

## IJIDI: Book Review

Dowd, R. J. (2018). *The librarian's guide to homelessness: An empathy-driven approach to solving problems, preventing conflict, and serving everyone*. Chicago: [ALA Editions](#). ISBN 9780838916261. 248 pp. \$57.00 US.

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A few years ago, I worked in a great library that was the heart of a community. This library's big and bright spaces and computer terminals attracted people from all walks of life: from mothers pushing expensive strollers to homeless men carrying their belongings in oversized backpacks to university students at their laptops. Library staff were proud to create an environment where all patrons felt welcomed and valued. On a fairly regular basis, staff also had to break up fights between different patrons, often calling the police or paramedics. Although libraries are free, communal spaces that can foster connections, they are also sites for potential friction and disruption. People experiencing homelessness, like all other types of patrons, may be involved in some serious incidents which require library staff intervention. Despite the fact that in most cases they are not the underlying problem, this group of patrons is often perceived as an "issue" that requires disproportionately more staff attention and resources, instead of the library framing these encounters as a customer service issue.

Public libraries across North America have long addressed the need to properly serve those experiencing homelessness using several strategies, including hiring social workers, delivering targeted programming, developing key partnerships with external organizations, training staff and engaging the topic in Library and Information Science programs (Lilienthal, 2011). It is in this context that Dowd, a long-time director of a homeless shelter outside of Chicago, adds to the literature on how to effectively serve homeless library patrons. His work, found in a website (<http://www.homelesslibrary.com>), a webinar, and now this book, brings to the table context, experience, and tools that can ideally be used in librarianship. Though Dowd is not a librarian and has never worked in libraries, he has delivered workshops and webinars to many library groups across the U.S. Through this experience he is well aware of the main issues libraries face when serving homeless patrons.

Dowd's book has four parts: outlining homelessness myths and the theory of empathy; a set of tools for applying empathy-driven enforcement; advice on how to deal with more complicated or serious incidents; and information for managers and decision makers. Most of the book's content is from Dowd's own experience working with the homeless. Potential readers can consult the guide when facing specific situations, as it is a very practical toolkit based on the simple premise that we can have patrons follow library rules by either punishment or empathy. The author argues that patrons experiencing homelessness, addiction and mental illness are immune to regular punishment, and therefore it is better to use empathy-driven enforcement with them. This approach focuses on controlling our emotions, developing relationships,

actively listening, and being fair to patrons. Library staff can prevent, de-escalate, and solve potential incidents by changing how we think, talk, and position our body when interacting with a patron.

This book is an ideal read for public library staff who are interested in learning efficient and proven strategies to create a welcoming environment and cultivate relationships with a diverse range of clients in public library spaces. Academic and special librarians might also find this title interesting, but not necessarily applicable given that these types of libraries typically do not interact with homeless users very often. Outreach librarians, more interested in connecting with patrons in their spaces, might take advantage of some of these tools and tips, but may find Dowd's focus on what happens inside the library and the enforcement of rules difficult to assimilate.

One of this guide's greatest strengths, compared to similar resources, is that it provides an insider's perspective into a world that public facing library staff is familiar with, but may not fully understand. The "Top Ten Homeless Myths," unpacked in the first part of the book, as well as "Key Phrases" to use when dealing with conflict are valuable to help us improve the relationship with patrons that we tend to erroneously label as "problematic." Readers learn, for instance, that banning a patron for a month is ineffectual if she does not know where she will sleep that night. Dowd's work is very accessible to readers and provides a wealth of tools, based on his experience working in shelters, and good advice on how to use them. These strategies come with interesting names, including "the Jerry Seinfeld": how to deal with someone who gets too close to you and "the Michael Jordan": focusing on the main goal of enforcing the rules instead of getting offended. Of all the strategies, the "Walmart Rule" stands out: if we greet and acknowledge every person that comes into the library it will be far easier to interact with them later as the need arises.

Despite these useful tools, we have to consider, nonetheless, that Dowd's simplistic method may be hard to implement. I cannot see anyone memorizing his tools ("I think I need to use the Jerry Seinfeld in this situation") or following a step-by-step approach to serve those experiencing homelessness after reading it. Implementing the empathy-driven approach is an emotional investment that will require time and energy to work through. In spite of these challenges, we could argue that, at its core, Dowd's method is basically good customer service with a spin. We have seen these strategies before in other customer service books. For instance, *Win the Customer* has among its 70 rules "Create the Right Culture for Service," or how to change the way we think, and "Don't Be a Zappos to Your Jack Welch Customer," about tailoring service to the individual client by understanding their needs and interests (Martins, 2015). Dowd's focus on homelessness could be a disadvantage, as this book seems more relevant to urban public libraries and singling out homeless people as a more challenging group can increase anxiety and build an extra barrier to service to these users. Yet, taken as a customer service kit on how to deal with every problem patron, the book is invaluable. Empathy-driven enforcement is beneficial to our interactions with teens, stressed moms, and entitled customers in addition to those experiencing homelessness.

Ultimately, Dowd's guide is rich in tools useful to deal with difficult public facing situations. His advice is better suited for staff in public libraries that work with a diverse population, and who are interested in building safe and inclusive spaces without having to turn people away. This is a pleasant and easy read, working best as a guide for quick reference as needed. While reading it does not guarantee an outcome of expertise, this book will provide library staff with a basic understanding of why homeless patrons behave in some particular ways, and the ways

staff can develop better relationships with them without having to see them as a problem.

### References

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