The number of people who are homeless is on the rise, as is library service for them. Still, many librarians and library administrators believe they cannot meet the needs of this group since homelessness is such a complex issue. It often reflects the problems of individuals themselves—hence the idea that the homeless themselves are the "problem"—but it is also attributable to a lack of affordable housing and changes in work and the economy. Nevertheless, there are innovative librarians and libraries working to serve homeless and low-income users. Their efforts fulfill the spirit of the American Library Association Policy 61, inspired by lifelong activist Sanford Berman (see "Poverty Is the Problem," Blatant Berry, p. 10). The policy spurs librarians to recognize the "urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America."

Hardly someone else's problem, homelessness is prevalent and even more persistent owing to the recession. "We are continuing to see increased numbers of people experience homelessness due to the economy and the foreclosure crisis. Right now, there is an upward trend," says Whitney Gent, development and communications director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Libraries, Gent contends, can do more. "Libraries are information spaces so they can serve a key role in helping people find resources to end their homelessness or to prevent it."

Angie Kelleher, a librarian at Alma College in Michigan and a former social worker, agrees but is cautious regarding the scope of support. "Libraries can't solve the lack of good jobs, create more affordable housing, provide better health care and better mental health care or substance abuse treatment," she says. Yet, she, like Gent, thinks libraries can do much more to reach out to homeless people.
San Francisco's model approach

A look at the positive measures taken by libraries and librarians to help the homeless makes it clear that the idea of shelving the homeless into the simple category of "problem patron" is inadequate. While the concept that all library customers must be treated equally may be self-satisfying to librarians, it can also serve to prevent helpful actions, including simple services such as merely listening to a homeless library user.

One library that has redefined the library approach to helping the homeless is San Francisco Public Library (SFPL).

Leah Esguerra made headlines when she started working at SFPL in 2009, a move prompted by the city's desire to serve homeless library users better. SFPL pays her salary, but the check comes from the Department of Health. She prefers dealing with library users in need of counseling to conducting media interviews.

A typical day for Esguerra begins with a meeting of the library's Health and Safety Associates (HaSA), formerly homeless men and women who were clients of the city's Homeless Outreach Team (HOT). HaSAs now work part-time shifts as interns for the library. Later, she and the HaSAs walk through all public areas of the 376,000 square foot main library. HaSAs provide peer counseling, relating their own experiences with homelessness, and offer information about shelter and food. During that walk, Esguerra assesses users to determine their need for government assistance and treatment of health and mental problems.

Esguerra takes that walk a few times every day and frequently encounters people with significant troubles. She estimates that she helps library staff answer questions or provide referrals to social services five to eight times a day. Often she will try to persuade users to take advantage of computer and job search classes offered by the library. Esguerra is fluent in Tagalog and speaks some Spanish but usually finds even non-fluent English-language speakers can communicate well enough in English that she can show them where to find library items in their native tongues. Esguerra is asked for advice regarding homeless library users by staff at other SFPL branches and colleagues at numerous U.S. and Canadian library systems.

A bridge to technology and more

Vikki Terrile, coordinator of young adult services at New York's Queens Library, is concerned that libraries often overlook the needs of families in precarious housing, a fast-growing segment of the homeless on the radar of many social services organizations.

Terrile makes ten visits a year to homeless shelters, coordinating with the city's Department of Education family shelter liaison. At the shelters, she talks about what the library offers, reaching out to parents as well as children and teens. Those visits remind her that parents can benefit from computer access and training as well as job search help. "Families and parents have information needs, too," she says.

Melanie Colletti, a librarian at Denver Public Library's (DPL) Community Technology Center, says the library uses quarterly visits to the Gathering Place, a day shelter for homeless and low-income women, to acquaint women with technology and the library. Esguerra makes ten visits a year to homeless shelters, coordinating with the city's Department of Education family shelter liaison. At the shelters, she talks about what the library offers, reaching out to parents as well as children and teens. Those visits remind her that parents can benefit from computer access and training as well as job search help. "Families and parents have information needs, too," she says.

During the visits, DPL provides instruction on job interview techniques and how to use audiobooks and MP3 players. After the class at the Gathering Place, participants receive bus tokens to go to the main library for a tour and to get library cards. Colletti says clients of the Gathering Place are diverse in skills. Some have never used a computer, but others have worked in administrative and corporate jobs and are highly proficient with technology.

DPL has received a $20,000 LSTA grant to provide targeted technology training and career counseling services to female
ex-offenders, some of whom are or are likely to become homeless and, potentially, users of the Gathering Place.

"Many women we see don't feel comfortable just going to the library, so this program really serves as a bridge to a community resource that can be used long after an individual is no longer homeless," says Leslie Foster, CEO and president of the Gathering Place.

Book clubs foster connection

Book clubs have turned out to be an excellent avenue to initiate dialog between homeless users and librarians.

In Michigan, Margaret Kelly, while adult services coordinator at Traverse Area District Library (TADL), started a book club for the homeless inspired by an article in *People* magazine about a Boston lawyer who started such a club.

One great benefit, Kelly says, is that it helped to open communication between the homeless men and women who frequent the library. "They like to stay by themselves; they're not sociable," Kelly says, noting that conversation openers such as "How was your day?" or "Where do you work?" are not relevant to this population. "I wanted to know them as such, not this or that homeless person."

Teaming up with a faith-based winter shelter effort called Safe Harbor, Kelly held book club meetings there. She found the homeless participants to be readers and intelligent. Attendance varied, with eight being the largest number, but Kelly insists her goal was not "quantitative results." Noticing that one participant had eye problems, she made calls to a local ophthalmologist and the local Lion's Club to seek treatment. "I'm not a social worker," she says. "But I do know local resources."

Cleveland Public Library (CPL) has participated as a partner in a book club with Care Alliance Health Center. Outreach nurse Donna Kelly spearheaded the program. CPL supplied the books, and for a time librarian Merce Robinson assisted with moderating the sessions. CPL also invited book club participants to attend talks and book signings by authors.

Robinson and Kelly illustrate the good work librarians can do to aid the homeless, but they also point to a big issue libraries should consider—sustainability. Robinson says active participation in the program at CPL declined owing to staff reorganization. CPL hopes to have more active participation in the near future. Kelly’s involvement with the book club had been greenlighted by TADL, but the commitment proved to be more personal than institutional. Having had to leave TADL earlier this year, Kelly continued...
Sustaining the programs

Greensboro Public Library (GPL), NC, is a good example of how programming to serve the homeless and low-income users can be sustained by vital partnerships and a strong commitment to service. It also demonstrates the importance of listening closely to the program’s target users.

Every Monday from December to March meals are served at the library. These mealtimes, called the Winter Series, are attended by 50 to 60 people, most of whom are homeless. Of those not homeless, some are low-income folks who use the meal as a way to save money while others are there for the companionship. What started as a pilot program is now a standard, continuing despite the loss of the librarian who was a coleader.

The local chapter of Food, Not Bombs, an advocacy organization that serves the homeless, is one vital partner. It obtains food from local grocers and bakeries, and the Friends of GPL contributes $200 annually to cover the library share of programming. Community agencies and concerned members of the public also donate.

Originally then GPL e-librarian Jennifer Worrells thought that the homeless would be interested in computer classes and job search information. She learned that much of what they need, she says, “could not be provided from behind the reference desk.” Participants made it clear that their immediate needs were a place to sleep and health care.

“The participants were saying, ‘We have some basic needs. To do the things you want to show us, we need certain things first. How can I get a job when I’m not shaved and when I don’t have proper clothes,’” recalls Brigitte Blanton, assistant director of public services at GPL. Haircuts have been offered, along with a dental office with oral hygiene supplies. Nursing students and professors attend the mealtimes to provide screenings to participants.

The program has brought access to a disenfranchised population. The mayor of Greensboro, members of the city council, and county commissioners have been featured guests. Worrells, now a librarian with Guilford County Schools, says that the Winter Series enabled homeless people to be “at the table” with community leaders when a new day center was being planned. An interim day center opened in 2009, and this spring the program was relocated to a fully renovated facility.

The Winter Series effort opened a dialog between the homeless and the city’s community and elected leaders. Now there are more winter emergency shelters in the city, and Winter Series programs are held earlier to allow participants to make 7 p.m. shelter curfews—an important detail to consider when programming for the homeless.

One benefit of holding such a series is that it creates relationships with homeless library users that are difficult to initiate. “Jennifer was able to get to know the homeless so that if they had reference questions, they would call and ask for her,” recalls Blanton. Worrells credits GPL with maintaining its commitment to the Winter Series even though she has left.

Bringing in Social Workers

Social Workers in the Library (SWITL), initiated in 2009 by the San Jose Public Library (SJPL), CA, links services to other users, not just the homeless. The concept could be taken advantage of by any public library, even those with quite limited resources. It provides a way to reach the less visible homeless and others who need help.

“When I attended a public libraries conference, and the issues of homelessness and mental illness were addressed in a workshop, the room was overflowing. Library staffers are finding it difficult to handle situations involving these customers, and they are desperately in search of ideas of how to help them,” says Deborah Estreicher, family literacy coordinator for Partners in Reading at SJPL and who first conceived of the idea for SWITL.

The program launched in October 2009 with minimum publicity. Sessions are held every fourth Monday of the month, National Association of Social Workers members serve as volunteer counselors, a necessity in part because the organization helps to cover the costs of the required liability insurance. An earlier similar program at SJPL is Lawyers in the Library (LITL). Volunteer lawyers associated with the pro bono project provide 20-minute consultations. SWITL print materials make clear that any information provided by the volunteer social worker is “solely” that volunteer’s “opinion” and that they do not represent the city, university, or public library and that the visit is confined to in...
COLLABORATION, NOT "TOP-DOWN" OUTREACH

John Gehner, former coordinator of the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table's Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty, suggests forming a Public Library Association (PLA) community of practice devoted to serving people who are socially excluded, including the homeless.

"It might better reach the right audience," he says, referring to public librarians. It would compile resources and coordinate programs at PLA and state library meetings, identify and promote best practices, develop partnerships, and seek funding for pilot projects.

Gehner, a follower of the social inclusion philosophy that gained prominence in Great Britain, suggests that low-income library users should be included on library boards in order to have a voice on library services and policies. Gehner prefers more active collaboration with low-income library users rather than the "top-down" process of "outreach" that currently holds greater sway in public library circles. For that reason, he would hope the momentum will develop within U.S. library circles to stage projects akin to Canada's four-year Working Together Project.

In the project, initiated by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, four urban Canadian library systems created the community-led service planning model, a new approach to promoting greater and more comfortable engagement between library staffs and members of excluded communities.

Ken Williment, community development manager at Halifax Public Libraries in Nova Scotia, says community-led librarianship represents a new philosophical frontier for public libraries. Outreach, in his view, depends on librarians creating programs, then taking them into the community.

"Community development shifts the role of librarian as expert to acknowledging the community as the expert of its own needs. Relationships between the community and the library are built on developing trust. Service planning then becomes a collaborative process. Since a large portion of excluded populations are not regular public library users, the model depends on having librarians out in the community," says Williment. "Library policies which are applied uniformly and which fail to take into account economic disparities of potential users unintentionally create barriers. Community-led library service planning places a premium on 'soft skills' such as open-ended communication and empathy," he adds.

"Librarians hear the needs of the community and based on these needs collaboratively create programs and services," explains Williment. Evaluation occurs throughout the different phases of the process in an effort to ensure that the needs and desires of the community are being met.

leaders in developing the program are National Association of Social Workers (NASW) California chapter Region B director Glenn Thomas and his predecessor and wife, Cyndy Thomas.

Lee worked with graduate students to develop and administer a comprehensive needs assessment questionnaire in English and Spanish that was completed by over 360 people. "Homelessness was one of the areas where people indicated needs on the assessment. A handful talked of not having current residences or were in danger of losing their housing," Lee says.

"A whole range of referrals can be made, such as sending someone dealing with the loss of a home to a shelter or telling them how to obtain emergency housing assistance or suggesting ways to cope with stress. We are able to look up information quickly," Lee explains. A pamphlet listing local resources is made available by the volunteer social workers.

Cyndy Thomas says that simply having a list of community social services available in the library is not enough to provide an effective referral service. It takes time via tested interview techniques to gain the trust required to understand a person's needs, which can range from problems with transportation to suicidal depression and addiction. Knowledge is available at the library, but people are often overwhelmed, which makes it difficult to make use of the help offered.

One benefit, Cyndy Thomas says, of working with clients on information referrals in the library is that people appear to feel more welcome and consequently are more trusting than in more clinical settings.

Picking up the thread of service

Lee and SJSU SLIS professor Lili Luo have received a research grant from the College of Applied Sciences and Arts at SJSU to determine how the SWITL model can be expanded. SWITL's leadership team is interested in increasing publicity about the program and getting greater involvement from NASW. They want to reach out to specific immigrant groups such as Latinos and Asians and ensure sustainability.

"We're excited about how other people might pick up on this model and replicate it. We are also interested in how other libraries might be doing something similar and networking with them," says Lee.

More libraries should form partnerships with professional associations and social service agencies to stage programs such as LITTL and SWITL. "Health, legal, and social services and employment agencies should have more of a direct connection to the library because people, whether in need or not, migrate to the library," says SJSU librarian Francis Howard.

Every library should do more to serve the homeless and low-income users. Libraries like those in San José, Greensboro, and San Francisco serve as examples of the potential to help improve the lives of those in adverse situations.