Libraries are for *everyone:*
providing quality services to people who are homeless

The core values / principles of librarianship are accessibility and equity. Public libraries can demonstrate their commitment to these principles by providing targeted services to people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. This document aims to support library staff to consider the needs of people who are homeless in library decision making for equitable service delivery.

Included in this document are:

- tips for establishing library activities that address the needs of people who are homeless

- resources and further reading

- case studies from libraries already providing excellent service

For people who are homeless, a visit to the library can bring respite from an often distressing daily existence. Reading and participating in activities can offer a chance to learn something new, act as a retreat, or be a reminder of when times were good. This document will help your library offer people who are homeless and love reading the same access and experiences as the rest of your customers.

Some facts about homelessness

Homelessness NSW uses the following definition to describe the homelessness spectrum:

Minimum community standard: equivalent to a small rented flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom

Culturally recognised exceptions: where it is inappropriate to apply the minimum standard, eg seminaries, jails, student halls of residence	**Marginally housed:** people in housing situations close to the minimum standard
	Tertiary homelessness: people living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure
	Secondary homelessness: people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends and relatives, emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels and boarding houses
	Primary homelessness: people without conventional accommodation (living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc)

Homelessness affects people of all ages from children to older people and whole families. Situations including financial difficulty, eviction, family breakdown or fleeing domestic violence and decreases in public housing availability can trigger homelessness.

- A significant proportion of people experiencing homelessness are in regional, rural and remote Australia, where there are fewer services available to assist

- A complex interrelationship between homelessness and mental health is noted through various studies and arguments exist for the intertwined cause and effect of mental illness and homelessness. Fear, victimization and constant danger experienced by people facing homelessness can cause great emotional distress.

The NSW Homelessness Action Plan (HAP) lists the following factors as key protective factors in preventing homelessness:

• education

• employment

• stable family life

• involvement in the community

Libraries are well placed to make impact by providing education opportunities, and space and occasion for social interaction and community involvement.

The Library context

The value of public libraries' contribution to social wellbeing is demonstrated through the State Library report *'Enriching communities: the value of public libraries in New South Wales.'* The report indicates that public libraries are perceived as:

• Safe, harmonious, welcoming and inclusive

• Promoting of acceptance and understanding through being accessible to the whole community

• Ensuring free and equitable access to collections for all community members

• Contributing to developing, maintaining and improving literacy levels

• Able to target and contribute to the social wellbeing of niche groups

A possible driver of this perception is the values of librarianship, summed up in ALIAs core values statement as:

• Promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works

• Connection of people to ideas

• Commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning

• Respect for the diversity and individuality of all people

• Preservation of the human record

• Excellence in professional service to our communities

• Partnerships to advance these values

Supporting these values are specific actions that public libraries take to make information and ideas accessible to all, especially those most in need in the community.

The State Library NSW guidelines, *Living, learning libraries 2013* provides suggestions for identifying parts of the community that may face barriers to using public libraries with the objective of equitable service and providing services and materials which meet the needs of particular customer groups served by the library.

Living, learning libraries recognises that:

> 'there may be diverse groups which are 'invisible' members of the community. Good planning will identify all of the library's potential constituencies, including individuals with special needs. The library can then develop specific strategies for reaching them and for providing appropriate services, materials and resources.'

This toolkit aims to raise the profile of people who are homeless as a group who, while not homogenous, have particular needs that can be met by libraries through targeted services.

Getting started

There is a wealth of information about homelessness and this can be daunting. It is worth keeping in mind that the objective here is to provide a library service that is doing the best it can for the members of your community who are homeless.

Steps to getting started/thought provoking questions:

1. **Gather some information – what is the reality of homelessness in your area?**

   - Read – articles, blogs and forums, academic studies

   - Check your community information through the Council website

   - Talk to some local service agencies such as shelters and drop in centres, Community Services department of Council

   - Look in your own library – what customer statistics can you interrogate? Have you included questions about homeless issues in your library user surveys?

2. **Consider a review of current services to people who are homeless**

   - What programs or activities could you plan that would be attractive to people who are homeless?

   - Are you already running any programs that might be attractive that you could promote differently?

3. **Consider what is working in other libraries. Examples include:**

   - Enabling people who are homeless to join the library by not requiring proof of residential address. Select libraries in NSW accept ID with name only and list such customers in the Library Management System as 'unconfirmed address' status.

   - Donating excellent quality weeded books to a charity that can pass them on to people who are homeless, for example The Footpath Library.

Case Study

Membership

A number of libraries in NSW have established guidelines for allowing people who are homeless, and with no fixed address, to join the library. By establishing a membership category such as 'Unconfirmed Address' these libraries are accepting forms of identification such as Medicare, Centrelink or concession cards for their customers to prove who they are.

Some libraries offer a lower range of borrowing options for such a category and this may be a first step for a library that is hesitant about opening up access. The argument for allowing equal borrowing entitlements for all library members is also gaining momentum.

The benefits of incorporating this membership category extend beyond providing borrowing access to customers who are particularly in need. Feelings of acceptance and belonging can open doors to a positive relationship of information exchange with the library, which may include participation in surveys and suggestions for resources. Some important statistics can be gathered from the LMS on this group of customers for future decision-making.

Case Study

Programs

The staff at Newcastle Library initiated a program of promoting the library's services to people in the area who are homeless and perhaps not using the library, by running a stall at the Hunter Homeless Connect Day.

The library has been a part of the services on offer at HHCD since 2011. The team distributes freebies including Find Legal Answers show bags, free copies of Good Reading magazine, bookmarks and maps indicating branch locations. Free books are also handed out, consisting of high quality donations or library deletions.

Benefits of the day include placing the library in an environment that people feel comfortable to approach and ask questions without feeling intimidated by an 'institutional' vibe. The library can gain new customers and even welcome back customers who may not have visited recently for reasons such as fines owing. The library has great PR opportunities in explaining procedures such as waiving of fees for customers in need.

Programs such as this are also a great opportunity for libraries to raise their profile amongst other homelessness providers, highlighting the library's role as a social hub and an excellent point for information distribution. New partnerships are just waiting to happen.

4. Consider the culture of your library

Staff

- Are library staff trained to deal with issues covering the homeless spectrum?

- How do the library's values or vision address the needs of people who are disenfranchised?

- Are your library procedures and guidelines equitable and considerate of people who are homeless? Are they in line with the homelessness protocol?

Customers

- Are your customers part of the conversation? Do you publicise and promote programs that have a focus on addressing the needs of people who are homeless?

- Publicise National Homelessness Week

- Use your customer service charter or mission statement to reinforce that 'libraries are for everyone'

- Hold public programs such as speaker series or panel discussions to raise awareness and promote understanding

- Create fact sheets or posters for display in the library with homelessness statistics to highlight issues in your community

Partnership opportunities

- The Footpath Library
- Council departments such as Community Services
- Local hostels
- Interagency
- TAFE/University
- Homelessness NSW

Partnerships

Opportunities for partnerships between libraries and homeless shelters are an excellent way for libraries to develop relationships with their customers who are homeless, and to explore support mechanisms for staff to provide the best service. By establishing a relationship with a local shelter, the library has an opportunity to provide and promote services offsite, such as a drop off spot for borrowed items, and a place for library flyers promoting legal collections and programs.

Some US libraries, such as Richland Library, North Carolina, extend this further by delivering storytimes in Women's shelters or running computer classes onsite.

Partnerships like this benefit the customers by bringing the library to them and by beginning a relationship with library staff, this can make the library less intimidating to visit.

5. Resources and Links

Homelessness Australia

www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au

Find fact sheets, further resources and studies on homelessness.

Partners in Recovery

www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mental-pir

A federally funded interagency initiative that aims to provide support for people with a mental illness where there are complex needs.

Missionbeat

http://sd.missionaustralia.com.au/236-missionbeat

A homeless outreach service provided by Mission Australia, Missionbeat patrols the streets of Inner Sydney offering support to those in distress and transporting people to connect with essential services.

Australian Homelessness Clearinghouse

http://homelessnessclearinghouse.govspace.gov.au

A community of practice resource for the homeless sector including toolkits for local government, research and publications.

The Footpath Library

www.footpathlibrary.org

The Footpath Library encourages reading and connection by giving quality books to people who are homeless.

Resources and Links continued

American Library Association – Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force

www.ala.org/offices/sites/ala.org.offices/files/content/olos/toolkits/poorhomeless_FINAL.pdf

American Library Association published toolkit that includes examples of US run library programs.

....

Canadian Library Association- Libraries in communities interest group

www.librariesincommunities.ca/resources/Community-Led_Libraries_Toolkit.pdf

Toolkit for libraries recognising barriers to using the library for socially excluded communities and ways to overcome these barriers

....

Don't forget to check your Library's Community Directory resource to connect with local services.

6. Acknowledgements

The Footpath Library

City of Sydney Library

Newcastle Region Library

Waverley Library

State Library NSW

Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty Task Force (American Library Association)

> *When people shine a light to you in your darkest hour, it shows someone cares.*
>
> **Hank** (Client, The Footpath Library)

> *People say when they talk about homeless people "they've just got to be fed" and that's all they talk about. There's more to it than that.*
>
> **Gary** (Client, The Footpath Library)

> *Books are where I can lose myself and I don't have to think about everything out here.*
>
> **Mark** (Client, The Footpath Library)