

Santa Rosa Central Library at Risk

The Santa Rosa Central Library has experienced a growing problem with the homeless population using the library as a daytime shelter. No daytime shelter exists in Santa Rosa.

In September 2007 the Sonoma County Library Commission updated its 1997 Code of Conduct and issued the Library Standards of Behavior. Our investigation indicates that the new Standards of Behavior do not provide clear, definitive, and enforceable tools to minimize disruptive behavior and ensure a safe, secure environment for patrons and library staff.

In spite of the current level of coordination with shelter and mental health professionals, without the availability of daytime drop-in shelters, the situation will remain problematic.

The degree of public dissatisfaction with this disruptive atmosphere could influence future support of this vital institution.

Reason for Investigation

Libraries represent one of the few remaining public venues offering a safe, secure educational forum for the general public. The increasing presence of the homeless population in all public spaces is the subject of considerable discourse and political concern.

The Grand Jury decided to initiate a self-generated investigation following multiple visits to the Central Library in Santa Rosa. At the center of a growing homeless population within the County, the Santa Rosa Central Library has been receiving a disproportionate share of a burden that would traditionally be the purview of shelter and transitional housing programs and mental health facilities.

Background

The Library Commission's decision to undertake the updating of the Library Code of Conduct in 2006-2007 was widely covered by the Press Democrat.

The Grand Jury conducted preliminary site surveys using a detailed checklist of several Sonoma County libraries to gain an on-site appreciation of general operating conditions and compliance with the new September 2007 Standards of Behavior.

These surveys revealed an environment at the Santa Rosa Central Library where the inappropriate behavior of a small minority has created unacceptable conditions for patrons and staff.

It has been a tradition in library practice to maintain open inclusive access to all. However, the corrective action taken falls short of sending a clear message to repeat violators that their interference with the rights of all users will not be tolerated.

Investigative Procedures

Multiple surveys of library environment at various times

Discussions with homeless library patrons

Interviews performed:

- Sonoma County Library Director of Operations
- Children Services Coordinator
- Head of Division of Public Services
- Central Library Manager
- Security guard
- Circulation and Training Supervisor at the Central Library
- Sr. Client Specialist for Sonoma County Mental Health Community
- Program Director for Catholic Charities
- Executive Director of COTS
- Librarian at Petaluma Library
- Petaluma Library Manager

Investigative Procedures, continued

Documents reviewed:

- Sonoma County Library Code of Conduct (1997 to September 2007)
- Sonoma County Library Standards of Behavior (September 2007 to present)
- Patrons' comments for years 2006 through April 2008
- Central Library Incident reports years 2006 through April 2008

Internet research:

- California Law (Penal Code relating to loitering)
- Press Democrat Archives
- Sonoma County Library
- Library Law

Findings

- F1** The homeless are the principal cause of disruption of normal library operations and thereby impact the appropriate and productive use of the library by the general public.
- F2** The homeless are utilizing the library as a shelter during daytime hours, since there is no daytime drop-in shelter available in the Santa Rosa shelter system.
- F3** The homeless often bring in bundles, bedrolls, bags of recyclables and possessions, all items that are difficult for library staff to control.
- F4** Smoking and large gatherings at the library entrance are intimidating for many patrons and can discourage access.
- F5** The Library Standards of Behavior, adopted in September 2007 are less specific and direct than the earlier Code of Conduct established in 1997, relative to the consequences and action for non-compliance.
- F6** Those in violation of the Standards of Behavior, even after repetitive incidents, are rarely denied long-term use of the library.
- F7** There has been a general relaxation towards the enforcement of the Standards of Behavior: Restrictions on food and beverages, smoking, computer and cell phone use, and loitering.
- F8** There has been a noticeable increase in complaints from the public and recorded incidents requiring police intervention.
- F9** Current locations of computer stations allow easy observation of objectionable material by patrons passing through the library main aisle.
- F10** The addition of a security guard (September 2007) has had a positive impact on relations with the homeless community.
- F11** Outreach and coordination with key shelter management and county mental health personnel has been effective in mitigating many potential problems.
- F12** There has been minimal training of library staff in identifying and handling individuals with mental health problems or potential for violent behavior.
- F13** Library volume and usage have remained relatively unchanged in the past two years despite the population increase.
- F14** **The daytime shelter and outreach programs organized by the Committee for The Shelterless (COTS) in Petaluma have been successful in minimizing inappropriate use of the library in that city.**
- F15** **All shelter management professionals strongly recommended to consistently enforce rigid standards of behavior as well as consequences for noncompliance.**

Conclusions

There is a growing dissatisfaction among the general public regarding the changing environment at the Central Library facilities in Santa Rosa. The increasing presence and inappropriate behavior of homeless and transitional people are jeopardizing the traditionally safe, secure, and welcoming surroundings that are typical of this highly-valued institution. Library staff is called upon to spend an inordinate amount of time away from their normal duties to address behavioral problems. These issues often involve dealing with individuals who are substance abusers or mentally handicapped for which staff often have only limited training and experience. Although assistance is available from County Mental Health Division and shelter management personnel and library security, these incidents can escalate rapidly and necessitate police intervention.

Issue of a revised Library Code of Conduct in September 2007 has not given the library staff and security the necessary tools to cope with a rising level of code violations. A “three strikes” approach needs to be taken to send a clear message that strict measures will be applied to preserve acceptable conditions for all patrons. Additionally, library staff must be ensured of a working environment free of intimidation and threat of verbal abuse and physical violence.

In spite of the addition of library security and coordination with the mental health and shelter community, it is anticipated that the library environment will continue to be negatively impacted if an adequate daytime shelter is not provided within the general support area of Santa Rosa.

Public support will be crucial in order to maintain a healthy library system that is capable of expanding to meet population and advanced technology. To achieve this, it is paramount that the library system continue to offer an experience worthy of the library staff commitment and dedication.

Commendations

The dedication and commitment of the library staff has been exemplary in spite of sometimes difficult situations demanding their attention and intervention.

The security guard at the Central Library has dealt with disruptive individuals in a calm, respectful, and efficient way. His presence brought some reassurance for the patrons and staff.

The shelter management and mental health crisis intervention personnel have made major commitments in spite of their limited staff and demanding schedules.

The library environment will continue to be negatively impacted if an adequate daytime shelter is not provided within the general support area of Santa Rosa.

Recommendations

- R1** Modify the Standards of Behavior to include strict, unequivocal consequences for disruptive behavior.
- R2** Incorporate no-loitering provisions into the Standards of Behavior and provide library staff and security with the necessary support and training to enforce these rules.
- R3** Enforce a smoke-free zone on all properties surrounding the library facilities.
- R4** Modify and strictly enforce current standards to prohibit any patron from bringing into the Library bed rolls, bundles, and containers other than reasonably sized backpacks.
- R5** Prohibit cell phone use within the confines of the library.

Recommendations, continued

- R6 Rearrange and monitor computer access to limit unintended viewing and exposure to inappropriate material.
- R7 Make the Standards of Behavior more visible and proactively introduce it to all new arrivals in the library.
- R8 Sonoma County Mental Health Division and shelter management personnel should expand their commitment to training and on-site intervention.
- R9 Coordinate with the Santa Rosa Police Department to schedule random but regular visits inside the library.
- R10 **The Library Commission, City of Santa Rosa, and the Community Development Commission should coordinate a task force to investigate the feasibility of alternative daytime venues for the homeless community.**
- R11 The Library Commission should take the “pulse of the public” by producing an annual report summarizing citizen complaints and action taken by the library.

Required Responses to Recommendations

Library Commission	RI, R2, R3, R4, R5, R10, R11
Sonoma County Library Director	R6, R7, R8, R9,
City of Santa Rosa	R3, R9, R10
Sonoma County Mental Health Services Director	R8
Sonoma County Housing Authority, Community Development Commission	R8, R10
Sonoma County Board of Supervisors	R10

