

Sanctuary of Mind



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Sanctuary of Mind: Public Libraries and Homelessness Report

Homelessness is an issue of society at large, but it has a disproportionate impact on public libraries. Many library supporters grapple with a problem that they feel is not of the library's making and should not be its responsibility. Even the most compassionate librarians and library patrons have sometimes found themselves at a loss to handle certain encounters with homeless individuals in the public library.

The **MLK Library Friends** – a group of library volunteers and advocates – hosted a half-day conference to help the DC Public Library explore solutions to the dilemmas posed for the city's central library – Martin Luther King, Jr, Memorial – by homelessness in the District of Columbia.

The session was convened in conjunction with planning for renovation of the MLK Library building, an historic landmark, and was held on Thursday June 26, 2014 at the Carnegie Institution for Science.

Civic, religious, non-profit and District agency leaders were invited to discuss their challenges and aspirations. The program was also informed by on-the-ground perspectives of DC Public Library professionals, including new Executive Director Richard Reyes-Gavilon, whose presence and participation was greatly appreciated. In addition, the MLK Library Friends presented a brief slide show of ideas gathered from other library systems.

The conference, free and open to the public, included an after-session lunch at which discussions continued. The ideas and suggestions that arose from the lunchtime conversations were also incorporated in this Report.

The MLK Library Friends hope these ideas for library-based solutions will provide a starting point for meaningful exploration as part of design development for the renovation of the MLK Library. The Friends anticipate and welcome all discussion of this report. We expect to continue the conversation through the establishment of a committee to work with the DC Public Library on an on-going basis.

Robin Diener
President, MLK Library Friends
September 8, 2014

Who Is Homeless in the Public Library?

The vast majority of individuals who become homeless at some point in their lives are able to get back on their feet, and never again experience living without a home. They may receive help from their family and friends, and/or from the network of social service programs available through government, non-profit, religious and private agencies and institutions.

Public libraries everywhere already play an important role in helping many temporarily homeless individuals regain their footing in life. For instance, the public library provides access to computers as part of its mission to guarantee free access to information. Librarians help patrons search for job openings, develop resumes and apply for jobs online. Older children, teens and adults find in the public library a safe place to study and learn, one that is often open for extended hours.

The majority of homeless individuals using the library for such purposes do not appear to be obviously in dire straights. For the most part, we are not aware of their presence in the library except as patrons like ourselves.

A small portion of the entire population of homeless individuals are considered to be persistently or “chronically” without a place to live. It is this subsection of the homeless population that seems to inhabit the public library in disproportionately large numbers. In reality, they are a small percentage of the overall total, but the chronically homeless tend to be highly noticeable. This contributes to the sense of there being a lot of them.

In general, the chronically homeless bear burdens that have historically remained difficult to alleviate: breakdown of mental health, exposure to abuse or trauma, drug addiction. They may exhibit anti-social behaviors, such as maintaining poor hygiene, talking to themselves, berating or accosting others, cursing and acting belligerently.

This report is intended to address the impact on the public library of this small but noticeable population of the *chronically homeless*. Ideas for lessening that impact, based on existing and proven examples, were put forward at the conference. Some of the ideas would help homeless individuals directly. Other ideas would benefit the non-profits and agencies that provide aid to them.

Overview

Most of the thinking about the impact of homeless patrons on public libraries has focused on developing and enforcing *Behavior Guidelines*, like “no sleeping” and limiting the size and number of parcels one is permitted to bring into the library building.

More proactive suggestions, such as the provision of lockers and showers, crop up frequently but present complications. Inexpensive publicly available lockers, which used

to be fairly common, at train and bus stations for instance, have been nearly eliminated due to concerns about terrorism. A “water ministry” for personal hygiene, showering or washing clothes, to be located within a public library, perhaps through a separate entrance and maintained by a different entity than the library, has been proposed but no library that we can find seems to have figured out a viable plan for accomplishing this.

There is also a thread of thinking that suggests homeless individuals should be urged to occupy a different part of the library just for them, within the library but apart from the general population.¹ DCPL’s past Chief Librarian Ginnie Cooper maintained that redevelopment of the District’s libraries would increase usage by the general public to the point where the chronically homeless would just not be noticeable. In fact, usage by patrons did increase significantly at all new and renovated locations during Cooper’s tenure. However, the number of homeless library users has also grown due to the Iraq War, the Great Recession, and booming redevelopment in the District that has gentrified formerly affordable neighborhoods faster than new affordable housing has become available.

The District has plans for creating more affordable housing units, including those backed by supportive services – a critical corollary to housing the chronically homeless. Supportive services make it possible for a formerly homeless person suffering from mental health issues to stay on their medications, pay utility bills and carry out necessary social interaction. Any plans for housing the chronically homeless must have the cost of providing supportive services built in, because housing alone is not enough for most chronically homeless individuals to effectively benefit from it.

Plans for more affordable housing citywide, and for housing with supportive services specifically for the chronically homeless, are proving to be the best and most far reaching solution. People wouldn't need lockers and showers and washing machines at the public library if they had homes where they could bathe, sleep, and store their possessions.

But the plans for affordable housing so far are mostly still plans. DC’s Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) law, hardwon over time by homeless advocates and others, has not yet yielded many affordable units. Developers have successfully used exception processes to exempt their projects from the affordable housing requirements of IZ.

Reality Check

Maria Foscarnis, Director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, and a self-described library lover, opened the Conference. She suggested that strong continuing advocacy is needed to bring these plans for affordable housing to fruition. Foscarnis said she appreciates library advocates’ interest in solving the homelessness

¹ This has been done in Richmond, VA, among other places, but is limited to traditional library functions only, like computer access and reading, not for storing belongings or doing laundry. Historically and continuing today within libraries, children and teens are often separated from one another and from adults. Some libraries provide special areas for seniors.

dilemma, commending them for protecting libraries – “these public sanctuaries” – and charged them to remain vigilant. She also encouraged library supporters to actively “demand” affordable housing. Not only would affordable housing address homelessness generally, it would reduce the number of chronically homeless, who appear to congregate in the public library because it is one of the few places they can be safely and productively off the streets.

Monsignor John Enzler, CEO of Catholic Charities of DC, spoke poignantly about the need for affordable housing in the District, citing personal knowledge of an individual who had taken to “living” in a unit of a commercial storage facility. The units were climate controlled and the “rent” was affordable. Living in them was not allowed, but the individual felt it was a viable option worth risking at the time.

Monsignor Enzler has proposed another idea for reducing the impact of homelessness on the resources of the public library. A longstanding interest of his has been to help establish a day shelter expressly for the homeless, with the full range services during the day when other shelters typically are closed. As the CEO of Catholic Charities, Enzler committed his organization to exploring this possibility with the city, including assuming some of the costs, and is looking for partners in government and other advocates to move forward.

What DCPL Already Does

Social Worker

This spring the DC Public Library joined a handful of cities whose libraries have hired a social worker. DCPL’s Jean Badalamenti has extensive background in direct provision of services to homeless individuals. In addition to dealing with problem individuals on site at the library, she will also liaise with city agencies, develop new initiatives, and provide sensitivity training for library staff about the homeless as needed.

Library Security Officers

DCPL maintains a small force of security officers who have been specially trained to deal sensitively with problematic homeless individuals. It is important for the public library to have a cadre of police professionals with this particular outlook and experience. The Friends of the Library have gone to bat at DC Council budget hearings to ensure the continuing presence of this particular security force for the library.

Librarian and Biblio-therapist: Bill Turner

DCPL’s Bill Turner, a librarian at the West End branch, has volunteered for several years to lead a monthly reading group for homeless clients at nearby Miriam’s Kitchen. Bill calls this work biblio-therapy² and spoke movingly of the opportunity for voicing

² Definition from Wikipedia

feelings, memories and opinions that a book discussion group affords people, like his homeless clients, who might otherwise go unheard.

Conference attendees, many of whom are members of one or more book groups themselves,³ were taken by the concept of book discussion groups for the homeless. (It was not lost on anyone that all book groups, even for the most articulate among us, can be said to constitute a form of therapy!)

Bill noted the need for quiet space for discussions. Miriam's Kitchen is housed in the multi-purpose room of a church in Foggy Bottom, where a variety of activities take place, sometimes at once. Attendees thought Bill's group could be replicated at MLK central library and other branches frequented by the homeless, or that DCPL could train volunteer group leaders for other homeless feeding programs.

DCPL currently hosts reading groups of all sorts across the city, including many at MLK. Given the enthusiasm for book groups among all types of library users, the idea of a Readers Center took hold, to be incorporated into the renovated MLK, where book groups could reserve small glass-enclosed living rooms for their get-together's – complete with comfortable chairs, sofas and coffee tables. In addition, the Readers Center would be the place to offer space for training reading group leaders.

The Success of *StreetSense* in DC

StreetSense is a newspaper written by and about homeless individuals in DC, and sold by homeless “vendors” who register with the organization. Executive Director Brian Carome spoke of the success of the newspaper as both a business enterprise for homeless individuals and as a means for their self-expression. According to Brian, many homeless people feel they have a singular story to tell. He described the growing demand *StreetSense* has engendered for classes in creative writing, playwriting, and poetry, in addition to journalism.

As with the book group for the homeless, the newspaper for the homeless fills a human need to be heard. Reading groups and writing classes struck the same resonant chord with conference attendees. All these activities could be held in one combined Center for Readers and Writers at MLK Library.

Examples of Successes from Elsewhere

³ Everything from groups that had met for years to discuss books of the day; to constantly renewing “magazine” discussion groups about the New Yorker and The Nation; to specialized groups in foreign languages, about climate change, individual authors, periods of history, politics, contemporary fiction and 18th century novels, to name a few. MLK Library already hosts a variety of groups including one for low-literate adults.

In our research for the conference, the MLK Library Friends encountered two specific success stories that directly address homelessness issues in public libraries -- restrooms and cafes. Both required special job training. Thus, we felt a workforce training center, like the one at the new San Diego Central Library, would be a possible third initiative that could have a direct impact on homeless individuals.

One: Free Philadelphia Library

The Problem of Public Bathrooms

We are pleased to note that architect Francine Houben of Mecanoo, chosen along with local architect firm Martinez and Johnson to design the renovation of MLK, has already declared the importance of bathrooms to public libraries.

Bathroom Attendants

The Free Philadelphia Library collaborated with a local non profit organization Project HOME to hire and train formerly homeless people as bathroom attendants, who could assist homeless individuals in need by informing them about services available to them at the library and elsewhere. The best experience for this job, it turns out, was to have been homeless oneself. The empathy engendered in the formerly homeless individuals by firsthand knowledge life on the streets has helped make the program a success for going on six years. It is important to note that the bathrooms at Free Philadelphia Central are large (National Gallery size) with a lobby area suitable for a concierge station.

Café Workers

In Philadelphia, the success of the bathroom attendant program led to another collaboration with Project HOME to open a cafe at the library, staffed by formerly homeless people now skilled in food service. The café opened in 2008, with a staff trained in coffee and food preparation, customer service, and other necessary workplace skills. The Café even spawned a program for teens to be trained in business skills, also run by Project HOME.

Two: Seattle Public Library

Architecture, Ambiance and Air Flow

Now a decade old, the new Seattle Public Central Library opened in 2004 to much acclaim for its architecturally-forward thinking and public input process. Erected on the site of the original 1906 central library paid for by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, planning for the new building broke new ground, too, in its far ranging consideration of creative ways to minimize the impact of homelessness on the public library and try out new positive solutions.

Libraries of today consider themselves to be gathering places and community centers as much as repositories for books and portals to information. One study about cafes in libraries found that many libraries were “more interested in selling ambiance, a sense of place and community, than making money.” The Seattle Central Library designated its main lobby and entrance level as the Living Room, making clear that ambiance was

something they were after. Indeed, most libraries now see providing welcoming space as a vital part of their identity.

Thinking about people who might feel a little too comfortable in the library, Seattle tried painting the men's restrooms an electric seasick green to discourage lingering. Another proactive measure Seattle adopted was installation of air vents in the floor spaced more closely than had typically been done before. The intent was to increase the rate of air exchange for a fresher environment.

Seattle also hosts a coffee cart on the premises in the lobby near the library's gift shop and bookstore. The cart is staffed by a job-training organization that provides jobs for homeless and other disenfranchised people. Proceeds benefit the organization directly.

Three: San Diego Public Library

Work Force Training Center

Both the bathroom attendant idea and the cafe service idea required special job training programs with opportunities for homeless and formerly homeless individuals. We recommend that a center for workforce training be considered as part of the MLK renovation. In the new San Diego central library, such a center was created. The naming rights were sold to help fund it. A few years ago DC Councilmember Tommy Wells, then-Library Committee Chair, offered to bring on Department of Employment Services (DOES) staff to supplement the extensive work the library was doing assisting patrons with resume writing, job searches and submitting on-line applications. DCPL declined to partake of help from DOES at that time. However, the library continues to do this work at an ever increasing rate. It seems worthwhile to think about an interagency collaboration.

Public Library Advocates

The network of Public Library advocates in the District is large. Friends of the Library groups exist at almost every branch and their elected leaders participate in a central Federation. Many residents tend to support their local branch library Friends groups through annual membership fees or by donating materials to book sales. Even if they don't actively use the library much themselves, they believe firmly in the purpose and value of libraries. Civic Associations and Advisory Neighborhood Commissions also tend to be very library involved.

DC's library advocates have been extremely effective over the last decade: calling for the transformation of the neighborhood library system, lobbying for expanded library hours, saving and landmarking the historic MLK Library, and now participating in the discussion of what a thoughtful renovation of that central library building should be like.

As their extraordinary track record indicates, library supporters could make a difference as a large wedge group if they chose to insist upon more affordable housing, and to advocate specifically for housing with supportive services for the chronically homeless.

They could also be of use in lobbying the city government to examine possibilities for creation of a day center for the homeless as envisioned by Monsignor Enzler.

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Recommendations for Programming Pertaining to Homelessness for Inclusion in the Renovated MLK Central Library Building

Center for Readers and Writers including

Office of Biblio Therapy

Center for Poetry in the Public Interest

- Multiple spaces for book discussion groups, glass enclosed for noise reduction but with activity visible, and furnished like casual living rooms with sofas and coffee tables
- Classroom space for classes in writing, training book group leaders (biblio therapists), etc.
- Small stage or amphitheatre space for classes in playwriting, storytelling
- Designated space for a Writers-in-Residence program – with at least one seat reserved for a Homeless Writer in Residence

Restrooms

- With lobby or other space for concierge to be posted
- Staffed by formerly homeless trained in service by outside organization
- *Example:* Philadelphia

Café, Coffee Cart

- Staffed by formerly homeless trained in food service by outside organization
- Proceeds to benefit training organization
- *Examples:* Seattle, Philadelphia

Center for Employment and Workforce Development

- In partnership with DOES
- Naming Rights/Sponsorship possibilities
- *Example:* San Diego

Other Actions to be Taken by MLK Library Friends

Advocacy Issues for Consideration of Support

- Affordable Housing

- Day Center

CONFERENCE PRESENTERS

Brian Carome, Executive Director, StreetSense

Conference Topic – Working Words

Brian joined the staff of Street Sense in November 2011. He has over 20-years of senior management experience at non-profit homeless service and child welfare agencies in the Washington, DC metro area. Previously he served as Executive Director at Housing Opportunities for Women, Project Northstar and A-SPAN. Additionally he worked at New Hope Housing, Sasha Bruce Youthwork, the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless and the Father McKenna Center. He also completed an executive certificate program in non-profit management at Georgetown University's Center for Non-profit Leadership.

Robin Diener, President MLK Library Friends

Conference Topic -- Could This Work Here? Ideas from Other Libraries

Robin Diener was educated at the school of Languages and Linguistics of Georgetown University in Washington, DC and at the University of Nice, France. In 1985, she co-founded Chapters Literary Bookstore in downtown Washington DC, which she operated for 13 years, developing a renowned international reading series featuring authors such as Nadine Gordimer, Gunter Grass, A.S. Byatt, and Umberto Eco. In 1998, she became Executive Director of the Washington Literacy Council, where she pioneered the implementation of professionalized language training for volunteer literacy tutors. In July 2006, Ms. Diener became Director of the DC Library Renaissance Project, founded by Ralph Nader. She is on the board of the Dupont Circle Citizens Association and was elected President of the MLK Library Friends in October 2013.

Msgr. John Enzler, CEO and President, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC

Conference Topic -- Sanctuary Sanctus

Since July 2011, Msgr. John Enzler has served as the President and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Washington, charged with leading an agency that serves tens of thousands of people facing the most pressing human needs in our community each year. A native Washingtonian, Father John has more than 40 years of experience as a priest, leader and advocate serving the needs of the most vulnerable in our community. His commitment to the poor and underserved extends beyond his work for Catholic Charities to include service on the boards of many national and local organizations such as Providence Hospital, Order of the Malta, Christ Child Society and Mount St. Mary's University among many others. He has been active among several local interfaith networks and is a recognized and respected figure in the metropolitan area community. He was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Washington in 1973 and was named

Monsignor by Pope John Paul II in 1985. He has served as pastor at three parishes, including most recently at the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Washington, DC and continues to serve in his role as Vicar of Development for the Archdiocese of Washington.

Maria Foscarinis, Esq. Executive Director, National Law Ctr for Homelessness and Poverty
*Conference Topic -- **Defending Sanctuary: Freedom to Think***

In the mid-1980s, Maria was a litigator at a large corporate law firm where she volunteered to represent homeless families on a pro bono basis. After seeing the impact of first-rate legal advocacy on the lives of homeless people, she left the firm to dedicate herself to that work full-time, establishing the Law Center in 1989, with one goal in mind: ending homelessness in America. Maria is a primary architect of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the first major federal legislation addressing homelessness. She has written widely on legal and policy issues affecting homeless persons; her work has appeared in scholarly as well as general audience publications. She speaks and lectures regularly on law and homelessness, conducts trainings on legal issues and advocacy strategies, and is frequently quoted in the print and electronic media. Maria is a 1977 graduate of Barnard College and a 1981 graduate of Columbia Law School. She also holds a M.A. in philosophy.

Richard Reyes-Gavilan, Executive Director, DC Public Library

*Conference Topic -- **Moving Forward: Library Planning with Homelessness in Mind***

Richard Reyes-Gavilan was chosen to be Executive Director of the DC Public Library system in January 2014 after a national search by the Board of Library Trustees. He served as Chief Librarian for the Brooklyn Public Library since 2011. At the Brooklyn Public Library -- the fifth largest in the country serving more than 10 million annually -- Reyes-Gavilan spearheaded the Open Libraries Initiative, an organizational capacity assessment that resulted in 440 additional hours of public service per week across the system. In 2012, the Urban Libraries Council recognized the initiative as the top operational innovation of the year. In 2013, Reyes-Gavilan provided the public service vision for Brooklyn Public Library's strategic plan. Reyes-Gavilan first began his career at the New York Public Library, where he developed Spanish-language collections for neighborhood libraries in the Bronx. He earned a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Texas at Austin and an undergraduate degree in literature from the State University of New York at Albany.

William Turner, Librarian, West End branch, DC Public Library

*Conference Topic -- **Feeding the Soul***

William (Bill) Turner is a librarian at the West End branch of the DC Public Library. He is a volunteer in the breakfast program at Miriam's Kitchen, a local provider of services to the homeless, where he runs a monthly reading/discussion of selected short stories for guests in the life skills/arts therapy program. He is a former volunteer coordinator for the DC Public Library, a former assistant dean of the School of Library & Information Science at Catholic University, a former head of public services at the U.S. Census Bureau Library, and a former assistant professor of English at several colleges/universities. He is a former president of the Friends of the Arlington (VA) Public Library, and now chair of the Nominating Committee for the District of Columbia Library Association and an elected councilor-at-large with the American Library Association. As a native Washingtonian and child of Foggy Bottom, he works at a library branch two blocks from the hospital where he was born.



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Report on *Sanctuary of Mind* Conference on Public Libraries and Homelessness
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