

LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO HOMELESSNESS™

Compassionate Tools for Reducing Problems

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Top Ten Things Every Library Employee Should Know About Homeless Patrons:

- 1) **Homeless individuals want to look dangerous:** It is really dangerous to be homeless. Homeless individuals get robbed, attacked and raped much more frequently than housed individuals. Consequently, homeless individuals want to look a little dangerous so that bad people won't want to attack them. Unfortunately, there is no way to look dangerous for would-be robbers, but not also look dangerous to librarians.
- 2) **The best thing you can do to help is just be nice:** Homeless individuals are treated very poorly by most people. They are constantly subjected to harassment and disrespect. Most homeless people are craving to be treated with respect. Believe it or not, the most important thing you can do for homeless patrons is not to help them get a job or get sober. The most important thing you can do is treat them with hospitality and respect.
- 3) **Homeless people love libraries:** Libraries are everything that shelters and the streets aren't: quiet, calm, spacious, safe, police-free... In survey after survey, homeless individuals identify their local library as one of their most important resources.
- 4) **You only see 10% of homeless people:** Only about 10% of homeless individuals are homeless for a year or longer ("chronically homeless"). These individuals are the only ones that fit the stereotypes of homelessness. The other 90% don't "look" homeless. In fact, you serve a lot of homeless people that you had no idea were homeless.
- 5) **Homeless people just want to be treated the same:** Most homeless individuals are not looking for special treatment. They just want to be treated the same as non-homeless patrons. They especially don't want to be discriminated against because of the actions of a few trouble-makers.

- 6) **Space is different:** When you are homeless, there is not a single place in all of the world where you can go that is truly yours. There is nowhere you can go to be alone that other people can't intrude upon you. That is why the spaciousness and relative privacy of libraries is so important.
- 7) **Time is different:** When you have to worry about where you will sleep tonight and where you will get your next meal, you don't worry about anything that happens more than 24 hours from now. The long term horizon becomes irrelevant in the face of surviving today. As a librarian, you might think periodically about retirement. A homeless person rarely thinks about beyond next week.
- 8) **Possessions are different:** When you only own a few things, those few items become very important to you. You don't want to let them out of your sight for fear that they will be stolen from you or you will lose them. Imagine if everything you owned in the world fit in one bag. Would you ever let that bag out of your sight?
- 9) **Homelessness is exhausting:** Imagine sleeping outside or in a room with 100 other people (with 30 people snoring simultaneously). Imagine skipping meals periodically. Imagine walking everywhere you go. Imagine being worried 24 hours a day about where you will eat and sleep. You would be absolutely exhausted. So are homeless people.
- 10) **The homeless information network is really efficient and effective:** Homeless individuals talk to each other a lot. It is necessary for survival. Word about anything and everything spreads really fast (and relatively accurately) amongst homeless individuals. I guarantee that they talk about which librarians are helpful and which security guards don't enforce the rules. They also share which library programs are the most beneficial and which parts of the library are the quietest. You can use this to your advantage. Share key messages with a few homeless individuals and it will spread on its own without you telling everyone.

About the author: Ryan Dowd has worked in homeless shelters almost his entire career. The Homeless Toolkit is the training he provides to staff at homeless shelters.

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