**DP10 - Two-Year Limited Term Social Worker**

**Supporting Documentation**

**Introduction / Summary**

This paper shows the need for a full-time social worker based out of the Central Library. A social worker would effectively connect with the library’s at-risk community of customers located at the Central Library and branch libraries, connect them to the social services they may need, remove barriers they face in receiving library services, while effectively reducing the number of security and emergency incidents library staff and emergency first responders have to address, making the library a safer and more comfortable place for everyone.

**Background / Problems**

Denver Public Library’s Homeless Services Action Committee formed in 2011 with a dual mission: 1) improving customer service to customers experiencing homelessness. 2) educating staff on issues that these customers face.

We have hosted classes for staff, represented DPL at the annual Project Homeless Connect fair, and made connections with various social service agencies in Denver. Through this work, we have learned more about the scope of homelessness within Denver and nationwide. We have also learned that many of the issues people experiencing homelessness face are not unique to this group, but are common to many people across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Denver Public Library strives to provide a welcoming place for all customers, and to reduce barriers to receiving library services. The Denver Public Library, like all large urban public libraries, attracts a diverse range of customers who utilize the library for different reasons. Some of these customers, homeless or not, are facing serious life challenges and may present behavior that makes it difficult for them to receive library services.

When a customer exhibits behavior that cannot be managed by regular library staff, a Library Security Officer is often called to contact the customer. In extreme cases, Denver Police Department will respond. Sometimes these contacts result in a one-day ban or a ban that lasts until the customer returns to the library to speak to a security supervisor. The process is somewhat ineffective in cases involving a customer who is fearful of someone in a uniform and badge, or who is intoxicated, or who simply does not understand what is happening. But Library staff members are not trained, nor are they expected, to thoroughly address the issues of these customers. At the same time, they often have challenges that require them to rely more heavily on the Library’s services and materials than others. Internet access on the street or in a shelter is often inadequate or nonexistent, for example. Denver Public Library embraces the American Library Association’s stance on equity of access, which means that “all people have the information they need-regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations or geographic barriers.” Adding a social worker to the staff would help the Library work toward that goal, especially where customers experiencing significant life challenges are concerned.

The types of behavior incidences observed by Library staff range from sleeping to physical altercations. Library staff are not always privy to the circumstances leading to these incidences, nor do they know the best referrals for customers to get assistance. Incident tracking by the Library Security Department shows the following issues during the first four months of 2014:

**Customer Behavior Incidences 1/1/14-4/30/14**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 15 | Customer to customer conflict |
| 11 | Customer to staff conflict |
| 64 | Drugs & alcohol use |
| 5 | Inappropriate bathroom use |
| 24 | Computer use violation |
| 1 | Sexual activity |
| 15 | Medical issues |
| 1621 | Sleeping in the Library |
| 29 | Trespassing |
| 426 | Other behavior issues |
| **2211** | **Total** |

Library access can be restricted when customers exhibit behaviors that are addressed by Library security and/or the Denver Police Department, and these behaviors may also discourage other customers who may view the Central Library and some of the branches as unsafe. While Library staff and security strive to resolve conflicts in a constructive way, many situations arise that are out of scope of library and security staff’s training and expertise, resulting in limited access for a large number of customers.

Public libraries across the country have developed innovative ways to address their customers’ needs, which transcend socioeconomic divisions. At the most basic level, public libraries connect customers with social services information in much the same way that we address any customer question: by finding authoritative sources and referring customers to trustworthy agencies. However, many libraries are seeing that this is not enough.

In particular, the libraries in San Francisco and Edmonton, Alberta (Canada) have engaged social workers in various capacities to harness their expertise in addressing tough questions and situations that regular library staff are not trained to handle. The measurable outcomes of their projects have shown that embedded social workers in the public library effectively reduces the number of security and emergency incidents, while also reducing barriers to library services to a customer group that has been historically difficult for regular library staff to reach. The outcomes have been so positive that both library systems have secured additional funding to make their pilot projects permanent, and to expand them to more library branches.

**Solution**

**Other libraries have identified the need for social work outreach services. Two successful programs are at the San Francisco Public Library and the Edmonton Public Library.**

**-San Francisco Public Library:**

* Outreach program began in 2009. Employing the “Recovery model” (similar to Harm Reduction model), a full-time social worker on staff walks floors in Main Library to establish relationships with at-risk patrons. Conducts formal screening to assess for case management and permanent housing services. Trains and supervises formerly homeless Health and Safety Associates (HASAs) to assist with outreach services. 5 HASAs are currently on staff.
* Metrics for people contacted: 60-85 people/month.
* Evidence of success/metrics:
* Favorable response from staff right from the start.
* Program tracks number of people assessed, connected to social services, housing, etc.
* Staff surveys are positive (asks questions like: how safe do you feel?), and branches want social workers of their own. In response, the program has been expanded to the branches, with HASAs doing outreach work.
* Customers respond better to the social worker and HASAs v. librarians and library staff/security staff.
* Other City agencies have shown interest, and San Francisco Parks & Rec. is starting an embedded social worker outreach program in Golden Gate Park this year.

**-Edmonton Public Library, Alberta, Canada.**

* Outreach program started in 2011 in partnership with Boyle Street Community Services, in response to increasing number of people seeking refuge in downtown library. It was a pilot project funded for 3 years with $600,000. Three outreach workers operate within and outside library walls to support and empower at-risk citizens through literacy, education, and social support. Program targets people who may not access existing social services but do use the library because it’s a welcoming, safe place. Library Outreach Services are available during daytime, evening and weekend hours as a drop-in service. Private consultation space is provided, as is general office space.
* “Outreach workers are mandated to:
* Identify and engage with individuals within the library and around the library precincts who appear to be at-risk.
* Provide supported referrals to services and agencies based on client defined needs. Outreach Workers are committed to an anti-oppressive approach that allows the individual to set the pace of change. [Similar to “Recovery Model” and “Harm Reduction Model”].
* Work in collaboration with library staff and area agencies to provide and lead programs of interest to library customers, particularly those with social challenges.
* Educate staff on working with at-risk customers, including understanding of issues that contribute to disruptive behaviors.
* Collaborate with library security staff in working with at-risk customers.
* Demonstrate professionalism by working within the Alberta College of Social Work Code of Ethics and Standards of Practices.
* Embrace the Canadian Library Association Statements on Diversity and Inclusion and Intellectual Freedom. With the EPL Community Librarians, Outreach Workers endeavor to build connections with the greater downtown community. The project has a mandate to bring the diverse users of the library together and to build understanding on community issues.
* **Evidence of success/metrics:**
* Program has had a significant impact on library’s capacity to respond to disruptive behavior without having to involve enforcement or emergency services. Program has had a significant impact on improving peoples’ lives.
* Since inception, July of 2011, over 700 individuals have been engaged by library Outreach Workers, with up to 50 new encounters each month. Key referrals include mental health and addictions treatment, income/employment, personal identification and housing. In 2012, nearly 300 individuals were connected with housing agencies. Outreach Workers support security staff, who often engage with at-risk customers. Security statistics show a consistent decline in severe incidents since 2011. Specifically: there was a -36% decrease in incidents for which police was called in 2011 than the year before.
* Library feels “calmer” according to main branch manager. Customer complaints about homeless customers and disruptive behaviors have also declined demonstrating a growing understanding and tolerance for ‘those people.’
* As of March 2014: Edmonton secured funding to continue outreach project, and expanded the program to five other branch libraries.

**Conclusion**

Denver Public Library workers often feel they are in the position of having to offer social services to customers when they do not have the training to do so. The result is frustration to staff and customers who are not getting their information needs met as well as other customers who avoid the library because they view it as unsafe. Social workers are a crucial link in library services to a customer group that may need vital information and services, but are often the hardest for library staff to reach.

Social workers fill a critical gap in library staff expertise and abilities. Edmonton Public Library and San Francisco Public Library have both demonstrated that embedded social work and outreach services at the library improves the lives of people in their community while simultaneously improving the safety and comfort of everyone who works in and comes to the library.

A two-year limited term social worker would focus on working with customers who have behavior issues that become barriers to receiving library services. They are either banned from the library because of their behavior or do not receive services from staff who do not feel comfortable in their presence. The social worker would also work with staff to train them on how to handle a variety of situations presented with difficult customers giving the staff more confidence. While the primary focus of the social worker would be the behavior issues of difficult customers, they would also work with homeless customers who are motivated to improve their lives by connecting them with resources and information.