

Social services a new chapter in Elmhurst library offerings

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ELMHURST - The morning that Jackson Jones entered the Elmhurst Public Library to sign up for a library card, he felt alone, was facing homelessness and was on the verge of suicide.

He asked a librarian for help in signing up for a card so that he could use the computers to look for a job. The librarian referred him to Tracey Orick, a social work intern brought to

the library to provide social services for patrons.

Orick, who is now a social service specialist, is one of many social workers being placed in libraries in the Chicago area.

"Libraries have always been inclusive places where anyone can come and seek help," said Mary Beth Harper, director of the Elmhurst library.

Librarians were encountering situations beyond their skill set. When librarians were asked for help with filling out job applications and using

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computers, they knew there was a need for someone such as Orick.

Partnering with social service agencies in DuPage County, Orick is able to offer referrals to help with food insecurities, mental health issues, housing, substance abuse, unemployment, social security and domestic violence.

Orick was able to help Jones with food, housing, transportation and blankets, but most important, medication. He said he couldn't afford counseling or the medication he needed to treat depression and PTSD. Jones was experiencing frequent nervous breakdowns, and without help he could not independently fill out pages of paperwork or look for a job.

For patrons, getting service at their public library is much easier than traditional social service centers. There is not an application or lines, and proof of residency or an ID are not needed.

Orick also can offer the feeling of having someone in your corner.

It feels like a "safe place," she said.

Most of Orick's clients are senior citizens looking to get back into the workforce, facing food insecurity or at risk of losing their housing.

"We see a lot of seniors or people with other barriers that struggle with being on the computer and filling things out," she said.

Some of these clients just need help filling out an application for the local Jewel-Osco, while others face losing their home.

When Jones came to Orick facing crisis, she was able to help him identify five crisis points. She sat with him twice a week, treated his case with urgency and showed him the empathy he craved. By doing so, she was able to help him get a full-time job as a corporate recruiter, get his own apartment and regain custody of his dogs.

On Saturday afternoons, the library hosts "Social Services Coffee Chat." The event welcomes homeless people before they head to DuPage Pads, an organization that offers interim overnight housing on Saturdays through a church.

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As winter rolls in, there is an increase of homeless patrons who use the library as a warming center. The event offers coffee, snacks and sometimes movies.

When asked if having a higher homeless population on the weekends has caused problems with other patrons, Orick said it has not.

"Sometimes a comment will be made, but it's very rare," she said.

Elmhurst's poverty rate is 3.8%, according to U.S. Census data, which is about half the poverty rate of DuPage County and 10% less than Illinois as a whole. About 1,700 people are thought to be living below the poverty line in Elmhurst, with the highest demographics being females ages 18 to 34 and males ages 45 to 54. Around 19% of Elmhurst

residents are uninsured or are receiving Medicare or Medicaid. Over the past five years, there has not been a significant increase of older residents.

"Anyone can have a situation arise that may lead them to need social services," Harper said. "Some are related to socioeconomic issues, some not."

Orick hopes that these services become more readily available at other libraries. So far, Oak Park, Chicago, Addison, Evanston and Downers Grove have begun to host social workers in their libraries.

Jones has yet to refer anyone to the services, but absolutely will when given the opportunity. For him, the Elmhurst Public Library and Orick saved his life.

"When I was looking at ending all of it, I needed her, I needed the Elmhurst Public Library, I needed social services, but most of all I needed a friend," Jones said.