

Library Psychiatry

Is there a place for the mentally ill in your law library?

By Jennifer S. Murray



Any public services law librarian working in a law library open to the public will deal with mentally ill patrons. For many, these interactions happen daily, and it is no easy task. They can run the gamut from challenging to humorous and unpleasant to downright scary. If you feel guilty because you would rather avoid dealing with mentally ill patrons, it is okay. Know that you are not alone, and the feeling is normal. And, if you feel alone in your struggle with mentally ill patrons, a quick Internet search will show you that public libraries throughout the world deal with the same issues.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, approximately one in four adults has a mental illness. The Institute also reveals that one in 17 of those suffering from a mental illness will have a severe form of it. The National Coalition for the Homeless reports that approximately 16 percent of the homeless population suffers from significant and chronic mental illness. Yet, despite these statistics, there is little if any discussion of reference interviews and accompanying techniques for dealing with these patrons in library schools across the country. This lack of attention to the mentally ill segment of our patron base leaves us as law librarians to fend for ourselves when interacting with that population. We typically must develop our own skill set for these interactions on the job through trial and error.

No discussion of the mentally ill library patron can occur without an understanding of why the problem exists. Societal changes have resulted in more mentally ill persons not receiving the care they need. You may have heard that this problem is a result of closure of mental health facilities turning patients out onto the streets but this is not the true cause of the problem. According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, while this may have been the case 40 years ago, today's problem is a lack of social services for this population. Without this social services network, libraries often fill a void for the mentally ill.

Also, while it is true that some are homeless, others do receive some form of financial assistance and have shelter. It is inaccurate to assume that all homeless are mentally ill or that all mentally ill are homeless. But regardless of the patron's personal situation, libraries are friendly, open places where access to information is a fundamental tenet. As a result, the mentally ill may be attracted to the library to fulfill their need to be socially connected, receive information, and be left undisturbed.

Before you begin a conscious effort to address your interactions with mentally ill patrons, it is also necessary to understand that this isn't a solvable problem or one that will go away. The mentally ill library patron will continue to be a presence at your public library. If your library's goal is to rid itself of this type of patron, the staff will be set up for failure. But libraries can make serving this specific population less burdensome by accepting it as a part of their patron base and making informed

decisions about how they want to handle their informational and resource needs. Hopefully, this article will begin a discussion in your library about how you can make this happen.

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So, how does a public law library with a problem patron who is mentally ill begin to address the issue? There are four steps: (1) develop library policies and procedures that aid you in these interactions; (2) train on mental health issues and best practices for interacting with the mentally ill; (3) learn how to have difficult conversations and make difficult decisions; (4) connect with other community referrals and resources for the mentally ill; and (5) address security issues.

Policies and Procedures

Creation of policies and procedures that allow you to better control all your library patrons is critical. In order to make these rules in an appropriate manner, it is imperative to know the rights of the mentally ill as they pertain to library access. Both statutory and case law support the right of the mentally ill to access public spaces. As a result, any rules must be enforced uniformly upon all library patrons and not just the homeless or mentally ill. The *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)* gives the mentally ill specific rights. In particular, Title II of the *ADA* provides that no qualified individual with a disability may, because of that disability, be excluded from participation or be denied the benefits of public services, programs, or activities. In addition, federal case law exists that states libraries cannot bar homeless from their facilities.

If your problem is that you have no policy in place that addresses this issue, it can be very helpful to reach out to other public libraries to find out what policies they may have in place. For example, in writing this article I discovered that the Washington, D.C., public libraries recently prohibited sleeping in the library as well as bringing in more than two bags. I was

particularly intrigued by the two bag rule because our library had a patron arrive last year with all his belongings on a furniture dolly. Given that our library is in a court with airport-like security, complete with x-ray machines to scan personal items, I could not understand how the patron could get through with that dolly. Since we do not have any policy in place that would address this issue, we were also not in a position to request that the patron leave. However, we do have strict enforcement of our policy that patrons not leave their bags

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unattended. Had the patron left the dolly unattended, we would have put it in the possession of court security. Regardless of policies, I felt it was completely appropriate that, when the patron left the dolly in the middle of a heavy traffic area, we ask him to move it. As this incident demonstrates, this particular population can be extremely creative, meaning you may often find yourself addressing issues on a case-by-case basis.

Consider this hypothetical situation and what critical analysis is involved in application of your library policies. If you have a mentally ill person using the Internet to watch streaming videos, ask yourself two questions before you ask him or her to stop. Do you have a library policy in place that prohibits this? And, if so, would you enforce it if the patron were instead a law student or attorney? If you answered yes to both questions, then you are in the best situation possible. If you answered no to both of these questions, you need to consider whether you have a legitimate basis for asking the patron to stop the offending behavior. Of course, there are certain behaviors that are addressed by statutes and ordinances that would not require a library policy. But if the behavior is not so egregious as to violate law or public policy, you then must consider whether you need to implement a new policy. If you answered yes to only the latter question, you need to give serious consideration to how your library enforces its policies and whether it is appropriate to not enforce the policy uniformly.

Training

The training required to address the needs of your library's mentally ill patron is two-fold. First, it is not enough to simply have policies and procedures in place. You must train your staff and engage them in discussions about these policies and related procedures. This training ensures staff members understand the policies as well as how to enforce and use them. Second, staff also should receive training from a mental health professional on how to interact with the mentally ill.

It is critical that you not attempt to identify what type of mental illness a person has. Trying to determine if someone is schizophrenic, obsessive compulsive, or any other category of mental illness is a red herring that you are stepping outside your role as a librarian. Instead, identify the barriers to your reference interview or library services that the mental illness presents. Think about this situation: How often have you seen someone talking to himself or herself out in public and wondered what was wrong with him or her? As you got closer, however, you realized he or she had a blue-tooth device and was talking on a cell phone. Remember that your assumptions can be faulty.

If you focus on the reference interview and what barriers you encounter, you may find that you are still able to aid the person with a true information need. If, for example, the person is having a conversation with someone in his or her head, you can ask him or her to please focus on your

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conversation instead. If he or she is being disruptive to other patrons by talking out loud, you can explain that the library requires quiet. There is no reason to approach this conversation any differently than you would in asking a library patron you perceive as “normal” to turn off a cell phone. You should only adjust your approach if the patron responds inappropriately to your request or you have legitimate reason based on your observations of the person to fear for your personal safety.

If the patron is asking questions that aren't based in reality, you can still respond in a rational manner. Consider whether the patron's question is based in logic. If so, you could answer it and suspend your own personal beliefs. I once had a patron who wanted to sue aliens for invading his thoughts. Rather than engage in a discussion about whether that was a rational belief, I responded that his first issue would be to find out if he had jurisdiction to sue the aliens. I guided him to some resources on the topic of jurisdiction and recall that he was quite content when I left him. However, if the person's questions are not based in any logic, you can respond firmly in a clear but calm tone that there is nothing more you can do for the patron and explain that, unless he or she has another question, you need to help other patrons. You ultimately may need to request assistance from your institution's security or law enforcement. However, from my experience, that rarely is the case.

As evidenced in the discussion above, you must be able to have difficult conversations and make difficult decisions when dealing with the mentally ill patron, and this is not something that most library staff can do naturally. As such, library staff should receive training to enable them to develop this skill set. What does having a difficult conversation look like? Let's say that a patron's severe body odor is disturbing to both library staff and other patrons. You can be empowered to have an appropriate conversation with that patron. It is an awkward conversation, but it is not impossible. Rehearsing how the conversation will go with a colleague

is helpful. Sometimes it can be easier to make a statement rather than ask a question. For example, you could say: “I need to let you know that, because you haven't taken a shower in a while, your body odor is noticeable and disturbing to others. Here is a list of places you can go to take a shower. We need you to leave and not return until after you have showered.” Of course, any of these difficult discussions and decisions must comport with your library policies and procedures. If your

library policies dictate that you are unable to ask a patron with severe body odor that disturbs others to leave, then brainstorm with your colleagues what other options you might have. Can you ask the patron to move to a different area of the library perhaps?

The bottom line with difficult conversations and decisions is that they take training and practice. They also

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require a good knowledge of the boundaries of your library policies and procedures. The more that library administration can help staff by outlining boundaries, the more empowered library staff will be to address these conversations and decisions within their appropriate authority. In the end, it will take time and effort in this area to see identifiable progress. Engaging in training and allowing library staff to discuss their issues and questions in training is invaluable toward making that progress.

Connect

The benefits your law library can derive from connecting with other public libraries and social work organizations in your locale are tremendous and can have immediate impact. If your library is having a problem with a patron, it is very likely that another nearby library is having a problem with that same patron. Wouldn't a unified approach make sense in that circumstance? If you wish to pursue this option, remember to expand your network to all public libraries and not just public law libraries. Once you have combined forces with other library stakeholders, you can easily gather and share information. This information can be made available to all through the various Internet-based technologies such as blogs, wikis, or web pages. It is quite easy to make your own resources with the freeware available. Through the Maricopa County Library Council, our library was able to begin the process of establishing a wiki that shares the various resources that Phoenix metropolitan libraries have created regarding homeless and mentally ill patrons. It is our hope that this small step will blossom into an even larger network of shared resources addressing the provision of services to mentally ill and homeless patrons.

But networking should include more than just other public libraries. You should also identify what social services agencies, both public and private, exist in your area. For example, another step our library took was to reach out to the Central Arizona Shelter Services, the largest homeless shelter in the Phoenix metropolitan area. This connection allowed us to identify the resources available to our homeless and mentally ill patrons, such as where to refer patrons for showers. Through this connection, we were also able to learn about training opportunities specifically on the topic of mental illness. In return, through the Maricopa County Library Council, we are currently looking into how our public libraries can assist this shelter by providing computers and basic computer instruction through grant funding. The partnership can truly be a win-win for everyone involved.

Security

Finally, the reality is that no approach to addressing the mentally ill library patron is complete unless it addresses safety concerns. To be certain, no one, mentally ill or otherwise, should make library staff or patrons fear for their safety. Furthermore, if your policies do not have any repercussions when violated, there is no disincentive to prevent the patron from behaving inappropriately. Any public law library should have some mechanism for security. It could be the local police department, campus security, or court security. If you are about to embark on a concerted effort to deal with this segment of your patron base when your library previously has been passive about it, you should engage in a dialogue with whoever handles your security. They will play a pivotal role and need to have input into how the final interaction proceeds if removal of the patron is unfortunately required.

Our law library thought we had a process in place to address patrons violating library policies. However, when we began enforcing policies and requesting removal of patrons in dire situations, we learned that court security viewed things differently. We had to set multiple meetings with security and draft specific policies to ensure we followed the steps they felt would be necessary before any removal could occur. The end result was a positive one though. The procedures we put into place have improved staff comfort levels in handling patron interactions where escalation is required. As such, unless you are fortunate enough to have your own library security, initiating this conversation with security would be wise. None of the steps above will do any good if you are left with no way to

For More Information

If you are interested in learning more about homeless and mentally ill library patrons, the following resources may be of interest to you:

American Library Association, Office for Literacy and Outreach Services

www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/olos/poor-homeless/servicespoor.cfm

American Library Association, Tip Sheet #7, Library Accessibility, "What You Need to Know: Library Patrons with Mental Illness"

www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/ascla/asclaprotocols/accessibilitytipsheets/tipsheets/7%20%20mental%20illness.pdf

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nih.nihm.gov

Homeless Law Blog

<http://homelesslaw.wordpress.com>

enforce them. And you don't want to find out that you have no ability to enforce a policy at the time you are trying to enforce it.

Conclusion

Creation of a comprehensive approach to addressing the use of your library by mentally ill patrons is a worthwhile endeavor. It is also a journey that will make you step back and think critically about the larger world around you. Many of the judgments you may have about mentally ill library patrons will change. I confess that my initial goal when I began our library's effort was to direct the population elsewhere. The education I received on this journey made me realize that the mentally ill deserve and need our service. Instead, the goal should really be identifying how to successfully coexist with the mentally ill patron. ■

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