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Building a Strong Foundation: An Action Plan to  
Address Homelessness and Poverty in Knox County Public Libraries

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INSC 590: The Role of Libraries in Addressing Homelessness and Poverty

University of Tennessee Knoxville

## Part 1: Description of Action Plan

### Question 1: Library Chosen

- **Name:** Knox County Public Libraries
- **Reason for choosing this library:** I chose Knox County Public Libraries (KCPL), or the county-wide library system for Knoxville, Tennessee because I saw a real need to create an action plan that addresses barriers to providing adequate resources and services for patrons experiencing poverty and homelessness on a system-wide level. By building a stronger foundation for KCPL alongside various community organizations, the KCPL system, as well as individual branches, will be introduced to resources that can aid libraries to not only participate in systemic change, but also help library professionals engage in branch-specific programs that can address community needs specific to each branch in the KCPL system.
- **Information about this library:**
  - **Location:** Knoxville, Tennessee
  - **URL:** <https://www.knoxlib.org/>
  - **Category:** Urban/Suburban
  - **Type:** Public
  - **Whom they serve:** The Knox County Public Library system serves all citizens and areas of Knox County (Knox County Public Library, 2020). This means that all demographics and peoples residing within Knox County are served by the KCPL, including children, teens and young adults, adults, seniors, and all demographics of sex, race, sexuality, ability levels, income levels, and housing status found within the Knox County/Knoxville community.

- *Vision and Mission Statements:*
  - The vision of KCPL is “the essential connection for lifelong learning and information for every citizen” (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021).
  - “The mission of the Knox County Public Library is to serve all residents as an educational, informational, recreational and cultural center through a wide variety of resources, services and programs” (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021).
- *Funding Information:* The Knox County Public Library system has an operating budget of \$14.51 million and is governed by the Department of the Knox County Mayor and a Library Advisory Board (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). Of this budget, around \$9.9 million is allocated for “salaries and fringe benefits,” leaving just over \$4 million for “operating expenditures” (Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, 2019, pg. 51). Other funding for KCPL comes from Friends of the Knox County Public Library, which according to their 2021 Annual Report raised over \$250,000 and dispersed around 81% of those funds to the Knoxville community and KCPL (Friends of the Knox County Public Library, 2021).
- *Statistics:* In 2020, The Knox County Public Library System shared a total of 150,955 library cardholders; 939,122 patron visits; 236,813 reference questions answered; 56,492 program attendees; and 585,202 courier transactions across their 19 locations (Knox County Public Library, 2020).

## **Question 2: Agency Chosen**

- *Name:* Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee (CAC)

- ***Reason for choosing this agency:*** I chose CAC as the community agency to partner with because of two reasons: the wide variety of programs they offer seeking to prevent homelessness and help unhoused people, and their strong ethics and dedication to uplifting the people of Knoxville. With three different community centers, programs at CAC range from offering services for children and youth to seniors through their Office on Aging, alongside general programs like transportation services, low-income home energy assistance programs, homeward bound services, food and nutrition programs, and more (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2019). I was also interested in choosing a secular agency that had low-barrier access to resources and programs because I just wanted the agency that I chose to have the right motivations when it comes to ending homelessness in Knoxville. With all these different programs, and a distinct emphasis on keeping the community of Knoxville housed, fed, and taken care of, I felt like CAC was the right agency to partner up with to aid in systemic change across KCPL.
- ***Information about this agency:***
  - *Location:* Knoxville, Tennessee
  - *URL:* <http://www.knoxcac.org/newweb/>
  - *Mission and Vision Statements:* “We, as community action professionals ever respectful of cultural diversity, dedicate ourselves to eliminate poverty in the midst of plenty in this nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity” (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).

- *Date Established:* CAC has been upholding its commitment since it was created by Knox County and the City of Knoxville in 1964 (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).
- *Whom they serve:* CAC serves “low-income neighborhoods, government, and the community at large” (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).
- *Funding Information:* Knox County Community Action Committee is part of the national network of Community Action Agencies (CAAs) which “are non-profit and public organizations established under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to fight America’s War on Poverty” (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021). CAAs are connected by a national network that includes the Community Action Partnership, regional associations, state associations, the National Community Action Foundation (NCAF), Community Action Program Legal Services (CAPLAW), and a national association of Community Service Block Grant administrators (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021). Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee is funded through a combination of federal, state, and local grants, donations, etc. (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).

### **Question 3: Aspect of homelessness**

- *Who will benefit:* This action plan seeks to address the generalized needs of the entire unhoused population, as well as low-income persons and families in the City of Knoxville and Knox County.

- ***Why this aspect:*** My initial reason for choosing to develop an action plan that would address all persons experiencing homelessness in Knoxville is because I didn't see any specialized programs dedicated to low-income individuals or unhoused individuals in KCPL and identified a need to foster a welcoming and safe environment for this demographic within the KCPL setting before attempting to tackle more complex or specific aspects of homelessness.
- ***Needs to be addressed because:*** According to the most recent census, which represents county data as of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, the population of Knox County is just under half a million at 478, 971, increasing almost 9% since the past census a decade ago. Of this population, there are 187,319 households. 13%<sup>1</sup> of the population is classified by the census as living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, Accessed 2021). As of September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021, there were there were 3656 “literally homeless” clients documented by the Knoxville Community Dashboard on Homelessness in Knoxville, a sharp 19.75% increase from the end of June, when there were 3053 “literally homeless” clients (Knoxville Homeless Management Information System (KNOXHMS), Accessed 2021). With statistics surrounding Homelessness in Knoxville unfortunately higher because the Dashboard on Homelessness in Knoxville can only count clients served, it is absolutely vital that agencies and community resources begin to focus on taking action to target the existence and rise in homelessness within the Knoxville community. More so, these statistics demonstrate a distinct demographic of Knox County citizens that are experiencing poverty and homelessness within the broader Knoxville Community.

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<sup>1</sup> This percentage is likely higher, as the census only documents the Official Poverty Measure, which does not consider resource sharing, and other attributes that contribute to poverty. For more information see [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2017/demo/poverty\\_measure-how.pdf](https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/2017/demo/poverty_measure-how.pdf)

Currently, KCPL does not offer any specific or distinct programs targeted at this rising demographic, and as public library resources offer opportunities to increase equitable access to information, knowledge and resources that may be difficult for some patrons to access elsewhere in the community, public libraries must shoulder the responsibility of providing equal access to educational and informational resources to “regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations or geographic barriers (American Library Association (ALA), Updated 2021 October).

- ***How is it relevant to the library and agency of choice?*** This aspect is relevant to both CAC and KPL because both have a stake in the Knoxville community and an explicit responsibility to the patrons they serve who are experiencing homelessness. While CAC’s mission explicitly states that they are dedicated to serving “low-income neighborhoods, government, and the community at large” (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021), and further demonstrates their interest in addressing homelessness in Knoxville through their various programs that assist the Knoxville and Knox County community in finding and keeping housing (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2019), the Knox County Public Library’s system responsibility to its homeless patrons is more implicit. Both KCPL’s mission and vision statements emphasize providing library resources, services and programs to “all residents” and “every citizen” of Knox County, which while not overtly stating a dedication to their unhoused or low-income patrons, still implies an understanding of the importance of and life changing opportunities unlocked by the value of “lifelong learning,” a love of knowledge, and a basic access to informational and educational content (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). As previously discussed, a

distinct demographic of low-income peoples and persons experiencing homelessness has been rising in the past couple of years, and these individuals and families are just as much part of the fabric of the Knoxville/Knox County community as any other individual living in this area, and thus are subject to being served by KCPL. KCPL has also worked with the Knoxville Homeless Coalition for years and already has some community connections and resources. Furthermore, Knox County Public Libraries is overseen by the Knox County Mayor's Office, with the Knox County Mayor also residing on the Board of Directors of CAC (Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, 2019, pg. 27; Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2021), making this partnership a near perfect match to address homelessness and poverty within Knoxville and Knox County. A final statement to note, is that this partnership and action plan will also fulfill requests within Knoxville's Plan to Address Homelessness, which calls upon all members of the community to be accountable" and "pursue strategies that are demonstrated to break repeated cycles of crisis and homelessness, and instead lead to stable housing and the re-establishment of healthy connections to the community as a whole (City of Knoxville, Office on Homelessness, 2014, Pg. 3).

**Question 4: What specific action are you proposing that will address this aspect of homelessness?**

- To address homelessness and poverty in Knoxville and Knox County I propose that the Knox County Public Library change their library policies to be more inclusive of unhoused and low-income individuals, create fee-less library cards with low-barrier to access, and partner with CAC and eventually other community agencies to offer relevant resources, services, and physical handouts.



- Rewriting the KCPL's Code of Conduct to remove language that targets unhoused or low-income library patrons will create a more inclusive and accepting library environment. Extreme signs of homelessness, trauma, and state of crises as indicated the KCPL's Code of Conduct should be transformed into points of referral or introduction to resources, services, and physical handouts provided by partnerships with CAC and various branch-specific community agencies.
- The fee-less library card would not require official proof of residency within the county, just a valid identification, and maybe a sign on from CAC or another community agency for proof of residency within the county as an unhoused resident. Features of this card would obviously be waived library fees, the low-barrier access to the card, and hopefully an allotted weekly allowance for printing.
- The relevant resources, services, and physical handouts would (1) make library staff prepared with proper knowledge and resources of community agencies, programs, and local aid (2) empower library staff to feel more confident in serving and assisting low-income and unhoused library patrons (3) provide and connect unhoused and low-income individuals with vital live-changing resources within the immediate community and the agency to connect with community organizations and reach out for help themselves.
- ***What motivated you to choose this action?***
  - I was originally motivated to create a program that addressed the glaring disparities between the mission and vision statements of the Knox County Public Libraries and their Code of Conduct, Library Application Requirements, and Fines and Fees, all of which create major barriers to library access for unhoused

and low-income patrons. After speaking with Scott Lappas, The Outreach Coordinator for REACH at CAC, I learned that a major problem low-income or unhoused clients have is accessing library computers and having the devices time out on them while they are trying to fill out a housing application. It is also nearly impossible for an unhoused patron to get a library card because it requires a valid ID and proof of residency within the county, postmarked within 30 days of applying (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). While CAC and other community agencies can assist unhoused patrons without their documentation to get official identification, it could be more difficult and take months, or nearly impossible, for unhoused patrons to find affordable housing within a timely manner, and the use of library resources, services, computers, and printers can greatly assist unhoused and low-income library patrons to find affordable housing.

- Another problem Lappas mentioned was the lack of regular communication and referrals to community agencies by libraries. Not having a proper referral program leads library employees to be ill-equipped in assisting patrons experiencing homelessness and often causes them to make the wrong decision when it comes to doing something about a patron experiencing homelessness, like calling the police or waiting too long to call the proper community agency, which will just compound trauma and destroy trust between libraries and persons experiencing homelessness, housing crises, and poverty. By calling the proper agency, *as soon as* a library employee notices a downward progression in the patrons emotional, mental, or physical state, then the patron can be quickly given access to relevant

resources and a case manager to get them rehoused as fast as possible, avoiding, and bypassing some of the trauma associated with homelessness.

- Finally, I thought that a nice way to give unhoused or low-income patrons more agency in seeking aid, would be to make those referral contacts publicly available or on request, as well as setting out additional physical handouts, and pamphlets describing the various programs and assistance offered by community agencies directly to patrons at tables that already exist providing some relevant handouts. This sentiment was also echoed by Franklin Preston, an unhoused library patron, who stated that he would appreciate if KCPL offered more resources surrounding health and human services and welfare.

- ***Description of Action:***

- *Title of your project/plan:* Building a Strong Foundation: Addressing Homelessness and Poverty in Knox County Public Libraries
- *Budget:* Majority of budget would come from the regular budget for library cards, but leftover costs not covered by library fees and costs for services associated with the card can come from a pay-as-you-can donation jar, grants and donations secured by KCPL and CAC, contributions and partnerships from other community agencies, Friends of the Knox County Public Library, or any other funding method secured by either KCPL or CAC.
  - Possible ways to cut costs would be to replace the services offered on the regular library card like free access for children to the zoo, and access to the Knoxville symphony orchestra could be replaced by services relevant to low-income and unhoused library patrons, like a printing allowance.

- *Staff involvement:*
  - KCPL will have to create a fee-less library card
  - Library Staff/Board of Directors would have to rewrite policies in partnership with CAC.
  - CAC Staff will have to gather community agency contacts and share them with KCPL Staff
  - Dedicated Branch Libraries' Staff to form and keep partnerships with community agencies.
  - Branch Libraries' Staff and Administration will have to create a program/system for referrals and keep referral information up to date.
  - Library Staff and CAC Staff will have to create handouts representing programs and aid offered at different agencies.
  - Library Staff and Employees will have to refer unhoused and low-income patrons to agencies to agencies or resources, services, programs, and handouts.
  - Library Staff/Administration would have to secure additional funding for the program if not covered by current KCPL operating costs.
  - Agency staff or case managers would have to give signature of approval of Knox County residency for patrons without an official address residing in Knox County.
- *Who will implement/oversee/make decisions about the action:*
  - KCPL Administration and the Library Advisory Board (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021) will oversee decisions surrounding the

Library Code of Conduct in conjunction with certain staff at CAC, like for example: Central Office Services Special Projects Director, Social Services Director, or anyone appointed by the senior staff at CAC (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2021; Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).

- KCPL Marketing or Administration will create any handouts, marketing materials in conjunction with Central Office Services Neighborhood Resource Coordinator (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2021; Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).
  - Library Branch Directors will create referral resources and branch partnerships with community agencies within their geographical jurisdiction alongside Central Office Services Neighborhood Resource Coordinator (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2021; Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021; Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, 2019, Pg. 27)
  - *Whoever is in charge of creating programs at KCPL will create the fee-less library card.*
- *How it will be implemented:*
    - KCPL will create the fee-less library card.
    - CAC and KCPL will work together to secure funding for the fee-less library card—open to outside agency and organization partnership and

contributions, or a pay-as-you-can donation jar depending on services attached to card and costs associated.

- KCPL will create marketing material for the fee-less library card to distribute throughout KCPL Branch Libraries and community organizations.
  - CAC and KCPL Branch Libraries will work together to develop community connections with other agencies and a system of referral/introduction to crisis-specific resources and services created by individual agencies.
  - CAC and KCPL will partner together to rewrite the KCPL's Code of Conduct.
  - CAC will create marketing material for their programs and services to be offered at KCPL Branches.
- *How it will be evaluated:* The Fee-Less Library card can be evaluated by KCPL through online and in-person evaluations with its users, as well as KCPL statistics around use of the fee-less library card. The New Code of Conduct will be evaluated through an initial test run, after librarians and library staff have collected the proper resources and materials in preparation for fully catering to the unhoused and low-income demographics. After a set trial period, KCPL can conduct initial investigations into staff comfort levels, while CAC and any other community agencies partnered with can contribute agency-use and referral statistics to create a joint evaluation of the partnerships, resources, and services. This joint method of evaluation should also be performed after a longer duration

of time and be compared with the initial trial run evaluation, and statistics prior to the implementation of the action plan, to fully capture the usefulness and impact of the action plan within the KCPL, CAC, other community agencies, and the community of Knoxville.

- *Additional Details:* Maybe in the future, the fee-less library card could partner with gyms. That would provide unhoused patrons and low-income individuals with the ability to exercise if needed and a guaranteed place to have a hot shower.

### **Question 5: Library Assets**

- ***Operating Budget of \$14 million:*** The Knox County Public Library System has an operating budget of just over \$14 million in 2020 and just under \$14 million in 2021 (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021; Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs, 2019, Pg. 51). This budget encompasses already existing library cards and the KCPL special Digital Access Card created in the pandemic (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). Regular library users do pay fees for printing and late or lost materials, which may offset the cost of library cards, and depending on the amount accrued from these fees, they might also help offset some of the costs of the fee-less library card.
- ***Strong Friends of the Knox County Public Library:*** Knox County Public Libraries has an extremely strong and dedicated Friends of the Knox County Public Library group which has raised over \$200,000 for various programs in the community and within KCPL (Friends of the Knox County Public Library, 2021). In 2020, the Friends of the Knox County Public Library provided support for Knox County Public Library's Children's Festival of Reading, Summer Library Club incentives and family-friendly activities at KCPL branches, author events presented in partnership with KCPL and others, and many

other different programs and partnerships with KCPL (Friends of the Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). If needed the Friends of the KCPL might be able to contribute/recruit either volunteers or monetary funds for the fee-less library plan, as well as market and share the program on their social medias or mailing lists.

- ***Strong Community Influence:*** With 19 locations across of Knox County, and a generally positive community presence the Knox County Public Library system carries a lot of weight and influence within the Knoxville and Knox County community and is generally seen as a pillar of the community. One element of KCPL that demonstrates their influence within the Knoxville community is their various community connections in the Read City Explorer Pass which comes with a library card, allowing “Knox County Public Library cardholders to book a visit to an area museum or institution for free or reduced admission” (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). These community connections include the Knoxville Symphony Orchestra, Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame, the Knoxville Zoo, and about a dozen more (Knox County Public Library, Accessed 2021). These community connections reveal that KCPL understands the importance of community partnerships and the value that comes with access to costly educational programs. Hopefully, KCPL can add CAC and an interest in preventing and ending homelessness and poverty to their long list of community assets and involvement.

#### **Question 6: Agency Assets**

- ***Dedicated Offices, Programs, and Staff to Address Homelessness and Community Outreach:*** As a CAA, CAC is more than prepared to address homelessness and poverty with “swift, direct action” and integrate resources to “solve community and individual problems” (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021).



With three community centers, the range of programs and services offered by CAC are immense, meaning CAC has a lot of different resource and connections. The programs offered by CAC can be broken down into:

- Community Leadership
- CAC AmeriCorps
- Head Start
- *Office On Aging: Affordable Medicine Options For Seniors (Amos), Barbara H. Monty Mobile Meals Community Kitchen, Daily Living Center, Feed A Pet, Foster Grandparent Program, Gift Of Sight, Hearing & Dentures, Grandparents As Parents Program, Knox PAWS (Placing Animals With Seniors), Mobile Affordable Meal Service (Mams), O'Connor Senior Center, One Call Club, Project LIVE (Living Independently Through Volunteer Efforts), Rise Above Crime, RSVP (Retired & Senior Volunteer Program), Savings Checkup, Senior Information & Referral (SIR), Senior Companion Program, and the Senior Employment Service Senior Nutrition Program.*
- 2-1-1, East Tennessee Information & Referral
- *Knox County CAC Transit: Public and Contract Transportation and Volunteer Assisted Transportation*
- *Energy And Community Services: Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) and Project HELP & Local Heat Relief.*
- *Homeward Bound Programs: Elizabeth's Home, Emergency Solutions Grant Program (ESG), Families in Need (FIN), Project Succeed, Reach (Resources Extended to Assist the Chronically Homeless), Resilient Families, Youth Wins*

- *Housing & Energy Services*: City of Knoxville Minor Home Repair Loan Program, City of Knoxville Emergency Home Repair Program, Knox County Minor Home Repair Loan Program, Knox County Rehabilitation/Reconstruct Program, Knox County Emergency Home Repair Program, Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP)
- *Food and Nutrition Programs*: The Urban Agriculture Program & Beardsley Community Farm, The Green Thumb Program, Community Garden Program, USDA Programs: Commodity Program, Summer Food Service Program, The Christmas Clearinghouse, The News Sentinel Milk Fund
- *Workforce Connections*: Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)  

(Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, 2019)
- ***Incredibly Strong County and Community Connections***: The board of Directors of CAC consists of City of Knoxville Mayor Indya Kincannon, the Knox County Mayor Glenn Jacobs who also runs the governmental body that oversees KCPL, and the superintendent of Knox County Schools (Knoxville-Knox County Community Action Committee, Accessed 2021), all of whom have large influences and individual responsibilities to serving the Knoxville and Knox County Community.

### **Question 7: Barriers to Implementation**

1. **Cost of maintaining the fee-less library card, alongside vital services accompanying the card will not be able to be encompassed within the library budget**: It is a very real possibility that removing fees from a portion of library card and adding additional costs to a fee-less library card in the form of printing credits could make this card too expensive per person/family meaning that only a certain amount of fee-less library cards

could be given out that the program might be too expensive overall and not be able to be introduced into employees' regular workflow. The cost of persistently keeping partnerships with community agencies could also create the need for new positions within the library to keep up with the demand of providing social service programs.

**2. Superficial concerns surrounding stereotypes of homelessness and signs of crisis:**

Employees may be reluctant to “officially” serve low-income and unhoused patrons because of predetermined stereotypes surrounding people experiencing poverty and homelessness. Employees may be more concerned with the opinions and experiences of housed and middle or upper-class patrons in the KCPL at the expense of unhoused and low-income library patrons.

**3. Library staff will not feel comfortable enough to provide outreach to unhoused**

**patrons:** Library staff and employees could worry and feel fear at the thought of serving low-income and unhoused patrons because of a lack of resources, programs, information, and knowledge needed to fully serve this demographic. Most library staff could be either untrained or uneducated on the programs and services available to unhoused and low-income patrons, and what skills are most useful too or needed by this demographic, and therefore do not feel prepared to serve low-income patrons or persons experiencing homelessness.

**Question 8: Overcoming Barriers to Implementation**

- 1. Cost of maintaining the fee-less library card, alongside vital services accompanying the card will not be able to be encompassed within the library budget:** Action plan includes option to seek funds outside of regular library expenditures, including a pay-as-you-can donation jar, KCPL and CAC partnership in securing funds from grants or

donations, partnerships and assistance from other community agencies and organizations, and assistance from friends of Families Group.

**2. Superficial concerns surrounding stereotypes of homelessness and signs of crisis:**

Action plan includes transforming prohibited behaviors from the KCPL's Code of Conduct that are demonstrative of extreme signs of homelessness, trauma, and state of crises into points of referral or introduction to resources, services, and physical handouts provided by partnerships with CAC and various branch-specific community agencies.

**3. Library staff will not feel comfortable enough to provide outreach to unhoused**

**patrons:** Action plan includes the development of community partnerships, connections, resources, handouts, and marketing material that library staff will have on-hand when providing outreach to unhoused patrons. Library staff will also have proper protocol developed for how/when to refer a patron to CAC, another community agency, or resources and materials.

**Question 9: Proposed Evaluation of Action Plan**

- There will be a paper and online survey available for users of the fee-less library card wherever any other surveys are posted online and throughout the libraries. An evaluation of the fully implemented action plan will be conducted after the first couple months and again after a year, where KCPL and CAC will conduct initial investigations into the staff comfort levels, confidence, and preparation surrounding serving unhoused and low-income patrons; use statistics of the services and programs offered by KCPL, CAC, and any other community agencies partnered with; and finally, testimonials from staff and low-income and unhoused patrons. This evaluation can be used to secure funding for additional programs, as well as serve as a community example for other public library

systems looking to start catering to low-income and unhoused persons in their communities. Hopefully this evaluation will not only identify additional needs and avenues for KCPL, CAC, and other community agencies, but also capture the contribution of this action plan to the Knoxville and Knox County community. Below is an example of marketing for an evaluation of the KCPL's website posted on the KCPL's homepage.



(Screenshot, Knox County Public Library, Accessed Nov 16, 2021)

- **Sample evaluation questions:**
  - Has the Fee Less Library Card impacted your life? Answer yes/no/maybe. Please give one example as to how the Fee-Less library card has impacted your life or one example of why the Fee-Less Library Card has not impacted your life.
  - On a scale of 1-10, how confident do you feel serving unhoused and low-income patrons?
  - How has your opinion of serving unhoused and low-income patrons changed over the implementation of this action plan?

## **Part 2: Getting Feedback**

- I submitted a copy of this action plan with Part 1: Description of Action and Part 3: Marketing to the library employee I spoke to and Scott Lappas at CAC.

- **Feedback from Scott Lappas, Outreach Coordinator at CAC:** Lappas had many suggestions for how KCPL could assist patrons experiencing homelessness and poverty. The most important request stressed by Lappas was that KCPL needs to have some sort of a referral system to enact once a library employee identifies a person potentially experiencing homelessness. Not having a proper referral program leads library employees to be ill-equipped in assisting patrons experiencing homelessness and often causes them to make the wrong decision when it comes to doing something about a patron experiencing homelessness, like calling the police or waiting too long to call the proper community agency, which will just compound trauma and destroy trust between libraries and persons experiencing homelessness, housing crises, and poverty. By calling the proper agency, *as soon as* a library employee notices a downward progression in the patrons emotional, mental, or physical state, then the patron can be quickly given access to relevant resources and a case manager to get them rehoused as fast as possible, avoiding, and bypassing some of the trauma associated with homelessness. Other suggestions by Lappas were giving patrons experiencing homelessness more time on computers to complete housing applications, and other vitally important application processes, allowing unhoused patrons to park in library parking lots overnight, and help patrons get their mail by being the mail recipient for unhoused patrons.
  - I took this feedback and incorporated it as a very large component of my action plan. While the comments on computers timing out on patrons inspired me to go forward more with my idea on creating a low-barrier library card, what really struck me was the importance of transforming those signs of crises/trauma as indicated in the library code of conduct as prohibited behaviors into points of

reference to materials and references provided by and through connections and collaborations with community social service agencies.

- **Feedback from Franklin Preston, KCPL patron and person experiencing**

**homelessness in Knoxville:** Preston expressed his love for the library and said he does visit KCPL about 1-2 times a week, which is not as often as he would like. When he is in the library, he usually likes to read autobiographies, with his favorite being one about a Cambodian (whose name I couldn't catch) who had "endured the total upheaval of everything he had known." Besides reading the library material, Preston also likes to use the library computers. While Preston does not have a library card, he stated that he's been meaning to get one and would get one if it was offered to him, and when I brought up my idea for a fee-less library card with allotted printing allowances, he seemed to think it was a pretty good idea, but more so requested that KCPL provide broader range of materials under the subjects of health and human services and welfare (so social services) because "there's a lot of people down here living on food stamps or don't got jobs" and "there's a way out of homelessness, and the library—it's a haven... The more a person goes to the library and reads the more they know. If you have come to the library, it means that you have come to a certain need [available] in a library." To summarize, Preston stated "give them the information they need so they won't be sliding through the cracks." Preston ended the interview by speaking about how important books and reading are to fostering the value of lifelong learning, becoming more spiritually fulfilled, and increasing ones' quality of living. He spoke about the many different illiterate and unhoused adult and youths he interacts with and the difficulties they face in finding employment and a way out of homelessness and poverty. Preston spoke about how the public school system has

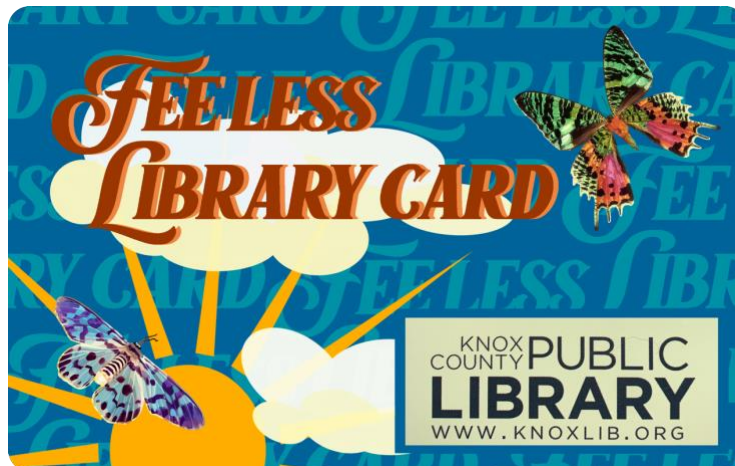
failed many individuals in the sense of failing to foster an interest in books and reading, and how that can lead to a person unknowingly making decisions that don't benefit their quality of life.

- I took Preston's placed importance on public library services and resources as a major factor into the materials and resources, community connections, and library code of conduct revisal in my action plan because of how important I saw fostering an environment that includes and serves low-income library patrons and persons experiencing homelessness. By revising the library's code of conduct, creating community connections, providing relevant library and agency materials and services, and preparing staff with the proper resources to serve low-income patrons and patrons experiencing homelessness, maybe the KCPL system can provide community services and play an important part in alleviating and eliminating poverty and homelessness in Knoxville and Knox County, helping more unhoused or financially unstable library patrons return housed, healthier, happier and more financially stable.
- Finally, what cemented my idea to create a fee-less library card, was the fact that as I was doing research for my field notes, I noticed that the KCPL had already created different versions of their library cards, with their official library card having a variety of different community add-ons like free museum entrances for children which made me feel like a fee-less library card with community sponsors could truly be an achievable project for the KCPL to offer tailored services to unhoused and low-income patrons.



### Part 3: Marketing

- **Methods of Marketing:** Handouts, posters, social media, street-outreach, QR code stickers, space on the library website, and any other relevant marketing strategies.
- **Outlets for your marketing:** Reference tables already existing in branch offices, bulletin boards, circulation desks alongside other library resources, library and agency websites, street-handouts and donations with paper handouts and QR-code stickers, Community Centers, CAC, and other Community Agencies.
- **Example of Fee-Less Library Card**



- **Example of Flyer/Poster**



#### **Part 4: Narrative**

The process of creating this action plan was quite difficult and complex for me. At times I felt like I wasn't doing enough or didn't have the right skills, personality, or confidence to talk to professionals or make the connections that I needed to make to create a project that realistically addressed homelessness in the Knoxville and Knox County community. As we progressed through the semester, I began to feel more confident in my own knowledge of Knoxville and Knox County, and social programming, services, and actions that I felt needed to change or be introduced to KCPL, so that they could more adequately serve unhoused and low-income library patrons. I won't lie, this project was hard. It was so hard, especially because I care so much about this work and improving the very real lives and situations of people on the streets in Knoxville, and I had to rely solely on myself and my ideas to drive this project forward. But, although being extremely difficult and taxing on my mental sanity due to my issues with procrastination, I came out on the other side a new woman almost—someone much more confident and surer of herself and her ability to create and conduct change in her community. This was something I have always struggled with, and will continue to struggle with, but just knowing that I was able to achieve and create this project by myself has been so empowering and has shown me what I can do when I truly want to put my mind to something, and I hope in the future it will get easier as I learn more about creating community connections and talking to people.

This action plan has transformed so much yet developed into a more clear-cut and concise idea of my original thoughts through the progression of this project. At first, I wanted to introduce social work education/training through trauma informed care, alongside all the various policy changes, community connections, and possibly a free library card. As I did more research into KCPL and the capabilities of the agency I wanted to partner with, CAC, I realized that my

training ideas were well intentioned, but not something that I could sustainably create an into action plan on with the assets and interests of each organization, so I instead focused on my other ideas to create a much more feasible action plan that could be integrated within the workflows of each entity. What helped me finally decide to narrow my action plan down, was speaking with my peers on their experiences trying to figure out their ideas, and they suggested that instead of focusing on too many ideas, I just focus on implementing a few.

My interviews with Franklin Preston and Scott Lappas (KCPL Library patron person experiencing homelessness in Knoxville and an outreach coordinator) really helped me drive my action plan forward, while my interviews with the library could have been more informative and didn't help as much as I would have liked due to library staff not being as comfortable or forward with answering my questions as I would have liked. From my interviews with Preston and Lappas, I learned much about what the unhoused and low-income population of Knoxville/Knox County really needs from the community, and on a more specific note the KCPL. In his interview, Lappas mentioned that the unhoused population of Knoxville was probably one of the most "well clothed and well fed," and that the lack of affordable housing in Knoxville is what has led to such a dramatic increase in the population of people experiencing homelessness in this area. Lappas had many suggestions that libraries could do to help alleviate or eliminate homelessness, which were furthermore echoed by Preston who spoke about the powerful impact of library resources and materials, with a distinct focus on libraries providing more resources, services, materials, and programming related to social services, welfare, and other social programming within the community that can help fund change and connect people with the resources they may desperately need.

While the library interviews failed to provide a picture into the KCPL, a thorough stalking and observations of their online and in-person spaces provided me with a deeper insight into the governance and functioning of the KCPL system. I was able to glean a lot of information from the library's branches based on the observation questions in the field notes, which gave me a much larger insight into the attitudes of KCPL towards serving unhoused and low-income patrons. Had I not performed in-person observations, I would not have learned about the tables where they already share some limited social service resources, felt the way that the physical library space made patrons feel, and learn about the various programming offered in the libraries. Without online observations, I wouldn't have learned about their special digital access card, or a lot of the library policies and budget details, and governance that is not clearly indicated on the library website.

I think a lot of people have the idea of homelessness that people who are unhoused are that way because it is how they want to live. While this view clearly erases the societal structures that cause and benefit from homelessness, it's still important to note that not all people experiencing homeless people desire to live inside; some people are happy living outside. This concept was probably the most important piece of information and insights that I learned about during this project because it reveals so much about homelessness and catering to this demographic of unhoused peoples would be beneficial to so many other demographics of people who have fallen through what seems like all the social service cracks. Preston brought this topic up when we were discussing the importance of libraries, and I've been thinking about how nuanced and complex this conversation/subject is. Preston mentioned how public schools have failed many of the youth and people he sees that are "happy" living on the streets, who have varying degrees of literacy. Regardless of how some unhoused people feel about re-housing, I still think that

libraries and public services should try to appeal to this demographic, because who knows how this specific population might feel about housing if they were provided with literacy skills and the relevant information and knowledge. Maybe they would choose housing, maybe they might choose to stay unhoused, but regardless, they would have the information needed to make the right choice for them and what they see in their future.

Agencies play an extremely important part in assuaging the systemic problems that plague America's low-income populations, but it is not enough. Libraries must step up their role in the communities they serve and cater to all demographics of people, regardless of how socially acceptable it is viewed in libraries. Library administration and employees should deem it socially unacceptable to have a public library without the proper training, programs, services, resources, and materials to serve all sectors of the population they serve, and by preparing for the most possible services needed, a library can encompass all patron needs and uses.

Besides this, I have to say that I was both pleasantly surprised and disappointed by the KCPL, while they did have a lot of resources that I didn't expect them to have available, and a lot of community connections, I was left disappointed by their code of conduct and the way in which they seem to think about and treat the issue of homelessness in their libraries.

If I had the chance to re-do this project, I think I would get started as soon as I started to think of ideas and really reach out to the library and agency a bit earlier. I think I would have felt a lot less anxiety and fear at reaching out and having the time to locate someone in the library that would talk to me. I love all the work that I did after my field works, and I am extremely proud of the project overall, but I just really wish I had the chance to reach out sooner and communicate more with the library. Because of this unfortunately, I was unable to receive that much feedback from KCPL on the finished action plan, as well as their seemingly low

enthusiasm for participating in the project. While I did make great contacts at the agency, due to how long I waited to contact KCPL, I only finished the action plan around two weeks before it was due, so the agency also didn't have time to send me back their feedback. That, or they both forgot, and I should have insisted more on receiving feedback.

If I were presenting to a library audience about the importance of using action plan partnerships to address aspects of homelessness in their communities, I think I would try and stress the point that library staff and employees have more of an opportunity and place to serve low income and unhoused individuals, due to the position of libraries within modern American societies. In the *IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness*, barriers commonly experienced by low-income and unhoused library patrons are: “Library card or access policies requiring a permanent address;” “prohibitive fines, fees, or other penalties or the perception that services incur fees;” “staff who are not trained in service to people who are poor or homeless or who are made uncomfortable by prejudices against people who are poor or experiencing homelessness;” and a “lack of programs or resources that address people’s experiences or current situations” (IFLA LSN, 2017, pg. 13). To improve these barriers, very simple solutions that may unfortunately carry political weight and implications like “building [community] partnerships,” updating language, and developing needed services, including “extra internet time and free printing” are suggested in the *IFLA’s Checklist for Guidelines for Library Services to People Experiencing Homelessness* (IFLA LSN, 2020). These very simple solutions are implementable by all library staff and can help reduce the some of the isolation and exclusion of unhoused and low-income library patrons. The language and services currently used and provided by the KCPL, despite claims that the system serves all members of the Knoxville and Knox County community, falls short of “meeting many community needs,” and in some cases,

actually alienates community members (DeFaveri, Annette, n.d., Pg. 10-11). KCPL should not adopt these “historical views of the poor in which only the worthy poor merit help,” at the expense of their low-income and unhoused library patrons. By structuring the code of conduct in such a way that prohibits signs of trauma, crises, low-income, and homelessness, the KCPL only succeeds in excluding and alienating members of the population that need and benefit from library services more than most housed patrons, and through proper preparation of staff and employees, serving unhoused and low-income library patrons would not be a hard, stressful, or crises situation for library employees, but a calm, comfortable referral of services in every day reference work.

I would probably share some of these same sources if I was presenting to a social service audience, because library services can be extremely beneficial to the causes of and share the same core missions as many community organizations and committees. Libraries also offer the perfect space within the community to offer resources, materials, services, and programming surrounding societal-re-entry and serve an extremely important community service in general, so I can’t imagine a social service audience arguing with this point of view, once presented with the knowledge that libraries serve important community functions and offer previously inaccessible knowledge and information resources to the public almost for free, as well as the impact of this service on low-income and unhoused members of any community.



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