Working with Patrons Experiencing Homelessness: Values, Engagement & Impact OLA/WLA session

Presenters

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Housekeeping notes

- We will allow questions throughout the session, but leave time for more questions at the end.
- One of us will be the main speaker on each of our topics, and then each of us can chime in briefly on the topic.
- Maybe a brief word about terminology (i.e., people first language usually preferred, different people prefer different words, etc.)

What does houselessness look like in our communities

Seattle

- housing state of emergency now in 4th year. BIPOC communities most affected (which is also the case nationally). About 12,000 unhouse people on any given night.
- Some housed people angry at the unsightliness of chronic homelessness - KOMO report "Seattle is Dying" described houseless people as demonic, less than human, and suggested interning all unhoused people on McNeil Island in a prison facility currently used to house sex offenders.

Portland

- similar to Seattle in regards to the housing situation, but a lower nightly number of unhoused individuals and families.
- In library locations, we see different groups of people coming to different libraries. Often that is based on the proximity to services.

Moses Lake

- Similar to Portland and Seattle, lack of affordable housing, housing shortage.
- No shelters. Warming center in winter, can't sleep there
- Very limited resources available for those people experiencing houselessness.
- Relatively new issue in our area. Only visible within the last 4 years. At emergency level within the last two.

Lincoln City

- Availability of rental units is at .2%
- Hospitality industry is biggest employer, and most work is seasonal and minimum wage.
- 15% of students in the Lincoln County School District meet Federal guidelines for homelessness -- over 1,000 children birth to 18. About ¼ are "unsheltered" - that is, camping or living in a vehicle.
- Last point in time count: 186 people
- Because of tourism, many concerns about people who appear homeless or who are panhandling, conflict over location of Emergency Shelter.

Decoupling houselessness and behavior

- When we talk about houselessness and libraries, we are often in danger of conflating behavior issues with houselessness. There is some overlap, but they are not a single issue. The vast majority of community members experiencing houselessness will never have a behavior issue in the library.
- There is also a tendency to assume that people experiencing houselessness are struggling with addiction or mental health issues. It's important to keep in mind that mental health and addiction affect people across all sectors of society, and for many people experiencing houselessness, the trauma of losing their housing is what precipitates a mental health crisis or leads someone to addiction. There are high numbers of housed people struggling with these same issues, and the difference between people who are homeless and are not is poverty.
  - 43.8 million adults live with mental illness
  - 20 million people over age 12 struggle with addiction
  - There are 553,000 people experiencing houselessness
  - About 45% of people experiencing houselessness struggle with mental illness, addiction or both, approximately 250,000 people.

How this work connects to library values/mission (Connie)

- ALA Policies

- Library Bill of Rights: "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views."
- Library Services to the Poor - "The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America."
  - It's about removing barriers to library service.
  - Fines?
  - Requirements to obtain library services, what does it take to get a library card? NCRL: Valid ID, mailing address, contact phone for full access card. Computer use only cards require only a name
  - Policies: are we being empathetic to all of our patrons needs, or are we being overly rigid in the application of policy? Are the rules too strict? Are they only being enforced upon those who are visibly experiencing homelessness? Are our policies creating more disruption than what they are trying to guard against?
  - Training to sensitize staff to issues affecting people experiencing poverty and homelessness
    - Physical and mental health issues, addiction
    - Knowledge of services that can help patrons find access to food, laundry services, showers, etc.
    - Being a safe and welcome place to spend the day
    - Teaching empathy driven rule enforcement and de-escalation techniques. Reminding staff that people experiencing homelessness are our patrons too, and deserving of the same treatment, service, and dedication as our housed patrons are

- Concept of the library as a community hub
  - "The library's role in the community is shifting to that of a storage facility to a community center," Pew Research Center: Libraries 2016 Study
  - Building partnerships in the communities that help create programs and services that effectively reach those experiencing homelessness and poverty
  - Making sure that our libraries offer a positive user experience for everyone who enters.

- The library is for everyone
  - We want everyone to feel welcome
  - We want to provide spaces that are safe and inviting
  - We want to provide services and programs that help and are effective

Kate - I am lucky to work in an organization that has very open policies for access to library cards and a forgiving culture towards fines. It would be much more difficult to do the work I do without that, so look at your policies.

Approaches for convincing reluctant stakeholders (funders, boards, city/county leaders, etc.) (Kirsten)

- Drill down and find out what stakeholders are ACTUALLY concerned about. Theft? Behavioral issues?
  - Important that they understand behavioral rules must be enforced equitably. "Flip the script" to explore scenarios.
  - Governing bodies do care about not being sued -- while I prefer to frame things in terms of service and our mission, I am also not afraid to raise potential discrimination issues as well.
- Whenever possible, center actual stories/testimony from patrons experiencing homelessness. (At DPL, we were able to invite a patron who had previously been homeless to a board meeting. If this is not possible, representatives from local nonprofits may be helpful.)
  - What are the effects of policies limiting cards or check outs?
  - How do other policies affect patrons experiencing homelessness?
  - Work to give governing bodies/stakeholders an accurate image of what homelessness actually looks like in the community, vs. what they perceive.

Hayden - Just underlining the importance of centering and elevating the voices of most affected communities. We have hosted public programs where folks with lived experience share their stories and their thoughts on how to address the housing crisis. This can help shift the conversation community-wide.

Kate - Time is also a factor. Continuing to push forward while keeping stakeholders informed will eventually make this work just part of what we're doing. Involve stakeholders whenever possible.

Strategies for engaging directly with patrons to learn about their interests and needs (Kate)

- Reasons for engaging directly
  - Learning about and understanding needs
  - Getting feedback on library rules or policy
  - Guiding decision-making
  - It's easier than you think, but it's still hard to connect with everyone. Just start.
- Engaging indirectly through organizations
  - Connect to learn about the situation in the community, listen to what the challenges are, ask what they see the needs are, ask about best practices.
  - This is how I learned that it is essential to have at the minimum coffee, but preferably food for patrons experiencing houselessness.

- Outreach. Through conversation at outreach at day shelters, night shelters, and other organizations, we learned what people want and need.
  - If time, talk about what we learned:
    - Access: lost materials, theft, past exclusions, fines.
    - Technology: computer access, technology classes, one-on-one help, Android phone help.
    - Place to be/belong: Relatively safe, clean, calm space
    - Job readiness: Learned this is less critical because of support through other organizations; many are unable to work, but not getting Social Security Disability.
- Survey of patrons to start conversations, gather more in-depth information
  - We used information gathering as a means to start conversations with patrons we realized we didn't have relationships with. Focus was learning about needs and interests for developing programming, but we asked about other things (what do you do in library, how much time do you spend). We asked everyone who was willing, but went to areas in the library where we know people spend a lot of time.
  - It really did help build relationships. We sat down with people and introduced ourselves. Chatted for a bit after the survey if they were open to it.
  - One survey respondent was a daily regular for years who told me that no one in the library had ever talked to him before the survey except to tell him he was breaking a rule.
- Meeting and connecting at Coffee and Conversation, gathering info through specific conversation prompts.
  - Deepening relationships, learning more, using as an opportunity to ask about specific topics (which movies for a film series)
- Patron Advisory group
  - A one-time meeting with food and coffee. Not a success for us, but others have done this successfully!
  - We didn't have strong enough relationships with patrons to know who to invite or how to recruit.
  - I realize now we didn't have a clear enough outcome that we were hoping to achieve. Tried using an open ended technique that didn't work.
  - Would try this again, but with clearer goals and outcomes. Would try to find financial support for attendees, maybe work with a community partner to try to connect with a group we're not hearing from.
- Interviews
  - We conducted interviews as part of a larger project to understand the needs of our patrons and the barriers that our organization has to better serving patrons experiencing houselessness.
  - What we heard from community members experiencing houselessness really guided the recommendations that we crafted, and having their voices in our report was crucial to framing this in our organization.

Evaluating impact: what will be different for most affected communities as a result of your program/project/service? (HAYDEN)

- LISTENING - (building on what Kate has said)
  - Most affected communities should define what success looks like.
  - This can happen with varying levels of formality:
    - **Outreach** (make sure outreach efforts are not promotional but based in listening and relationship-building)
    - **Listening circles** - going to where unhoused people are to ask them about their interests, needs, and experiences of the library (ex., Real Change vendors).
    - **Convos with advocates/orgs/partners** (Community Listening)
    - **Coffee & conversation** - talking with houseless people in our branches (ex. Capitol Hill Branch - staff build relationships, better understand needs)
    - **Surveys** - both a listening tool and a tool to evaluate success (ex. Survey of low income patrons to tailor Community Resource Specialist Program)
    - **Other opportunities** - Conversations with patrons in our buildings, neighborhood meetings, etc.

- ACCOUNTABILITY - Follow-through is crucial. DO NOT listen and then never act on what you hear. This breaks trust, and leaves you worse off than when you started.

- EVALUATING IMPACT - once you know what community is interested in and you plan your program/service (hopefully collaboratively w affected communities), make sure you have a plan in place to determine whether or not it was a success. Set benchmarks and check-in points with community partners so you can adjust as you go, or you can discontinue services that aren't reaching their intended outcomes.
  - **Keep it simple. What's the one thing (or maybe 2) you hope will be different for your priority audience as a result of your program, service, etc?** Can be a change in status, opinion, skill - whatever the community you are working with has identified as the change they want to see.
  - **Evaluation tools** (can look really similar to listening tools!). Take impact on patrons into consideration, as well as accessibility, etc.
    - **Survey results:**
      - Digital hotspot program, first checking out to individuals then installing in tiny house village encampments.. Measured change in status (no internet access → internet access) as well as what that change in status meant (e.g., ability to connect with loved ones, apply for jobs, stream tv, access health care).
      - Learned through a listening circle that a writing group would be welcome at Chief Seattle Club. Were able to hire an Indigenous writer to

lead the class. CSC's goals were for participants to feel their Indigenous identity was affirmed and for them to create a piece of writing they would be proud of. 100% of writing circle participants said they created a piece of writing that mattered to them
- **Interviews/Conversations with partners:** Camp leaders and participants at Camp Second Chance let us know that bringing arts and cultural programs to their tiny house village increased the residents' sense of community and improved morale
- **Other tools:** Show of hands, sticky dots on a giant post-it, interviews, focus groups - even observation (e.g., everyone in the resume workshop was able to complete a resume, therefore all participants experienced a change in status)

- COMMUNICATING RESULTS: Good evaluation means that you and your partners can point to concrete results from the work you are doing, which in turn assists with advocacy to your board, local government leaders, voters, etc.