

Why they need us and why we hesitate: the homeless in the library

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Abstract:

The number of homeless people in the world is growing every day, even though the right to adequate housing is one of the fundamental human rights. Homelessness is a complex social problem whose solution requires a wider support network, where libraries also have their place.

Zagreb City Libraries (ZCL) have already gained five years of experience in organizing library services for the homeless through the project A Book for a Roof. The project garnered great interest of the media, a number of presentations were held and articles were published on the experiences and results. However, ZCL are still the only libraries in Croatia that organize targeted and continuous library services for the homeless, and the author of this article, the manager of the library service for the homeless in ZCL, is the only librarian who organizes them and carries them out. For this reason, the author carried out a short survey on librarians' views of library services for the homeless and the international Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless. The survey was conducted among librarians without experience in working with the homeless and those who worked with them short term. Based on the views of these two groups of respondents and a comparison with the state of facts, the aim of the survey is to contribute to the process of establishing international Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless.

This article will deal with experiences from the project A Book for a Roof and views of users, partners and associates. It will also present results and conclusions of the conducted survey.

Keywords: homelessness, library services for the homeless, Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless, public libraries, Croatia

Complexity of the issue of homelessness

In Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to adequate housing is specified as one of the fundamental human rights. The Declaration was adopted almost 70 years ago and the number of homeless people is growing steadily in most countries. The most commonly quoted figure on the number of homeless people in the world is based on statistics released by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 2005, which reported that around 100 million people worldwide were homeless. The 2005 UN report took into account only the people who did not have a home. People who were not included were those who lived in terrible semi-permanent places, such as abandoned buildings, vehicles, hastily put together shelters or tents.

It is difficult to talk about the exact number of homeless people when there is no single definition of homelessness, as different countries have different definitions and a great number of homeless people are not even recorded in the national statistics. As the exact number of homeless people is not known, there can be no adequate approach to solving their problems.

Even though the definitions of homelessness differ, the causes of homelessness reflect an intricate interplay between structural factors, systems failures and individual circumstances. Homelessness is usually the result of the cumulative impact of a number of factors, rather than a single cause (Gaetz, S.; Donaldson, J.; Richter, T., & Gulliver, T., 2013).

Structural factors are economic and societal issues that affect opportunities and social environments for individuals. Key factors can include the lack of adequate income, access to affordable housing and health supports and/or the experience of discrimination. Shifts in the economy both nationally and locally can create challenges for people to earn an adequate income, pay for food and for housing.

Systems failures occur when other systems of care and support fail, requiring vulnerable people to turn to the homelessness sector, when other mainstream services could have prevented this need. Examples of systems failures include difficult transitions from child welfare, inadequate discharge planning for people leaving hospitals, corrections, mental health and addiction facilities and a lack of support for immigrants and refugees.

Individual and relational factors apply to the personal circumstances of a homeless person, and may include: traumatic events (e.g. house fire or job loss), personal crisis (e.g. family break-up or domestic violence), mental health and addiction challenges (including brain injury and foetal alcohol syndrome), which can be both a cause and a consequence of homelessness and physical health problems or disabilities. Relational problems can include family violence and abuse, addictions, and mental health problems of other family members and extreme poverty.

According to the findings of Homeless Hub (<http://www.homelesshub.ca/>), the largest library of homelessness-related resources in the world, holistic and wrap-around services that are personalized to the individual or family's needs and allow for multiple entry points along a continuum of supports and services are ideal. These services may be specialized with programs for homeless people or they may be broad services (health services, libraries, treatment facilities, etc.) that are geared to anyone who needs them.

Therefore, to successfully resolve the issue of homelessness, it is necessary to establish a support network where libraries also have their place. Unfortunately, as the definitions of homelessness differ from country to country, so do the approaches to resolving the issue of homelessness, and the support network is more or less developed, depending on the country. In some communities, libraries also play a significant role in this network, while in others, they do not find a way of effectively participating in it.

Homelessness in Croatia

This article is based on the experiences of Zagreb City Libraries (ZCL) in organizing library services for the homeless, therefore, a short introduction into the socio-economic background and the state of homelessness in Croatia will give a better picture of ZCL's contribution to the care for the homeless.

The social and political situation in Croatia is characterized by tumultuous changes caused by the transition from socialism to capitalism. The war in the first half of the 1990s left a deep mark on the social and economic situation in the country. Every fourth citizen is living on the verge of poverty. Croatia has one of the worst unemployment rates in the EU.

The term “homeless” was legally defined for the first time in the 2011 Social Welfare Act. There is no exact data on the number of homeless people in Croatia and this is one of the key challenges in preventing and resolving problems of the homeless (Krznar, A.; Dimić Vuげec, M., 2013).

Specific assistance for homeless people is offered through basic shelter services and food kitchens. There is very little professional support available to people in the shelters which would meet their extensive range of support needs. There are no formal resettlement policies in operation at present in Croatia. Homeless people themselves appear reluctant to accept assistance from the state and mistrust in the authorities is widespread (Šostarić, M., 2013).

As is visible from the aforementioned, due to the difficult socio-economic situation in Croatia, the number of homeless people is increasing and there are no adequate ways to resolve this issue. In this kind of situation, ZCL's contribution in supporting homeless people is valuable, but at the same time, full of challenges.

A Book for a Roof - can libraries really help the homeless?

Over the past five years that I have been the manager of ZCL library services for the homeless, i.e. the project A Book for a Roof, I have been constantly facing numerous questions. Should libraries care for the homeless and can they really help them? Initially, I enthusiastically argued why libraries should care for the homeless and how they can help them. However, I have grown tired of it over time. This may be because I am the only one who independently organizes library services for the homeless in Croatia. The homeless need a support network to find a way out of the situation they are in; likewise, those who work with them also need support. Various knowledge is needed for working with the homeless because each homeless person is unique with regards to the factors that led them to becoming homeless and with regards to motives and personal capacities to find a way out of this situation. Different stages in the development of ZCL library services for the homeless posed different challenges for the library and for me as a manager.

On World Book Day, 23 April 2010, together with Volunteer Centre Zagreb, I organised in the City Library the sale of the magazine on homelessness *Ulične svjetiljke* (Street Lamps) and bookmarkers made by the homeless. That was the first time I had the opportunity to meet a homeless person and I realized that I had prejudices about how the homeless people look and behave. First, I organized creative workshops with the homeless in the library and after that, together with one homeless person who became a ZCL volunteer, *Information Literacy Workshops for the Homeless*. The homeless volunteer was an important link between the homeless and the library, as well as two partner organizations with which we collaborated. When organizing library services, it is important to establish contact with the homeless because experience has shown that homeless people mainly participate because of a personal recommendation or a person they trust.

In 2011, ZCL received a USD 15,000 grant from the international non-profit organisation EIFL under its Public Library Innovation Programme for the project *A Book for a Roof* in the category of *Improving People's Employment Prospects*. It was a one-year project whose main objective was to encourage the homeless to enter the labour market. Information Literacy Workshops were held both at the City Library and at the biggest shelter located in the suburbs of Zagreb. Although gaining trust and achieving regular attendance of the homeless at information literacy workshops with structured activities presented a very difficult challenge, project evaluation showed that participation in information literacy workshops and psychological and social job-seeking workshops contributed to an increase in job-seeking frequency among participants. Some of them even found a job. Further details on the impact of the project as a good example of digital inclusion in public libraries can be found on EIFL's website <http://bit.ly/1KxTFp8>. During project implementation, libraries were able to provide professional support in various segments; however, motivating users and partners was left to me, which after a while led to a burnout syndrome.

During the project, promotional activities were carefully designed attracting considerable media and public attention for libraries. While developing library services for the homeless after the expiry of EIFL's donation, ZCL focused on raising awareness of professional and general public on the issue of homelessness and networking of organisations taking care of them. Moreover, the anthology *Druga prilika: izazovi i perspektive u radu s beskućnicima* (Second Chance: Challenges and Possibilities in Working with the Homeless) was published. The anthology gathers experiences, challenges and results of libraries and partner organisations during project implementation. In cooperation with one of the partners, a leaflet entitled *Informator za beskućnike* (The Who-and-what for the Homeless) was published with addresses and contacts useful to the homeless. In cooperation with another partner organisation, used computers were donated to one of the shelters in Zagreb and to the Drop-in centre for the homeless. This stage showed how libraries successfully network partners, and that publishing various publications is the area of work in which they can make a valuable contribution to the care for the homeless.

ZCL is currently at a stage where its activities are stabilized, one of the reasons for this being that years of experience showed realistic limitations of libraries in resolving the issue of homelessness as well as the resources available for long-term sustainable management. Library services for the homeless are based on 4 fundamental activities that are carried out continually: Information Literacy Workshops at the City Library; Bring Along a Friend gatherings; donations of used computer and books to organisations that take care of the homeless; and continuous promotional activities. This stage is the least challenging, however, cutting funding and personnel in libraries on one side and the rise of various library programs on the other prevent further development and expansion of library services for the homeless,

which is demotivating for me as a manager of such services. Five years of continuous work with a group where success is rare and progress slow is also a considerably demanding experience. During this whole time, neither my own profession nor the network of organisations that work with the homeless had no knowledge or resources to provide any additional training or professional support.

The presentation of each of these stages in organizing ZCL library services for the homeless speaks to the fact that libraries can truly help the homeless and that they have an important place in the network of organisations that care for them. However, the question is how long can the initiative and enthusiasm of an individual persist when they organize and develop them in circumstances where they are not provided with continuous training and supervision by either their own profession or the local community.

What do users, partners and associates say?

After the presentation of stages in organizing ZCL library services for the homeless and various ways they provided support to the homeless, what follows is a short overview of what users, partners and associates say on the project A Book for a Roof.

Drago Rendulić played an important role when the organisation of library services for the homeless began. Although a homeless person himself, he volunteered at the *Information Literacy Workshops for the Homeless*, invited other homeless people to come to the workshops, promoted the project on various occasions and broke down prejudices on the homeless. When asked what is it like to volunteer at workshops now that he is not homeless, he responded: "It is not a burden, even though I give up a part of my time, because I am compensated some other way, for example, I get some kind of a job, I am expanding my network of acquaintances, I have met journalists, celebrities..."

Mile Mrvalj, one of the users of the project, founder of the humanitarian organization *Fajter (Fighter)* and an activist for the rights of the homeless: "There are a number of reasons why I attend programs for the homeless in the library. First of all, to become more computer literate, and second of all, and the most important reason for me, that I feel like a person who is welcomed with respect and acceptance." On Book Night 2015, the fifth birthday of the project was celebrated and Mile's humanitarian organization was presented. Refer to the ZCL YouTube channel to see what Mile and other partners say about the project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQCyTT6LreQ>

Danijela Vidić, social worker, Kosnica shelter: "The greatest success of this programme is that we have seen improvements in the self-confidence of our clients. Most homeless people are stigmatized, which negatively influences their self-confidence and blocks their progress."

Romana Galić, City of Zagreb Office of Social Protection and Persons with Disabilities, answered the following to question on the success of the project: "I consider the project a success and I believe that ZCL is an initiator of changes in the field of information accessibility and providing equal opportunities when it comes to socially excluded groups of citizens."

Librarians' views on library services for the homeless

The project A Book for a Roof garnered great interest of the media, a number of presentations were held and articles were published on the experiences and results. However, ZCL are still the only libraries in Croatia that organize targeted and continuous library services for the homeless, and I am the only librarian who organizes them and carries them out. At the beginning of 2013, Zadar City Library organized similar services, but stopped after a few months. All of this inspired me to carry out a short survey on the librarians' views of library services for homeless and the Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless. Two groups of librarians participated in the survey:

- ZCL librarians who did not participate in the organization of library services for the homeless;
- librarians from ZCL or Zadar City Library who organized them or participated in them short-term.

Based on the views of these two groups of respondents and a comparison with the state of facts, the aim of the survey is to contribute to the process of establishing international *Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless*.

The survey among ZCL librarians who did not participate in the organization of library services for the homeless was conducted on a convenience sample of 33 librarians who attended *Informativna srijeda* (Informative Wednesday) on 25 March 2015. *Informativna srijeda* is the name of regular meetings of information librarians of Zagreb public libraries where the profession-related news are reported on. At this meeting, I reported on the Myd-year Meeting of *IFLA's Section for Library Services to People with Special Needs* held on 27th and 28th February 2015 at the National and University Library in Zagreb. The main topic of the meeting was the start of the process of drafting the *Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless*. Thus, the survey was conducted among librarians who were in some way already familiar and sensitive to the subject matter.

The results of the answers to 3 main questions in the questionnaire:

1. Do you think that libraries should organize targeted services for the homeless in areas where there is a higher number of homeless people?

96.97 YES
3.03 NO

2. Would you personally engage in the organization of library services for the homeless?

51.52 YES
48.48 NO

3. Do you think that publishing international Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless would encourage librarians to design and organize library services in their libraries?

84.85% YES
15.15 % NO

The survey conducted among librarians from ZCL or Zadar City Library who organized them or participated in them short-term. The questionnaire was sent via e-mail to the librarian who participated in the organization and implementation of the library services for the homeless in ZCL, the librarian who coordinated them in the Zadar City Library, and a former volunteer, the librarian who initiated and implemented them in this library.

The results of the answers to 3 main questions in the questionnaire:

1. List the reason(s) why you are no longer able to participate in the library services for the homeless.

All three respondents stated that other tasks they are currently engaged in prevent them from working with the homeless, and one of them stated that she does not want to work with the homeless at the moment.

2. List the situations you faced during your participation in the library services for the homeless for which you think you did not have professional knowledge and skills.

The first respondent stated a lack of training in crisis communication. Situations that require crisis communication are resolved thanks to personal skills and not according to learned models. She also believes that the biggest challenge is to encourage the homeless to use library services.

The second respondent said: "The biggest problem was communication - sometimes I was not prepared for the tragedies, traumas and live paths that I heard about, which leave a person shocked and speechless. In any case, I believe that the challenge is communicating with them and keeping them as regular users. To rely on them is also a risk, and I think a person must also be aware that many of them are present as long as they see a benefit for themselves. If they feel that something does not suit them or that something is expected of them, they simply stop coming. I also believe that they are rarely ready for compromises."

The third respondent had more of a problem with the fact that those who have the so called professional knowledge and skills have no empathy for others and they do not know how to apply their acquired knowledge to the homeless.

3. Do you think that publishing international Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless would encourage librarians to design and organize library services in their libraries?

All three respondents answered affirmatively and one of them emphasized:

"Certainly...because, this way, many librarians think that the homeless are not their problem like for example, the elderly, blind and visually impaired, patients in hospitals, and that is only because there are no guidelines to deal with them."

The results of this short survey are not representative with regards to the entire Croatian library community, let alone beyond, but they are a good example of the relationship of views and state of facts in a particular constellation of a social and professional approach to the issue of homelessness. Even though almost 100% of surveyed librarians believes that library services for the homeless should be organized in areas where there is a high number of them, only half of them would want to participate in them. However, the state of facts is that only

one librarian is participating, i.e. me. Those librarians that participated in them for a short period of time diagnosed 3 main problems: how to attract and keep the homeless, how to properly communicate with them and how to receive professional work support. Almost all respondents agree that international guidelines would encourage librarians to design and organize library services in their own libraries.

The fact is that guidelines cannot replace professional training and support nor address the lack of resources or initiative, but they can encourage the professional library community to thoughtfully approach the organization of library services for the homeless, and not leave it to the sensibility and initiative of an individual.

Today, somebody else is homeless, but tomorrow, it could be our library!

The example of ZCL's project A Book for a Roof shows that libraries can make a valuable contribution to the organization network involved in solving the issue of homelessness even in a community where a relationship with homelessness is only just beginning to emerge and there is no systematic policy and professional support for individuals who are dealing with this issue in their organizations. However, it is for librarianship as a profession to determine the role of libraries in the care for the homeless and the ways to approach it so it is not left to the initiative and enthusiasm of an individual, as in the aforementioned case. Developing international *Guidelines for Library Services for the Homeless* would be an important step in that direction.

I would like to quote R. David Lankes, a university professor and a library visionary, who said: "Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, excellent libraries build communities." If librarians do not build a community that shows compassion and care for the homeless, that same community might not show compassion and engagement when libraries' resources are drastically reduced and the libraries start closing.

Today, somebody else is homeless, but tomorrow, it could be our library!

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