DPL, SFPL Offer Innovative Homeless Services
Partners help libraries meet new needs

Libraries across the country provide services to the homeless, but some go beyond standard outreach, throwing their doors open and welcoming in those community members. Among them are the Denver and San Francisco public libraries, which have created unique services to bring additional dignity and humanity to library programming for people experiencing homelessness. Both libraries have hired full-time social workers to help address the homelessness crises in their communities, and that commitment shows through in their partnerships and programming.

Who hasn’t seen a mob of people waiting outside for a library to open its doors? At 9 a.m. on September 8, patrons at the Denver Public Library (DPL) experienced something more than a wait for the library to open: they had live music, bagels, and a cup of coffee. Technology and instruction librarian Simone Groene-Nieto and the Engage adult and technology group at DPL experienced something more than a wait for the library to open every day, it seemed like a great idea to have a pop-up concert.

When funding became available, Groene-Nieto and the Engage group jumped on it. Using $200 from the programming budget, Groene-Nieto reached out to members of the local music scene and
booked the band Piper Cub. DPL social worker Elissa Hardy promoted the program with local merchants. Donations of bagels and coffee came from Panera Bread and the library’s in-house café. From start to finish, the planning took three weeks. More than 100 patrons attended what Groene-Nieto called “one of the most joyous days I’ve had in 20 years.” More than 100 patrons learned about the new service. Approximately 40 people were able to take a shower on September 8, the program’s first day, and the number has been increasing since then.

The San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) connected with Lava Mae at a city council hearing. Lava Mae, which translates to “wash me” in Spanish, is a not-for-profit organization that renews decommissioned city buses with shower facilities. On Tuesdays, the Lava Mae bus parks outside the main branch of SFPL, offering free showers to anyone who needs one. The library provides the water hookup for the bus. SFPL health and safety associates provide outreach and referral services to people wanting to use the showers and now reach out as well to patrons using the library’s restrooms for hygiene purposes to let them know about the new service. Approximately 40 people were able to take a shower on September 8, the program’s first day, and the number has been increasing since then.

Lava Mae always offers its services in partnership with other organizations...
that serve the homeless, and Leah Filler, Lava Mae’s global community engagement coordinator, works with the library to facilitate the program. According to Filler, “The library is unique (as a partner) because they are not a homeless service provider, they are a public library. What’s great about them is that they are one of the few institutions in San Francisco that have adamantly kept their doors open to...all members of the public, including people who are homeless. In doing so they preserve public restroom access, which is extremely limited right now in [the city]. So they are known as one of the only places people can go to use the restrooms, get on the computer, have a quiet space to read for the day. Even in the face of pressure from constituents who want the library to restrict that access, they have kept their doors open.” Working with the library enables Lava Mae to connect bathing and hygiene services with other resources and library services.—Lauren Comito

NEH Supports Public Scholars
Funds scholarly writing for popular audience

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) will award $1.7 million in grants to 36 writers through its Public Scholar program, it announced on July 29. Open to authors of scholarly nonfiction, whether affiliated with an academic institution or writing independently, the Public Scholar program offers a $4,200 monthly stipend for periods from six months up to one year. Its ultimate goal, according to NEH, is to “bring humanities scholarship beyond academic departments and university campuses and into book clubs and best-sellers lists.” The Public Scholar program, announced by NEH’s Division of Research Programs in December 2014, brought in 485 applicants by the March 3 deadline. While guidelines were aimed at both academic and unaffiliated writers, only five of the 36 recipients ultimately selected are not connected with an academic institution. Nevertheless, the winning book proposals cover

Library officials interviewed for this story said the August 12 decision to suspend the program was made primarily to give patrons and other community members a chance to weigh in on the matter. This pause, and the subsequent media attention, spawned dozens of phone calls and emails—many from interested observers, computer specialists, and librarians nationwide.

DHS, for its part, denied applying any pressure on the library. Shawn Neu, a spokesman for Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), said an HSI agent sent an “FYI email” to a colleague at the New Hampshire Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. The agent’s email was soon forwarded to the Lebanon police department. The city manager’s office was then contacted, and a meeting was set up with library officials and police brass to gather information about LPL’s Tor project. “I recommended that we put a halt to it,” library director Sean Fleming said.

In the spring, LPL’s IT librarian Chuck McAndrew attended a Library Freedom Project (LFP) workshop in Hooksett, NH, at which he met Alison Macrina, who heads the project and is a 2015 LJ Mover & Shaker. The session dealt with methods for strengthening online privacy, and McAndrew later asked Macrina to conduct similar training in Lebanon.