



Facing Homelessness: A Rural Library Perspective

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Westford Public Library

Westford is a small, rural town in Chittenden County with around 2,000 residents. We are located equidistant from Burlington and St. Albans.

We have one PK-8 school, no high school. No police force or paid social services.

The library is open 34 hours a week (Tuesday-Saturday).

Annual budget is roughly \$94,000.

We have one full time employee and one part time employee, our staff work alone most of the time.





Context: What Are (and Aren't) We Talking About

This is Not About: A town resident in crisis. We have other traditions and systems in place for that.

This is About: A new pattern that we're experiencing involving non-residents who arrive in Westford, in crisis, seeking services and/or a place to land temporarily.



What Started Us Down This Road ...

Winter 2021 - Situation 1

Slow to unfold, lasted a full week, increasingly upsetting as time went on, no one was well-served.

Fall 2022 - Situation 2

Immediately uncomfortable, impacted library patrons (kids), lots of overt need, time-consuming, emotionally tiring. The tipping point. Bree hit a wall, allies got involved.



Course Correction: Bree Needs a Hug

- Bree felt like quitting
- Community members frustrated
- Friends worried about Bree
- Late night texts
- Zero boundaries
- Lots of flapping and chatter and disjointed, ineffective responding
- Dread of next time
- WE NEED A PLAN

What do libraries do well? We provide information and bring people together.



A Shared Responsibility

Libraries aren't and shouldn't be alone responding.

In Westford, people came together based on: roles, personal relationships, expertise.

What did we want to achieve?

- 1) What are our values
- 2) What can we do; critically what can't we do
- 3) What's our plan



Westford's Team: Who We are (And Aren't)

Library Director

Food Shelf Directors

Town Administrator

Selectboard Member (listening capacity only)

Mutual Aid Society Volunteers

Common Hall Administrator

Pathways Vermont Staff Person (a resident)



Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)

This is the term for the professional work/industry side of what we actually did. We examined our community, identified the helpers and impacted organizations. We were intentional.

Give professional language to your work for grants, recruiting partner organizations, funders and the community. Professional language makes it sound like you know what you are doing!

Also be aware of biases - acknowledge that you have them (if you have a brain, you have a bias) - are those informing your interactions/values. This is always a work in progress, and that's ok.



Values

- We value a humane, respectful, compassionate response
- The safety and support of Town Employees (our front line) is absolutely critical
- It's important to establish and stick to our appropriate limits
- Successful resolution may not mean no more homeless nights
- Planning before situations arise feels better than after the fact
- We know we will face more, not fewer situations like this in future

Response tree - liaison list, redirects away from town staff
(does not promise an immediate response)

Script - for public-facing employees including “do’s and don’ts”

Kits - at library, town office, with the response team - contains: gas card, snacks, hygiene products, socks, hand warmers, two locations for meals/beds (one north, one south) in a duffel for dignity

Other **related resources** in a private spot at the library (i.e. the bathroom)

Snacks and hygiene products available without question
(leverage your community partners for resources)



Road Test: A Good One, A Bad One, & What We Learned



April 2023 - Situation 3

Difficult situation over multiple days, drug involvement, littering, people passed out in car in the town center, safety concerns, law enforcement not helpful. Library *not* first point of contact, but involved. Quickly referred to a liaison. Focused response with clear objective (no hodgepodge, no resentment among responders).

July 2023 - Situation 4

Person displaced due to floods, arrived at library upset. Overwhelmed by circumstances and information. Cup of coffee and concise information card made all the difference. Felt like a success.

Lessons:

- Shared responsibility is important for lots of reasons
- Personal safety: easy to not think about it until the moment it becomes critical
- Mixed bag of feelings afterward
- Different situations can need different responses (lean on your values)



We Got Some Things Really Right

We were so much better off to have had the conversation before an event happened.

Even in our most challenging situation, our personal emotions (and professional/volunteer reputations) were healthier as a result of this work.

Good partners can mean everything.

Good partners + a good plan can really mean everything.



What Did We Get Wrong: Spoiler ... We Didn't

Ok we did. But really we didn't.

We had and have shortcomings. We were slow. We dropped balls. We stopped short on a few things. There are plenty of next steps we (or whomever comes after us) could pursue.

But none of that means we got it wrong.



How do we sustain this?

Once established, it's a once a year refresh:

- Reaffirm each team members' commitment - meet for updates and training - make changes to response team and documentation, if necessary
- ABCD - are there new community partners to include?
- Touch base with town staff for quick or first time training
- Check bags/swap out items/restock if needed
- Check resource cards - confirm and change if necessary



Resources

Homelessness and Housing Insecurity in Rural Communities: How Libraries Can Help - VTLIB/Niche Academy

<https://my.nicheacademy.com/vtlibwebinars/course/82646>

The goal of this 6-month series is to help rural libraries better serve people in their communities who are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. Guest Dr. Julie Winkelstein will facilitate this series which will comprise instruction, resource sharing, discussion, and the option to create an action plan over the course of the series. Library staff are welcome to participate collaboratively with other local library staff, trustees, or community partners

Books on topic from VTLIB - ILL through CLOVER:

The librarian's guide to homelessness : an empathy-driven approach to solving problems, preventing conflict, and serving everyone by Ryan Dowd

Libraries and homelessness : an action guide by Julie Winkelstein



Going forward ...

Homelessness doesn't look the same in every community and every case.

The resources and answers don't look the same.

It is OK not to have all the answers.

We hope that our experience makes you all feel less alone in your work.



What Are Your Stories, Questions, Ideas?



Please reach out:

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