the ACLU stated, "Not so long ago, public places excluded Afro-Americans and other minorities . . . The ACLU is involved in the library case to insure that a new class of persecuted people, the homeless, are not excluded from public places" (Rudolph,

1991, p. 9). Lawyers for the library countered that they did not seek to discriminate against the homeless, only to bar patrons who were creating a public nuisance ("Legal Beat: Homeless man settles", 1992).

An independent suit was charged against Morristown for police harassment, and in March of 1992, the township settled with Kreimer for \$150,000. Although the library was scheduled to appeal the ruling of the Federal District Court, Traveler's Insurance Company granted Kreimer the \$80,000 he had won (Hanley, 1992a, p. 7). Three weeks later, a Federal Appeals Court overturned the lower court's ruling. The three judge panel ruled that the "Library is a limited public forum and is obligated only to permit the public to exercise rights that are consistent with the nature of the library" (Hanley, 1992c, p. 8). The appeals panel stated that the library is not a shelter or a lounge, and that this ruling "prohibits one patron from unreasonably interfering with other patron's use and enjoyment of the library" (p.8).

Although the Federal Appeals Court granted libraries the right to expel the homeless if their behavior is disruptive, civil libertarians felt that the ruling gave librarians too much power to monitor the social behavior of its patrons. The American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee drafted a proposal to address issues such as offensive patron odor, staring, outbursts, and inappropriate library behavior, but 500 librarians rejected the policy as vague. The executive director of the committee asked "What odors are permissible? At what point can a librarian remove a user on the basis of how that user smells? What's the line? There are some perfumes that absolutely make me nauseous" (Hanley, 1992b, p. 8).

Libraries throughout the country cope with the concerns of the homeless, utilizing community resources, staff commitment, and public contributions. At times, libraries become enforcers and governors. The public library in Alexandria, Virginia responded to increased vagrancy in its building by forbidding adults to sit in the children's section unless accompanied by a child (Donahue, 1991, p. 23). The addition of a spiked wrought-iron railing to deter the homeless from sleeping or sitting on the recessed window sills of the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore elicited a storm of protest. An electronically controlled door and camera outside of the men's restrooms was installed to limit users and discourage bathing and washing of clothes (Valentine, 1994, p. 1). When the economy in Tulsa, Oklahoma plunged, street people moved into the Tulsa City County Public Library with bedrolls and bags, bathed in the restrooms, napped at study tables, and soiled upholstered furniture. Rules were posted to prohibit loitering, public intoxication and sleeping. The solution to the problem came through intervention, not prohibition. Library staff met with the Police Department, Chamber of Commerce, and representatives from the county and city. A Community Service Council was established to manage this library dilemma, now recognized as a community-based problem. A fundraising drive was initiated, and in two years, a vacant building within walking distance from the library was converted into a day shelter. The public library maintains a depository library at the shelter. Although the homeless still drift through the public library, the numbers have decreased and the library can once again focus its energies on information dispersal (Woodrum, 1988, p. 56).

The New York Public Library which "assumes that people should be served," (Behrmann et al., 1988, p. 198) dealt with an enormous challenge to bring the library to homeless youth in 1986. Library staff met with representatives from community organizations, and a pilot outreach program was set up in the Hotel Martinique, "home" to more than 1400 children. A depository collection of paperback books was created and branch librarians volunteered one morning each week for storytelling, finger plays, and puppet shows. Despite the shortage of library staff and uneven cooperation from staff at the Martinique and shelters from other boroughs, the program was deemed a success due to the important person-to-person contact established between the homeless and the librarians (p. 198).

The Milwaukee Public Library conducted a needs study and determined that the literacy level of the homeless was higher than that of other patrons (Pearson, 1988, p. 250). (Other studies have shown that 50% to 80% of the homeless have graduated high school, while one-third have either attended or graduated from college [McCormack, 1992, p. 10].) Working with representatives from the nearby day shelter,

the library staff established a peer tutoring program. In addition, information about low-cost cultural events and employment possibilities was made available (Pearson, p. 252).

San Diego, Memphis, and Fayetteville, North Carolina public libraries all have referral services that guide the homeless to social service agencies. Portland, Oregon and Milwaukee have developed grants to help establish reading rooms in shelters, and the San Francisco Public Library issues library cards to the homeless and conducts story hours and film viewing at shelters (Walters, 1990, p. 12). According to Peg Stuart at the Maine State Library, the recommendation in the Maine Guidelines for Adult New Readers is to distribute library cards at shelters (Peg Stewart, personal communication, April 6, 1995). The Los Angeles Public Library donated surplus books, tables, and shelves to Project Open Door, a drop-in counseling agency on Skid Row. As part of a re-socialization process, the library assisted in the creation of a 2,000 volume lending library (Gordon, 1994, p. 3). In 1989, the Haverhill, Massachusetts library received supportive press releases for its 5.7 million dollar plan to enlarge its public library and include a day-care center, winter garden, auditorium, and reading lounge for the homeless (Doten, 1989, p. 22). Presently, however, construction has not yet begun and plans were modified to include a space, rather than a room, in which the homeless could congregate (Haverhill Public Library, personal communication, 1995).

In Elmsford, New York, almost all thirty-eight member libraries of the Westchester Library System participated in "Libraries Help the Hungry," a community project to collect non-perishable foods at the libraries and then distribute the items to social service agencies (Hershenson, 1992, p. 1). A model program that was targeted for the Orangewood Children's Home, a shelter for physically abused, neglected, and sexually molested children in California, could serve as a paradigm for library interaction with homeless shelters. The public library established fine-free library cards, taught children to be storytellers and puppeteers, and allowed each child to check out two books (Carlson, 1992).

CONCLUSION

How important a resource is the library to the homeless? Aside from the shelter it provides, if the library is keyed into the complex and multiple needs of these people, it can serve as an important center for the dissemination of vital knowledge that otherwise cannot be obtained without private ownership of books, periodicals, and newspapers. In Santa Monica, California, as in many receptive libraries throughout the country, the homeless are reading and computer networking. The library provides an atmosphere of tolerance and serves as a clearinghouse for cultural events (Taylor, 1992). How we perceive the problem of homelessness determines how we meet the challenge of their management. Homeless people are still in need of shelter and access to information in order to break away from a pattern of failure. It is our obligation to respond to these needs with dignity. Many of us are not comfortable working with people who are substance abusers, who are unemployed, and who do not have the capabilities to organize a productive life. "As individuals, we should try to ask ourselves why they make us so uncomfortable, without drawing the conclusion that our discomfort destroys our obligation" (Seltser & Miller, 1993, p. 127). However, abusive behavior, potent body odors, and flagrant disregard for library rules are not acceptable behaviors. Once a prototype of conduct is established, it is then the library's responsibility to look for ways in which to serve the homeless. Information dispersal is our specialty, and we as librarians need to broaden our knowledge of area services by extending our relationships with community organizations that aid the homeless. We can help alleviate the pressure on libraries by serving on committees to develop day shelters. We can establish outreach programs to these shelters, and set up depository libraries that are accessible to the homeless. We can organize food drives, we can refer the homeless to appropriate agencies, and we can be catalysts of social awareness in our own communities. Programs take time, money and resources. But many of the communities described in this paper have achieved success with limited financial backing. Their programs were created with the enthusiastic support of organizations and individuals who defined the problem as a community responsibility.

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Recognizing the multiple origins of homelessness is the first step in allowing ourselves to emerge from a defensive, angry attitude toward the homeless. Regardless of how weary we are of this situation, it is our problem, and we must respond to it. Let us respond with care and thoughtfulness.

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