**Type of Contribution: PAPER**

**Let’s Talk about the Challenges and Outcomes of Library Services to**

**People Experiencing Homelessness!**

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Keywords:library services to people experiencing homelessness; challenges; outcomes

1. **Introduction**

Homelessness is an extreme form of poverty and a fact in all countries of the world, regardless of the level of development of their economic or governance systems. Due to their living conditions, poor mental and physical health, as well as prejudice, they face a series of barriers preventing them from obtaining equal access to library services. Therefore, IFLA Library Services to People with Special Needs Section (IFLA LSN) developed *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness.* The purpose of the Guidelines is overcoming stereotypes, prejudice and barriers faced by people experiencing homelessness, propose ways and give recommendations for planning, organizing, delivering, advocating, funding and evaluating library services for them (IFLA LSN 2017, 15). Although the Guidelines are based on good practice examples from around the world, libraries in their local community face different and specific kinds of challenges, find different ways to solve them and make a positive impact on the lives of their users, the whole community and the libraries themselves.

The paper presents challenges and outcomes of library services for people experiencing homelessness in Zagreb City Libraries (ZCL) and compares them with examples from around the world. The purpose is to give new inputs to a continuous discussion of the role of libraries in empowering this vulnerable and complex social group.

**Theoretical framework**

Librarians agree that the core values of libraries are access to information, equality and inclusion. Outcomes of the *Global Vision Discussions* organized by IFLA Sections, SIGs, Strategic Programs and Review Groups (IFLA n.d.) prove this. However, at the moment, when the values have to be implemented into the organization of library services for people experiencing homelessness, things become harder and some librarians start to complain that it is not their job, but a social worker’s job.

How challenging and overwhelming it can be to serve people experiencing homelessness is described by Chip Ward in his well-known essay *What they didn't teach us in library school: the public library as an asylum for the homeless* (Ward 2007). Lots of librarians think that there is no match between the needs of the library in providing these services and the education of librarians. On the other hand, some of them think: “If social work training becomes a required part of library school curricula that would send a definite signal to a lot of people that they don’t want to become librarians and maybe a good way to nip their starry-eyed idealism in the bud” (Annoyed Librarian 2017).

Librarians around the world find different ways to gain knowledge and skills to serve people experiencing homelessness. In many cases they are left to themselves (Bunić 2015) or, on the other hand, some libraries in the United States hire social worker and nurses (Fox 2015). Valuable support are also free weekly e-mails tips by Ryan Dowd, the executive director of Hesed House, the homeless shelter in Aurora, Illinois (Dowd n.m.).

There is also discussion about the outcomes of the services for the underserved social groups in the community. “Some libraries of all types, however, are reevaluating the role they play in their community, questioning whether it is still good enough to provide equal access, or if it is time to pursue an active equitable access that focuses on empowering the less powerful and amplifying the voices of the unheard. Libraries that have calculated their value on the strength of circulation and program attendance may see the math changing. If libraries continue to see significant results from community engagement activities, a traditional reliance on enumerating outputs could give way to social equity as a primary value” (Gustina and Guinnee. 2018). Traditional ways of measuring outcomes (number of users, attendances, circulation…) do not give a realistic picture about the impact of these services to life in the community. Focus is now on qualitative ways of measuring outcomes such as interview, focus groups, anecdotal information, video material (Bunić and Šikić 2015).

**Research questions**

In her report to the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee (UN 2015), Special UN Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, Leilani Farha emphasizes that homelessness is a phenomenon requiring urgent and immediate action by the international community and by all states. Homelessness strategies must be cross-sectoral, clearly allocate and coordinate responsibilities of all levels of government. The good practice examples collected worldwide in the process of the development of *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness s*how that librarians and libraries around the world are making numerous and diverse steps to reach people experiencing poverty and homelessness. The best results are achieved when librarians show initiative and sensitivity regarding this topic, library management offers support as well as local authorities and the government, and finally when community organizations are connected in a network (Bunić 2016, 12).

Regarding all of the aforementioned, two main questions are posed:

1. How can librarians in the communities where organizations are not connected in a strong network develop library services for people experiencing homelessness and overcome challenges?

2. How to evaluate the outcomes of the library services for people experiencing homelessness?

**Methodology**

ZCL have been organizing library services for people experiencing homelessness since 2010. Outcomes of the services will be presented through annual reports, both their statistical part as well as through outcomes that cannot be measured in numbers.

Interviews with the librarians, users, partners and associates are conducted to get a full picture about challenges and outcomes. Results will be compared with the examples of the library services for people experiencing homelessness collected in the process of the development of *IFLA* *Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness.*

**Research Results**

Developing library services for people experiencing homelessness in the communities where organizations are not connected in a strong network can lead the librarians to a burnout syndrome (Bunic 15, 4). Setting unrealistic goals along with a lack of partner organizations or experts who can give supervision and support can be overwhelming. Libraries are not expected to take a leading role in empowering people experiencing homelessness but when they do that, the community recognizes their efforts. Their image is greatly improved and they become a positive role model for encouraging others to make a contribution. That attracts more partner organizations and professionals and helps the network grow. Libraries are catalysts of change.

Over the years, more experiences help to set more realistic goals and predict what to expect from users and partner organizations. Given their role in the community and the public trust they enjoy, libraries are presented with numerous possibilities for raising awareness and advocacy. Outcomes are the best in that segment. ZCL received the 2016 Pride of Croatia award for their services to people experiencing homelessness.

But it is important to stress that without cross-sectoral cooperation, as well as clearly allocated and coordinated responsibilities on all levels of government and local community, there is no major impact on the improvement of the quality of life of people experiencing homelessness.

**Discussion**

The example of ZCL shows that libraries can mobilize resources within the organization and community, overcome many challenges, achieve good outcomes and become change makers. They manage to do that in the community where there is no strong network of support, but are these services sustainable? This is questionable as far as only one library in Croatia organizes library services for people experiencing homelessness.

The survey among ZCL librarians who did not participate in the organization of library services for the homeless was conducted on a convenience sample of 33 librarians. They were asked: “Do you think that libraries should organize targeted services for the homeless in areas where there is a higher number of homeless people?” 96.97% answered YES, 3.03% NO. When they were asked “Would you personally engage in the organization of library services for the homeless?”, 51.52% answered YES, 48.48% NO (Bunić 2015, 6).

The attitudes are also a key factor in the library where the network of support in the community is more stronger and the library hires a social worker. She said “One of the biggest challenges is helping some staff understand the needs of the homeless population, also the community understands homelessness and Denver Public Library's role in serving this population. Creating public dialogues to increase awareness, understanding, empathy and compassion for the homeless community is being designed to help address this issue.” (Bunić 2016, 9).

**Conclusion**

Everything should start with changing attitudes so it is very important to know: “**The best thing you can do to help is just be nice**: Homeless individuals are treated very poorly by most people. They are constantly subjected to harassment and disrespect. Most homeless people are craving to be treated with respect. Believe it or not, the most important thing you can do for homeless patrons is not to help them get a job or get sober. The most important thing you can do is treat them with hospitality and respect.” (Dowd n. d.).

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