
Practical Skills for Working with Patrons Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract:

This paper provides a few key practical tips and skills for working with patrons experiencing homelessness. It is taken from much longer training resources available at www.HomelessLibrary.com.

Keywords: Homeless, Skills, Practical

The Librarian's Guide to HomelessnessTM

Compassionate Tools for Reducing Problems

www.HomelessLibrary.com

Libraries can benefit from the insights and skills used at the best run homeless shelters.

The Homeless Toolkit (Library Edition) teaches library: key facts about homelessness, skills for working with homeless patrons and advice for specific situations. This paper includes one example of each:

Fact #4:

Skill #6:

Situation #10:

**Homelessness is
Boring**

**Explain, Don't
Debate**

**Patrons are
Arguing**

Fact #4: Homelessness is Boring

In order to better understand the life of the individuals I serve at one of the largest shelters in Illinois (USA), I have multiple times tried living in the shelter for days at a time (and even walked the streets). Every time I do it I am shocked by just how bloody boring it is.

Given just how boring it is, I am not surprised by how many homeless individuals are avid readers: books break up the monotony and keep the mind sharp.

I have no doubt that library staff are the group that takes its reading most seriously. I am also certain, though, that homeless people are a close second!

Imagine...

Imagine being cut off from most of your friends and family.

Imagine being unemployed (and possibly unemployable because of mental health issues).

Imagine that you don't even own a TV that you can watch when you want (if the shelter has a TV you have to watch whatever and whenever they choose).

Imagine having many hours every single day where you had absolutely nothing to do.

What would you do to fight off the boredom and exercise your mind?

Since you work at a library, I am guessing that you would do exactly what MANY homeless individuals do: You would read a book!

Skill #6: Explain, Don't Debate

Don't Do This

There are two extremes you want to avoid when talking to a homeless patron about rules or other potentially tense topics:

- **Debating** – You want to avoid getting into a debate about the merits of your rules. It sends the message that the rules are “up for debate,” it will frustrate you and it will create unnecessarily conflict.
- **Dictating** – It is equally unproductive to take a “Because I said so,” approach. If a person has a question about a rule and you are unwilling to give any explanation, it sends the message that you either don't have a rationale for it or that you are unwilling to share it. Either way, you look like a jerk.

Do this Instead

There is a third path: “**Explaining.**” Here is how you do that:

- Offer a sentence or two explanation, but no more. A few sentences says “this is the reason for the rule” whereas a five minute monologue says “I don't actually believe in the rule so I'm going to keep talking until you go away.”
- Don't be defensive about the rule. If the rule is a valid one, then have some confidence in it. (If you don't have any confidence in the rule, it should probably be changed...)
- If the person continues to challenge the rule even after you have explained its rationale, consider “blaming the rules.”

Example: Debating

Library Staff: "Sir, we have a rule against eating in the library. Would you mind finishing your meat loaf and gravy outside, please?"

Patron: "Why can't people eat in the library?"

Staff: "Because food can damage the books."

Example: Dictating

Library Staff: "Sir, we have a rule against eating in the library. Would you mind finishing your cotton candy and extra large Slurpee outside, please?"

Patron: "Why can't people eat in the library?"

Staff: "If you don't take your food outside right

Example: Explaining

Library Staff: "Sir, we have a rule against eating in the library. Would you mind finishing your chocolate fondue outside, please?"

Patron: "Why can't people eat in the library?"

Staff: "Because food can damage the books."

Patron: "But I'll be extra careful."

Staff: "Even if you're extra careful, you might accidentally get a little gravy on a book."

Patron: "I promise I will be really really careful."

Staff: "I believe you, but even when I'm really careful, I sometimes still spill food."

Patron: "Yeah, but I am super careful, and I brought a napkin so I can wipe up anything really quickly."

Staff: "But even if you wipe the gravy up, it can leave a residue that causes damage."

Patron: "Trust me. I'll wipe it up before it can cause any damage."

... and on and on and on...

now, you're going to be banned."

Patron: "But all I did was ask a question!"

Staff: "That's it! You're banned for twenty years!"

Patron: "But I'll be extra careful."

Staff: "Hey, believe me, I would love to let you eat in here, but that's the rule and I'll get in trouble if my boss sees you eating in here."

Situation #10: Patrons are Arguing

First You Need to Know

There are two types of fights between homeless patrons:

1. Noisy arguing where people don't touch each other.
2. An actual fist fight

Noisy arguments are common, but actual fist fights are relatively rare.

Here's why:

- Most homeless individuals don't actually want to get into a fist fight, but they want to look like they are willing to fight. The distinction is important. For their own safety (to not be viewed as weak), other people need to think they are willing to fight.

Consequently, here is what often happens:

- Two homeless individuals begin shouting at each other and walking slowly towards each other as if they are about to get into a fist fight. They intentionally are loud enough for you to hear and move relatively slowly towards each other in order to LITERALLY give you time to break up the fight before it starts.
- Then you break up the fight and everybody got to "look tough" without getting arrested or punched.

This is good news for you: It takes relatively little effort to "break up" one of these fights.

Basic Advice

- Stop arguments quickly. The goal is to stop it before there has been any physical contact. Once there has been pushing or punching, it is no longer just an argument. It is a fight.
- If you kick the people out, I recommend kicking them out one at a time. Have one person leave, then wait five minutes or so and then kick the other person out. If you kick them out at the same time, you increase the chances of having a fight in your parking light.

One Final Comment

The most dangerous kind of fight is the kind that is not noisy first. If a fight seems to erupt out of nowhere, stand back and call the police. That is not a display of "looking tough." That is an attempt to hurt one another.