

## Homelessness, Human Services and Libraries.

A cooperative study with recommendations from the Multnomah County Department of Human Services and the Multnomah County Library.



## **Executive Summary**

Multnomah County Library locations serve 15,000 people on-site each day. Library patrons come from all walks of life and use the library for everything from conducting research to keeping cool or warm. Public libraries often serve as day shelters for individuals with housing concerns, mental health needs, and difficulty with transitioning into new employment and domestic situations.

In order to gain a better understanding of the needs of these populations within Multnomah County Libraries, a survey was conducted of patrons entering the Central and Gresham locations. In order to avoid singling people out, all patrons entering the buildings were asked to fill out the survey over the course of varying days and times.

A total of 1,028 surveys were completed 834 at Central and 194 at Gresham. Survey respondents were significantly more likely to be white; persons of color declined to take the survey at much higher rates than white patrons, even when the survey was being administered by a person of color.

A series of recommendations are presented below in near, medium and longer terms. These outline closer coordination between the library and DCHS or other partner agencies, formalized training, provision of informational resources to library staff, and other processes that will aid the library in better serving patrons experiencing homelessness, addiction, or other social service related difficulties.

## Key Findings

### Homelessness

- Rates of homelessness were similar at both library locations; an average of 18.6% of respondents indicated that they were currently homeless. Approximately 0.61% of the general population of Multnomah County is homeless.
- Homeless youth were more likely to use Central Library (21.4% of respondents under age 25) compared to Gresham (2.5%)
- There were very small numbers of homeless seniors at either branch among respondents.
- Gender among the homeless varied significantly between branches. At Central, 63% of homeless respondents identified as male and 36% as female. At Gresham, the numbers were exactly opposite, with 36% male and 64% female.

### Veterans

- Homeless veterans were more likely to use Central Library; 11% of the homeless respondents at Central reported being a veteran compared to 5.6% at Gresham.
- Of the homeless veterans visiting Central Library, 84% identified as male and 16% identified as female. At Gresham, 92% identified as male and 8% identified as female.

### Frequency of Use

- Homeless patrons visit the library more frequently and stay longer. The frequency of visits and lengths of stay may lead to the perception that there are more homeless people spending time at the library than there are in reality.
- At Central, there were 99 respondents who reported visiting the library daily and staying there 1-4 hours, of these 56 were homeless. An additional 23 respondents visit the library daily and stay more than four hours, of these 15 were homeless. Looking at it another way, out of 122 people who visited Central daily and stayed for long periods of time, 71 of them (58%) were homeless.
- At Gresham, there were 14 respondents who visit daily and stay one to four hours, of these 11 were homeless. One additional respondent

reported staying at the library more than four hours a day; that respondent was homeless. Of the 15 respondents who visited daily and stayed for long periods of time, 80% were homeless.

### **Why People Use the Library**

- At Central, 86% of respondents intended to look for books or other reading material during their visit; of those, 16% were homeless. At Gresham, 84% were looking for reading material; of those 15% were homeless.
- Many people use the library as a quiet place to read and do research. At Central, 29% of respondents indicated that the purpose of their visit was related to reading or research. Of those, 31% were homeless. At Gresham the numbers were lower, with 15% of respondents reading or doing research; of those 27% were homeless.
- Libraries are often one of the few places people can use the restroom without making a purchase. At Central Library, 25% of respondents listed using the restroom as one of the reasons for their visit; of these 39% were homeless. At Gresham, 14% needed to use the library restroom; of those 48% were homeless.
- Library computers offer Internet access for many who can't afford it. At Central, 51% of respondents planned to use the computer during their visit; of those 28% were homeless. At Gresham, 48% were there to use the computer; of those 26% were homeless

### **Computer Use**

- Looking for work was one of the top reasons reported for using library computers. At Central, 19.2% of computer usage by respondents was job-related. Of those using the computers to look for a job, 46% were homeless. At Gresham, 18% of respondents reported using computers to search for work; of those 37% were homeless.
- Many respondents also use library Computers to look for new housing. At Central, 12% of respondents indicated that they were using library computers to look for housing; of those, 62% were homeless. At Gresham, 9.3% of respondents were looking for housing on library computers; of those, 61% were homeless.
- About 13% of patrons at Central Library used the computers to search for services; of those 45% were homeless. At Gresham, the picture looked different. Out of the 8.2% of patrons using the computers to search for services, only 31% were homeless.

## Services

The chart below shows the differences in respondents who reported having services versus those who were seeking services:

Service	Central		Gresham	
	Have	Want	Have	Want
Comp Classes	3% total (32% HL)	22% total (26% HL)	4% total (13% HL)	20% total (18% HL)
Job Help	7% total (46% HL)	17% total (40% HL)	6% total (18% HL)	17% total (16% HL)
Mental Health	7% total (39% HL)	8% total (50% HL)	0.5% total (0% HL)	5% total (0% HL)
A&D	5% total (42% HL)	6% total (46% HL)	0% total	2% total (0% HL)
DV	2% total (50% HL)	5% total (45% HL)	0.5% total (0 HL)	3% total (0% HL)
Housing	7% total (55% HL)	16% total (55% HL)	3% total (0 HL)	7% total (23% HL)

- It's interesting to note that at Central, there were nearly as many housed as homeless respondents who were seeking services like mental health, A&D, DV and housing.
- At Gresham more housed people than homeless patrons were looking for all service categories, although it's important to remember that these numbers may be skewed by the low response rates among persons of color

## Weather

- A significant number of people use the library to escape extreme cold or heat. At Central 38.3% of all respondents indicated they came to the library to warm up or cool down. Of those, 33% were homeless and 67% were not homeless. At Gresham, 39.8% of respondents used the library for weather respite. Of those, 17% are homeless and 83% are housed.

## **Recommendations for action**

Recommendations are divided into three prioritized groups: those that should take effect immediately, those that can be accomplished within the next six to 12 months, and those that may take more than 12 months to complete.

### **Immediate**

- DCHS and MCL will arrange meetings between key partners and discuss parameters for adding MCL to the locations that accommodate regular county outreach activities.
- MCL will develop a deeper relationship with Project Respond and make sure all employees know when, why and how to make contact.

### **Six to 12 Months**

- DCHS and MCL will develop a training for employees who serve as Person In Charge (PIC) to increase awareness and common understanding of the services and offerings from county and independent agencies by county region in order to facilitate better referrals to patrons in need. Include when and how to use the Crisis Hotline (and other tools), along with information about what will happen as a result of a crisis line call.
- The library will ensure that all library PICs attend Mental Health First Aid training.
- DCHS and the library will work to develop a Commons page to be used by public service staff as a quick reference guide for issues relating to homelessness or mental health issues.
- The library will create a way to promote 211 services to patrons. This could be accomplished via public programs, a website campaign, or one-on-one interactions between library staff and patrons.

### **Twelve months**

- The library will work with DCHS to develop a three-hour training session for public service employees who do not serve as PIC but are likely to have interactions with patrons experiencing difficulties with housing, addiction, mental health, or domestic violence issues. Ideally this would provide staff members with basic coping methods and hand-off skills to be applied when they need to redirect patrons to someone more skilled.

Appendix one: Sample Survey

Appendix two: Overview of Social Services in Public Libraries