



LEADERSHIP BRIEF:

Effective Strategies and Models for Urban Libraries Addressing Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

The homelessness epidemic is a challenge facing communities across North America that demands our collective attention. In cities large and small, individuals and families find themselves without a permanent place to call home, so many seek refuge in our public libraries, where they can find resources, safety, and a sense of belonging.

In May 2024, the Urban Libraries Council brought together library directors and CEOs from across the United States and Canada to discuss public libraries' responses to this [pressing issue of homelessness](#) and how libraries are at the forefront of addressing community needs. Co-hosted by LA County Library and the Los Angeles Public Library, the [2024 CEO Roundtable](#) was an opportunity for library executives to engage in in-depth discussions on innovative approaches to support the unhoused.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR LIBRARY LEADERS

The roundtable emphasized the essential role public libraries play in supporting those experiencing homelessness. Library leaders discussed how a multifaceted approach of treating the unhoused with dignity and recognizing their diverse needs, coupled with advocating for policy reforms and increased funding, can strengthen their homeless services. Conversations from the roundtable identified several effective strategies for libraries to take.

1. **Adopt a “Housing First” Approach** — Focus on connecting people that are experiencing homelessness with resources that provide permanent housing as a foundational step to addressing homelessness, rather than relying on temporary shelters.
2. **Build Strong Partnerships** — Collaborate with social service agencies, nonprofits, local governments, and healthcare providers to offer comprehensive services, including housing assistance, mental health support, and job training.
3. **Enhance Staffing and Training** — Implement dedicated engagement roles, train staff in de-escalation and behavioral management, and develop safety measures with staff input to better support unhoused individuals.

4. **Design Welcoming Spaces** — Create designated support areas, improve library layouts to encourage a welcoming environment, and use intentional design to manage behavior and promote community use.
5. **Leverage Innovative Programs** — Utilize initiatives like telehealth services and medical clinics to address substance abuse and improve public health among homeless populations.
6. **Promote Empathy and Understanding** — Engage directly with the homeless community and develop programs to raise awareness and challenge stereotypes.
7. **Align Security Practices** — Ensure consistency in security measures across all staff, including external security personnel, to maintain a cohesive and supportive environment.

BEST PRACTICES

While every urban library system has unique challenges regarding engaging the unhoused, there are general best practices that are proven to be foundational and effective in crafting and managing these services. This Leadership Brief includes a collection of best practices and successful models adopted by ULC members in responding to homelessness. Continue reading to discover how innovative community partnerships, strategic staff development, and thoughtful physical design are transforming libraries to be a vital place for supporting the unhoused.

1. Partnerships

Partnerships are essential for libraries to address homelessness effectively. In a survey of 2024 CEO Roundtable attendees, two-thirds of respondents identified community partnerships as a primary tool to support the library's aid to the unhoused and in navigating the local impact of homelessness. By collaborating with social service agencies, nonprofits, local governments, and healthcare providers, libraries can deliver a wider range of comprehensive services such as housing assistance, mental health support, and job training.

Local CEO Roundtable hosts, the Los Angeles Public Library and LA County Library, both participate in a [program called The Source](#). This service, made possible through the partnership of local government departments and community organizations, offers a one-stop shop of resources and services to help homeless Angelenos transition to independent and supported living. These free services are also available for eligible low-income residents.

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“We have implemented a monthly one-stop shop for various resources and services, which has been successful, but there are limitations due to the capacity of other nonprofit organizations and partners.”

— Skye Patrick, County Librarian and CEO, LA County Library

Examples of other community partnerships at ULC member libraries include the following.

Technology access extends outside the library

The **Denver Public Library** participates in a local government initiative called **Safe Outdoor Spaces** (SOS), which are managed, secure campsites for those experiencing homelessness. These spaces throughout the Colorado city offer amenities such as bathrooms, electricity, and access to social services. Since 2020, the **library has supported campsite residents** in a variety of ways. The library's Community Resources Team offers peer navigation and social work support, while the Community Technology Center provides technology assistance, including Chromebooks, Wi-Fi hotspots, and internet access. Additionally, the library's Digital Inclusion program distributes smartphones to SOS residents. This collaboration has facilitated transitions to permanent housing, treatment, or family reunification and is funded through 2024.

Telehealth services improve addiction treatment

Recognizing the challenges of treating alcohol and drug abuse among those facing homelessness, the **San Diego Public Library** partnered with San Diego State University's School of Social Work and local nonprofit Father Joe's Villages to provide buprenorphine, a medication used to treat opioid addiction, to those in need.

The **partnership** focused on helping university researchers determine if providing telehealth services at the public library would increase buprenorphine treatment uptake compared to a traditional clinic, like the ones at Father Joe's Villages. The two-year study, from 2023-2024, found that library telehealth participants were more likely to reduce substance abuse and take buprenorphine, suggesting this model could be scaled and replicated in other public libraries.

Modernization projects with affordable housing

Urban planners don't need to keep library modernizations and affordable housing construction in separate categories. The **Brooklyn Public Library** has applied "co-located housing" into two recent library modernizations projects. The **Sunset Park Library**, which opened in November 2023, followed a new development model that offered 100% affordable housing. Through a historic partnership with city and state officials and local nonprofit Fifth Avenue Committee, the Brooklyn Public Library delivered 49 units of permanently affordable housing at the new branch.

The **Spokane Public Library** and refugee organization Thrive International are collaborating on an **affordable housing project** that integrates library services with housing for refugees in Washington state. The land, originally bought by the library district in the 1990s for a new library, was left unused due to construction challenges. Development of at least 45 affordable housing units is underway, and the current plan also includes a playground, community garden, greenhouse, community center, and a 24/7 library kiosk.

2. Staff Development

Library staff play a critical role in connecting unhoused patrons to essential resources and services. This is why libraries should consider creating dedicated roles, such as a professional social worker or trained staff member, to focus on engaging individuals experiencing homelessness. This role can involve building partnerships with local service providers and connecting patrons to these resources.

At the **Salt Lake City Public Library**, a dedicated staff workgroup developed and maintains a comprehensive guide, *Social Services for Vulnerable Patrons*. This document lists dozens of social service agencies and the specific support they offer, such as food banks and rental assistance. Staff are trained to consult this guide first when approached by patrons seeking help with social services.

To support more complex needs, the library's Social Services Coordinator and **full-time Social Worker** provide additional assistance. Staff are trained to identify when it's appropriate to involve the Social Services team versus the Safety team, ensuring the right response in any situation.

The library also maintains a shared calendar that shows when and which community partners are on-site, detailing the services available and the target populations they serve.

In addition, Salt Lake City's Social Services Coordinator leads training sessions on mandatory reporting for child and vulnerable adult abuse/neglect, trauma-informed care, and professional boundaries. These initiatives aim to equip staff with the knowledge and confidence to navigate emotionally charged and challenging interactions with patrons, fostering both staff safety and patron support. Ensuring that staff feel safe, supported, and prepared to respond effectively in these situations is vital.

Awareness building initiatives

Libraries should encourage and train staff on methods of developing initiatives to help reduce stigma and educate both staff and the public on the challenges the unhoused are facing. For example, the **Dallas Public Library** launched a podcast called "On the Block," featuring personal stories from the city's homeless community. As part of the library's homeless engagement initiative, **the podcast** aims to foster understanding and empathy by showcasing the diverse experiences and challenges faced by unhoused individuals.

The **Peer Outreach Program** at the **DC Public Library** supports customers experiencing or at risk of homelessness. Trained and certified through the DC Department of Behavioral Health, peer staff work across library branches to help individuals find shelter, housing, treatment, mental health services, food, and clothing. Peers act as role models, demonstrating recovery competence and serving as advocates, providing essential information and support. They build trust and rapport with customers, helping them begin the challenging process of moving out of homelessness and into recovery.

De-escalation and behavioral management training

Libraries should also train staff on de-escalation techniques and empower staff with effective training and tools that help and communicate shared standards to all who use the library space. Tools such as suspensions for violations of a set code of conduct can serve as an effective deterrent for maintaining a conducive environment for all who use the library space. For example, the **Calgary Public Library** has a Code of Conduct that governs all library users, alongside a safety module for staff focused on de-escalation and safety practices.

At **Salt Lake City Public Library**, trauma-informed training includes consistent application of the **Code of Conduct**, and staff recently received refreshed verbal de-escalation training. Additionally, Salt Lake City's Safety and Social Services teams collaborate to intervene when patrons' behaviors appear to stem from mental illness or substance misuse.

Libraries should also involve staff in designing safety measures that make them feel secure when interacting with patrons. For example, **Calgary Public Library** offers a "Safe Walk" program, where staff can request a security guard's assistance in approaching certain situations. They also use a staff-designed debriefing tool for peer learning after incidents.

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“The implementation of a ‘constellation of services and resources,’ including hiring security companies, social workers, and community service representatives trained in de-escalation techniques, has been beneficial.”

— John Szabo, City Librarian, Los Angeles Public Library

3. Physical Design Interventions

The design and set up of the library's physical space is important in ensuring that all who come into the space feel welcome. The physical experience of people within a space can influence how they act and interact within that space. Particularly, library spaces should be designed to give people who are searching for help and assistance a sense of belonging, connection, and support as soon as they walk in.

Designated support area/services desk

In addition to library information and customer service desks, libraries should also consider including an easily accessible designated space serving people who need more targeted social service supports. These designated spaces or desks should be designed in an approachable and inclusive way that encourages engagement and preserves the dignity of those who are seeking assistance. This could include the way in which a service is named, such as the **“Help (Homeless, Engagement, Leadership, Program) Desk”** at **Dallas Public Library** and the **“Wellness Desk”** at **Calgary Public Library**. It can also include the way in which the desk or space is designed, such as privacy frosting on glass meeting room walls to support sightlines and privacy needs.

Libraries should work to include and expand essential elements that support the needs of those experiencing homelessness. This is particularly important as libraries often provide access to services and infrastructure items that they may face barriers to accessing elsewhere, including washrooms, water fountains, and Wi-Fi to name a few. For example, the Dallas Public Library recently made efforts to improve the living conditions of people experiencing homelessness by installing charging stations and creating small meeting spaces that people can reserve for personal use and for cases where people require some privacy.

Behavior management through design

Libraries should extensively invest in communicating the sanctity of the library space through specific and intentional design details. Such details should aim to communicate the reality that library spaces are meant for the shared enjoyment of community, as well as to serve as deterrence against behaviors that violate the space's **code of conduct**. This could include making spaces more open, improving lighting, and removing restrictive signs that may make patrons feel unwelcome, and implementing and communicating a simple code of conduct for everyone in the space.

CONCLUSION

Libraries across North America are increasingly at the forefront of addressing the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness. By implementing a combination of community partnerships, staff development, and intentional physical design, library leaders can better support both unhoused patrons and the staff who serve them.

Key best practices include forming strong partnerships with social service agencies and local governments to expand the range of resources available within libraries. Through these collaborations, libraries can provide essential services such as housing assistance, mental health care, and job training, enhancing the support available to unhoused patrons.

Additionally, staff development plays a crucial role in ensuring that library personnel are prepared to manage the unique challenges they face. This includes training staff on de-escalation techniques, trauma-informed care, and behavioral management, as well as empowering them with the tools and protocols necessary to ensure a safe, supportive environment for all library users. Libraries should also consider hiring dedicated staff, such as social workers or community engagement coordinators, to focus specifically on connecting patrons to needed resources.

Physical space also matters. Designing welcoming environments that clearly communicate shared expectations of behavior can create a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere for all patrons, especially those experiencing homelessness. Providing designated support areas where unhoused individuals can easily access help and resources preserves their dignity and strengthens the library's role as a community refuge.

By taking these steps, library leaders can transform their institutions into hubs of support, helping to address homelessness in meaningful and lasting ways. These strategies not only improve the lives of patrons but also empower staff to handle difficult situations with confidence, compassion, and professionalism. Libraries are uniquely positioned to be champions for their communities, and adopting these best practices will enable them to continue serving as safe havens for all.

Acknowledgments

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