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Building Community at the Library With Coffee and Conversation

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As communities and individuals struggle with houselessness and housing insecurity, library staff must adapt in order to help our patrons fulfill needs. In 2013, Multnomah County Library (MCL) and the Multnomah County Department of County Human Services surveyed library patrons about library use. The survey identified that about 18.6 percent of visitors to Central Library—the county system's main branch, located in downtown Portland—are people experiencing houselessness. These patrons visit the library more frequently than patrons who are not experiencing houselessness, and they tend to stay at the library longer than the latter group.



Because patrons experiencing houselessness may have negative experiences interacting with staff in businesses, government offices, and other public institutions like libraries, it's important to start any engagement by building relationships. Staff members need to help these patrons find resources and library materials, assist them with account issues, and show them that the library is the right place for them by making them feel welcome. In order to address this need, staff looked for a way to build relationships between staff and patrons and to create a welcoming environment in the library.

The Shared Problem

A 2016 survey of MCL staff found that more than half of the staff members who responded did not feel they had enough knowledge or resources to be truly helpful to patrons experiencing houselessness. More than 75 percent of respondents wanted ongoing training on issues related to serving people experiencing houselessness.

In April 2016, after working with a cohort of librarians at the Kettering Foundation and learning from several other public libraries that are making efforts to serve patrons experiencing houselessness and poverty, we began offering a program called “Coffee and Conversation” to engage this patron group and to give library staff the chance to interact with patrons experiencing houselessness in a safe and social environment. Coffee and Conversation is based on a program started in 2013 by the Dallas Public Library in Texas (Africawala, 2014) and adapted by several other libraries.

Kettering Foundation—Learning to Work *with Our Community*

In 2015, two librarians from Multnomah County Library were invited to the Kettering Foundation campus in Dayton, Ohio, to discuss ways that libraries can work with individuals in the community to address shared problems. The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit organization focused on researching democracy. Its core insights include that a robust democracy requires “citizens who can make sound decisions,” “a community that can work together to solve common problems,” and “institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening society.” The Foundation convenes learning exchanges during which people come together to discuss how to solve specific problems. This is a time for people who have an interest in solving a problem to come together to talk about their experiences and ideas and decide how to move forward. These learning exchanges may then develop into a cohort that continues meeting to exchange what they have learned over the course of some time.

The Kettering Foundation focuses on working with “citizens,” or members of the community, rather than for or on those citizens, positing: “democracy requires a community, or a society of citizens, that can work together to address common problems” (“Core insights: Communities,” n.d., para. 1).

Getting Started

Before starting a new kind of program, particularly one with a goal of supporting staff in engaging with patrons in a new way, we wanted to make sure we had staff and management buy-in. In addition to proposing the project to senior and middle managers we spent time visiting various staff group meetings at Central Library to explain the program and to specifically ask staff for support. Support might mean attending a program session or



promoting the session to patrons and to other staff members. After the program began we continued visiting staff meetings to promote the program and to report on our progress. Direct communication with staff whom we hoped would support the program was helpful in gaining that support.

The target audience for this program is people experiencing houselessness and library staff. In order to avoid attracting patrons who are not in that demographic we did not initially promote the program through typical library promotional channels, such as the library website. Instead we placed handbill style flyers on tables in the room in which the program would be hosted. Staff invited patrons verbally, and Kate Schwab, the librarian at Central Library focused on serving patrons experiencing houselessness, promoted the program during outreach sessions to shelters and other service providers.

Implementation

Starting the program at the beginning of the day proved to make the most sense, as patrons are moving into the library and into the Community Room, where the program takes place. This room is often used by people experiencing houselessness to charge their devices, read or study, and spend time with friends. Since we are already set up when patrons come in, there is no need to ask people to move if they are not participating, and we are able to welcome people as they arrive.

We provide a generous supply of coffee along with cookies, fruit, and soft breakfast bars. We place easel pad-sized sticky notes on the tables, on which we write conversation prompts and a drawing prompt for the shy or artistic. Staff welcome patrons into the room and invite them to grab a cup of coffee and some snacks. Because the ability to charge their electronics is so important to these patrons, we let them plug in during the program but ask them to engage in conversation rather than using their technology.

For each sheet of questions, we usually write three questions on a theme. Staff often act as the recorders for the question prompts. Sometimes people respond to the questions, and sometimes they talk about whatever they feel like discussing that day.

Our questions have ranged over a variety of topics, from questions about the library and the community to questions about hobbies and favorite activities.

What change would you like to see in your community?

*Free garden; Everyone knows each other; Spirit of fun, friendly, sharing;
Can't buy hot food with food stamps, but I have nowhere to cook.*

What kind of things do you make?

*Paintings; Online memes; Bracelets or necklaces out of beads/yarn;
Karaoke (memories are made); Cards; Friends; Food and pastries*

What does it mean to make something yourself?

*It's cool to see others enjoy my work; Joy; Help find answers;
Promote self awareness; A sense of accomplishment; Sense of peace.*





One of the responses to the drawing prompt, "Draw what health means to you."

As patrons become familiar with the program they become its ambassadors, letting new participants know how the sessions work.

It can be uncomfortable for some staff to begin to interact with patrons in new ways. To prepare staff for the session, the organizers share the conversation prompts in advance, as well as meeting with participating staff a few minutes before the session begins to talk about how the sessions usually unfold. Once the sessions begin, those who have participated before lead by example, demonstrating that a little discomfort is normal and should not be seen as a roadblock. Once people have settled into conversations of mutual interest, they find themselves relaxing and enjoying the experience. When we surveyed staff after the pilot, 47 percent of survey participants said that the program helped them feel more comfortable talking with patrons (50 percent said that they were pretty comfortable to begin with). In the same survey, 100 percent said they felt this session helped build community in the library.

The program provides opportunities to talk about behavior—both by staff and by patrons—in a way that is less hierarchical and more open than conversations intended to correct or modify patron behavior. Since Coffee and Conversation began, MCL enacted changes in the library rules. We deliberately chose not to use the sessions as forums about the rules. However, as conversations naturally arose between staff and patrons, they provided a way for staff to discuss the background and reasoning behind the rules and for patrons to discuss their feelings about how the rules were explained and enforced. One patron shared that the only time any staff person had ever spoken to them before this program was to tell them that they were disobeying a rule. These conversations, and many like them, are much more comfortable and convivial with a little coffee and without any in-the-moment need for behavior modification.



As patrons adapted to the program, we saw attendance grow, and we saw some regular attendees. We used the program to get input from the community on a variety of issues, from health care access to what kinds of programs we should offer at the library.

Lessons Learned


When we began hosting Coffee and Conversation, we started half an hour after the library opened for the day. We quickly realized that it was much better to start the program right at opening so that people could smoothly enter the program as they arrived.

Organizers need to be prepared for the program to change—we make connections with individuals, but people move on for many reasons, and it can be hard to let them go. Two of the regular participants in our group found housing and are no longer joining us for our monthly meetings.

Interest in and awareness of the program among the general staff waxes and wanes. It is necessary to regularly talk to staff about the program, at staff meetings and more informal gatherings, to invite them to take part and remind them that this program exists and serves both patrons and staff.

As shared above, we did have conversations in which we attempted to solicit information to help us make changes or decisions. Generally, these focused conversations did not stay on track; it was much better to be relaxed and respond to where the conversation went rather than attempting to facilitate. The goal of this program is trust building—for both patrons and staff—not information gathering.

Conclusions

Valuable relationships develop when working with patrons, rather than simply for them. Even if the model described in this article is not feasible for your library, the experience of engaging with patrons in different ways, letting people know you are happy they are here, and building trust between library staff and patrons benefits everyone involved. Patrons who feel that library staff welcome them into the library and view them as individuals, rather than needs or behaviors, will feel more confident approaching library staff with information needs. Library staff who have practice talking to marginalized patrons will have more confidence helping a patron meet those information needs. Approaching the relationship in a way that demonstrates that we are not only providing a service but also meeting each other as individual people, makes the library more welcoming and allows us to provide relevant programming and services. 

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Staff and patrons enjoying Coffee and Conversation.

