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Addressing the Needs of the Homeless: A San José Library Partnership Approach

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Addressing the Needs of the Homeless: A San José Library Partnership Approach

In 2003, the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library opened its doors to the diverse San José, California community. The joint city-university library system consisting of San Jose Public and the San Jose State University Libraries won national acclaim for its architectural design (Berry III, 2004), including two sets of main doors which permit entrance from the city side with a clear view into the campus on the university side. This architectural feature permits a person, independent of his or her economic means, to enter the main city library building and "see" the possibility of entering the campus to earn a degree and advance socially, economically, and professionally. The visual message is verbally underscored during the hundreds of school library tours offered annually.

San José Community Context

This unique joint city-university library is situated in the heart of California's high-tech Silicon Valley, the worldwide headquarters for Adobe Systems, eBay, Cisco Systems, Apple Computers, Yahoo, and Google. However, despite the international reputation of this region, significantly different circumstances exist among the diverse campus and community library populations served.

The King Library sits in the heart of Santa Clara County, one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse places in the world, where no one racial or ethnic group makes up a majority of the population. County boundaries encompass the City of San José, the nation's 10th largest city. According to a Community Impact Report published in 2006 by the United Way Silicon Valley (available at www.uwsv.org), nearly 40% of the county's 1.6 million residents are foreign born, and many more of them are children of immigrants. Approximately one quarter of foreign-born individuals residing

in Santa Clara County are from Mexico, and another quarter are from Southeast Asia, including a large number of individuals from Vietnam, China, the Philippines, and India.

Immigration and high birth rates continue to shape overall demographic trends for the county, and the demand for targeted services for foreign-born adults and children of immigrants continues to rise. In response, because 50% of the county's population is considered to be English language learners--with nearly a quarter of the population identified as having low English language proficiency--and 37% of the Latino population in the county lacks a high school diploma, the King Library offers English language literacy instruction through coordinating trained volunteers from throughout the community.

Amidst this considerable diversity, the homeless population may be among the least obvious and most at-risk populations served by the university and public library staff at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library and the City's twenty plus neighborhood branch libraries. One percent of the population of the United States experiences homelessness each year (Urban Institute, 2000; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2002). In Santa Clara County, planners completed a comprehensive, county-wide census of the homeless in 2004 with the aim of informing the County's 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness. 7,646 homeless people were identified on streets and in emergency shelters, transitional housing, domestic violence shelters, hospitals, jails, and rehabilitation facilities (2004 Santa Clara County Homeless Census and Survey).

These numbers mirrored national trends, which prompted the American Library Association to adopt "a compassionate, concerned, and serving attitude toward the nation's poor and its homeless. That attitude should filter down to all libraries and

become a catalyst for change in the lives of the poor and the homeless. It should also be a catalyst for change in the libraries" (Ayers, 2006). While recognition of the situation of homeless people is well within the scope of traditional public library concerns, it is less common that an academic library would also become involved in cooperatively designing and delivering services to the homeless population.

This paper, therefore, presents the outcome of a unique shared mission between two libraries, made possible through the city-university partnership. The focus on homeless youth is especially significant, given the university's "inclusive excellence" commitment to first-generation college students. Within this context, co-authors describe current library programming, present recent need finding results, and project future service enhancements.

Current Library Homeless Services

In 2007, San José Public Library (SJPL) and San José State University (SJSU) Library organized a task force to address the needs of Santa Clara County homeless populations cooperatively. Based out of the King Library, librarians completed an inventory of library programs for homeless children, teens, and adults, as well as potential partner agencies. As a consequence, a homeless resources page developed for the library Website now refers staff helping the homeless to national and local agencies (http://www.sjlibrary.org/research/web/iguide_subjectList.htm?t=31&catID=229).

The task force also recognized that the joint library had to adopt a more proactive approach for reaching out to the homeless community who, for instance, often lack transportation. Therefore, library staff began to go to the homeless to provide services, rather than waiting for them to come to the library.

These efforts were supplemented by partnerships with other local agencies. For instance, library staff have worked with InnVision, a San José organization that serves over 16,000 low income residents of Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties annually (InnVision, n.d.). Librarians teach computer classes and story times in their facility. In addition, they participate in InnVision events throughout the year to establish rapport with homeless participants. This relationship between the two organizations now includes shared commitment to expand services, including the addition of nutrition classes, family literacy programs, and book discussion groups. In a similar fashion, the library has also worked with Toys for Tots, *San Jose Mercury News* Gift of Reading, and the SJSU Police Department.

In addition, homeless people are now encouraged to attend library programs such as computer classes, story hours, resume workshops, arts and crafts classes, literacy programs, ESL conversation groups, and cultural programs. Despite these efforts over the past eighteen months, task force members felt they were still not doing enough. A literature review uncovered some overlooked and inexpensive enhancements: "Libraries can do some fairly inexpensive things to assist people who are poor and those who are homeless. Among these things are providing vital community and social service referral information; job search and career guidance; and educational/vocational course information" (Ayers, 2006).

What Does the Homeless Population Need?

In the recognition of "their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies" (Venturella, 1998), librarians next analyzed program participation trends supplemented

by observation and anecdotes. Results reveals that the information needs of the homeless vary depending on their specific situations. Some may need information about basic daily needs such as finding shelter or a place to eat or receive clothing. Others may need information about affordable housing, childcare, transportation, employment, or education (Hersberger, 2005). Affordable health care is a major concern due to the high number of mentally ill, drug or alcohol users, seniors, and children who are among the homeless (Hersberger, 2005). Many homeless people have jobs, but they are not paid a livable wage, so they may be interested in learning new skills (Grace, 2000). Working with the homeless to address these complex needs requires that staff are patient and sensitive to their needs--an insight that prompted library leaders to provide customer service training for all interested staff.

Program Adjustments

This training advanced library staff members' understanding that, with just a few minor adjustments, many of the programs that librarians already provide can be helpful to the homeless population. For instance, a recent study of San José library users revealed the presence of a significant "digital divide" among Silicon Valley residents, who experienced considerable differences in efficacy in using Internet resources (Partridge, 2007). Because many homeless lack personal computers, the library's public workstations can make a world of information available, with proper training. The library's computer skills classes typically include information on computer basics, computer programs, and Internet use. To customize the content to the needs of the homeless, class content might focus on how to find employment opportunities or job training or how to locate resources

on local government agency Websites. In this case, because the audience is struggling for daily survival, librarians offer practical information and skills.

Similarly, literacy programs for both adults and children can help the homeless population move out of poverty. Success depends on regular instruction. Therefore, programming for the homeless might include both classes held at specific times during the week, as well as "drop in" opportunities. In addition, offering group lessons as well as one-on-one literacy skill building allows individuals to choose the atmosphere most comfortable for them. Homeless families might, for instance, be attracted to a fun and creative story time program that involves the children with books, songs, and crafts, while showing the parents how they can spend time reading with their children.

Library programs that will attract the homeless population to the library must also help relieve some of the issues that may prevent them from coming in the first place. Focused one-session workshops are ideal since transportation and shelter can be very unpredictable. Additionally, offering food or childcare during programs or services will attract families. Librarians can also find out what time shelters intake people or when soup kitchens serve meals so programs can be planned around those times. In addition, "librarians can assemble collections that can be taken into the streets--and into shelters, welfare hotels, Head Start programs, and food kitchens" (Venturella, 1998). Some librarians have created reading rooms in shelters stocked with library books for children, teens, and adults and used this space to also market programs and other library services with flyers placed next to the books (Grace, 2000).

Other Internal Services

As task force members continued to reconsider traditional practices, their attention turned to information and user services. They recognized that the reference desk can be intimidating to the homeless population. Therefore, in addition to sensitizing staff to become more aware of this population in the library, librarians also created complementary services customized to the information needs of the homeless. "Lawyers in the library" and "social workers in the library" are two such programs which assist the homeless in negotiating shelter, food banks, employment, childcare, education, and transportation issues. Consultation is offered in meeting rooms to protect the privacy of the information seeker. In these instances, library staff serve as information providers in setting up appointments for homeless with members of other professionals. The next step in such a approach would have librarians "band together with social services to create 'crisis literacy' programs that provide strategies for managing bureaucratic mazes" (Venturella, 1998).

Policy

Despite the mission of the library to create a place that is accessible to all of the public, there are library policies that prevent the homeless population from accessing resources and services. To receive a library card, individuals must have two items: a picture ID and a proof of address. These are two things that many homeless people do not have. Lacking this, individuals cannot borrow books or use computers. In response, librarians have implemented temporary computer passes. The new eight-story building offers generous in-house reading spaces.

Conclusions

This unique academic-public library partnership now approaches its <mark>fifth</mark> year. To date, substantial reconsideration of service assumptions has occurred. New alliances with community social service agencies and social work and legal professionals now extend the reach, depth, and breadth of the San Jose libraries' services to its homeless residents. Work-in-progress aims to focus on increasing the numbers of library staff engaged in planning future endeavors with and for the homeless population.

Because of time and financial constraints, the best way for the merged San Joseééé Public and San Jose State University Libraries to approach future endeavors for the homeless population is to work with existing agencies. Alliances with community social service agencies, social workers, and legal professionals are the key components to creating better quality services. A needs assessment involving surveys and interviews of the homeless population as well as those who work with the homeless must be taken to evaluate current library services to the homeless. We must also find areas where the library could assist with agencies in providing unmet and needed services to the homeless population.

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