A Long Struggle to Force Libraries to Serve the Poor

Working and poor people have just as much a right to library service as the middle and upper classes, not to mention an arguably greater need.

by Sanford Berman

espite current "prosperity," millions of Americans remain hungry, homeless, and destitute. Most working poor people are barely making it. The income gap increasingly widens. Poor-bashing has become commonplace in media and politics while corporate welfare soars and conglomerates grow even bigger and more powerful.

Incredibly, the American Library Association (ALA) — until 1990 — had never developed a formal policy on library service to poor people. Nor had there been an ALA unit dedicated to ensuring that libraries be accessible and useful to low-income citizens, as well as better informing the whole population about the dimensions, causes, and ways to end poverty itself.

In that year, ALA Membership and Council approved a Poor People's Policy, but it long went unnoticed and unimplemented. In 1996, members of the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association formed a Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty to resurrect and promote the ALA guidelines on library services for the poor.

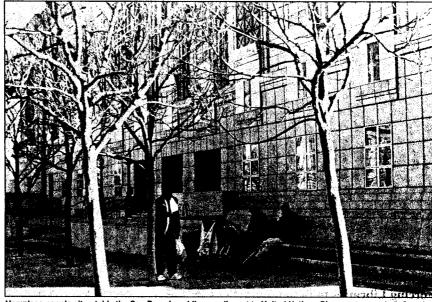
Subsequently, the task force mounted major conferences, secured support from ALA presidential candidates, initiated a SRRT resolution on poverty-related subject headings, distributed resource information encouraged the OLOS (Office for Literacy & Outreach Services) Advisory Committee to create a Poverty Subcommittee, published a first-ever statement on class and libraries in American Libraries, and spawned an activist's "cookbook": Poor People and Library Services (McFarland, 1998), edited by task force member Karen Venturella.

The Social Responsibilities Round Table has worked effectively to make ALA more democratic and to establish progressive priorities not only for the ALA, but also for the entire profession. Concern for civil and economic rights was an important element in the founding of SRRT and remains an urgent concern today. SRRT believes that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities in order to carry out their mandate to work for the common good and bolster democracy.

The struggle to get the ALA to honor its Poor People's Policy

The ALA membership, and then the Council, approved a "Policy on Library Services to Poor People" at its annual conference in Chicago in June, 1990. Originally drafted by the Minnesota Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table (MSRRT), it had first been submitted to ALA's Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT), which passed it in January, 1990.

Subsequently, ALA's Executive Board charged another ALA unit, the Coordinating Committee on Access to Information (CCAI), with implementing the resolution. However, CCAI did not immediately and vigorously plunge into implementation, but rather decided to "reanalyze the policy through referral to affected units," one possible outcome being that CCAI would "recommend that Council rescind its former action and refer the resolution for study by affected units."



Homeless people sit outside the San Francisco Library adjacent to United Nations Plaza.

Lydia Gans photo

The simple truth is that poor people do not enjoy the same access to library resources that people with adequate incomes do. The basic cause, certainly, is poverty itself and a socioeconomic system that permits it. But that doesn't let librarians off the hook.

Some of those units, CCAI noted, "may want to come back with recommendation/revisions."

On June 21, 1991, fully one year after the passage of the ALA's. Policy on Library Services to Poor People, I wrote to Arthur Curley, the CCAI chair, telling him that I was deeply disturbed about how CCAI was handling the "Poor People's Policy." Being one of the principal drafters of this policy, I reminded the CCAI that it was distributed to everyone attending the previous year's membership meeting, where it was duly debated and approved, then forwarded to Council, which accepted it, referring the document to Curley's CCAI for implementation, not dismemberment or revision.

The draft "Poor People's Policy" had been published in several journals before-hand and also sent — by me personally — to several ALA units, including the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) Advisory Committee and PLA, none of which responded with either criticism or suggestions. This was hardly a secretive undertaking; we did solicit input beyond SRRT, and the ALA Membership did pass the policy as submitted.

I wrote to Curley that I genuinely feared CCAI had betrayed the intention of Membership and Council alike by inviting revisions. Unequivocally, I said, it had violated and distorted the intention of the policy originators.

In analyzing the Poor People's Policy, the CCAI alleged there could be "trouble" with paying stipends or providing transportation to members of low-income advisory boards. In reality, it's elementary common sense. If you really want poorpeople to advise on policy and services, they must be able to attend meetings. And that provision was not a law, it's a guideline, a recommendation, a "permission" for individual libraries to do it. So what's the conflict here? What's the worry?

Similarly, the policy's encouragement of staff foodshelf donations and antihunger activity is exactly that: encouragement (not a "requirement"). Many libraries already conduct foodshelf donation drives among staff and canvas for United Way and other charities. These are not utterly earthshaking ideas. But what's important is to declare them as good and desirable, as something the whole profession thinks should be done to address an absolutely critical and worsening problem.

Finally, as I pointed out to Curley and the CCAI, much of the now "dismembered" policy is rooted solidly in the existing ALA canon, which enjoins librarians to be proactive in fostering information access and to not charge fees.

I closed my letter to Curley with these words, which seem just as relevant today in a country with an ever-increasing rate of poverty and homelessness:

"The simple truth is that poor people do not enjoy the same access to library resources and information that people with adequate incomes do. The basic cause, certainly, is poverty itself and a socioeconomic system that permits it. But that doesn't let librarians off the hook. There are many things we can do to serve poor people directly and to direct public attention to the continuing problem of poverty and how it can be lessened, if not eradicated.

"It is a lie to talk about "free public libraries" and "equality of service" large parts of the population can't afford to get to the library, can't afford video and other fees, can't afford fines, and are often so ill-housed, ill-fed and without health insurance (which translates into substandard, if any, medical care) that they cannot even exploit or enjoy library resources that are available to the same extent as people who do have adequate housing, food, and health care. To me and, I trust, to you, too - this is not just unacceptable: it's scandalous. And requires immediate attention and action. not bureaucratic game-playing....

"I ask the Committee to firmly and quickly commit itself to making the Poor People's Policy a reality: a declaration to and by the profession that we will not oberate destructive inequality based on how much money someone happens to have."

Equated with Charles Manson

What happened afterwards? Nothing. The "Poor People's Policy" didn't get rescinded or "revised," but neither was it made real. Indeed, to this day, it has never been fully published in the ALA's official organ, American Libraries. (See the full text published in this issue of Street Spirit.) It did, though, trigger a March, 1991, editorial by Leonard Kniffet in American Libraries that trashed the policy as "flabby-minded," "useless" and "absurd," in the process equating homeless neonle with Charles Manson.

I found Kniffel's editorial to be almost literally painful and deeply disturbing. I do not contest Kniffel's right to express his views nor American Libraries to publish them. What troubles me? The monumental ignorance about who the poor, hungry, and homeless really are, (I was with my family - once both homeless and on food stamps!) What I can only describe as cruel, if not vicious, stereotyping of poor and homeless people. And a serious misrepresentation of the "Poor People's Policy" passed by ALA Membership, which few readers are likely to appreciate since no major library periodical has printed the full text.

Most outrageous and hurtful, of course, was Kniffel's intentional equation of "Charles Manson" with poor and homeless people: Poor person = Crazed, evilsmelling brute. That is at once pathetic and preposterous.

In response to Kniffel's editorial, I proposed that American Libraries immediately publish the complete "Poor People's Policy," along with testimony by poor people and antipoverty advocates themselves, and some statistics to suggest the depth and breadth of poverty in this country.

My hope was that Kniffel's meanminded and uninformed editorial would stimulate an overdue discussion on what poverty means to all of us and what role libraries should assume in ending it. But the only outcome was a few letters appeared in the May and June 1991 issues

Library Services for the Poor

Approved by the American Library Association

The American Library Association promotes equal access to information for all persons, and recognizes the urgent need to respond to the increasing number of poor children, adults, and families in America. These people are affected by a combination of limitations, including illiteracy, illness, social isolation, homelessness, hunger, and discrimination, which hamper the effectiveness of traditional library services. Therefore, it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies. Concrete programs of training and development are needed to sensitize and prepare library staff to identify poor people's needs and deliver relevant services. And within the American Library Association, the coordinating mechanisms for programs and activities dealing with poor people in various divisions, offices, and units should be strengthened, and support for low-income liaison activities should be enhanced.

Policy Objectives

The American Library Association shall implement these objectives by:

- Promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.
 - 2. Promoting the publication, production, purchase,

and ready accessibility of print and nonprint materials that honestly address the issues of poverty and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.

- 3. Promoting full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislation programs in support of low-income services, and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults and families.
- Promoting training opportunities for librarians, in order to teach effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people.
- 5. Promoting the incorporation of low-income programs and services into regular library budgets in all types of libraries, rather than the tendency to support these projects solely with "soft money" like private or federal grants.
- Promoting equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.
- Promoting supplemental support for library resources for and about low-income populations by urging local, state, and federal governments, and the private sector, to provide adequate funding.
- Promoting increased public awareness through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity — of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
 - 9. Promoting the determination of output measures

through the encouragement of community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the needs of low-income people and involving anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments.

- 10. Promoting direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
- 11. Promoting training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.
- 12. Promoting networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.
- 13. Promoting the implementation of an expanded federal low-income housing program, national health insurance, full-employment policy; living minimum wage and welfare payments, affordable day care, and programs likely to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty itself.
- 14. Promoting among library staff the collection of food and clothing donations, volunteering personal time to antipoverty activities and contributing money to direct-aid organizations.
- 15. Promoting related efforts concerning minorities and women, since these groups are disproportionately represented among poor people.

Forcing Libraries to Better Serve Poor People

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of American Libraries contesting Kniffel's classist remarks. And that's it.

At least until 1996, when in the course of ALA's Midwinter conclave in San Antonio, I asked each of the three ALA presidential hopefuls if they would assign high priorities to implementing the longdormant policy. All said they would.

Later, in October, the president-elect, Barbara Ford, thanked me for responding to her questionnaire on "the developing presidential program for 1997-98." She asked: "What are the most important issues for ALA to address in the next two years" My recommendation: "Issues of class and poverty as barriers to equal and effective library use."

Her second question: "What would you suggest as presidential themes, initiatives, and programs that would benefit you and other members?" My answer:

- ◆ Immediate promotion and implementation of the "Poor People's Policy" adopted in 1990.
- ♠ Increased budgetary and staff support for OLOS (Office for Literacy and Outreach Services).

Said Ford: "As you know, I am interested in the 'Poor People's Policy,' which you listed as an initiative that would benefit you and other ALA members. What would you suggest to implement this policy?" I responded with a laundry list of urgently needed actions that remain to this day largely unimplemented:

- ♦ Publish the whole "Poor People's Policy" in American Libraries, with a few tips on local implementation.
- ◆ Designate OLOS as the ALA agency to coordinate policy-implementation, making this mandate equal to OLOS' responsibility regarding literacy and ensuring that there is adequate funding and staff to effectively address both mandates.
- ◆ Instruct ALA's Washington office to actively support legislative initiatives that would contribute to reducing, if not eliminating, poverty itself (e.g., a living minimum wage, adequate welfare payments, more low-income housing, and national health insurance, all cited in the "Poor People's Policy").
- Produce a policy-based brochure, replete with resource and bibliographic citations, on the issues surrounding the nationwide growth of poverty and policy solutions to address economic inequality.

- ♦ Urge, as ALA President, that the Library of Congress undertake the cataloging reforms specified in the enclosed SRRT "Resolution on Subject Headings Related to Class and Poverty."
- ◆ Revive OLOS' newsletter Empowerment as a vehicle for antipoverty, proliteracy news, ideas, and data.
- Mount a major conference program on issues of class and poverty as serious barriers to equal and effective library use.
- ◆ Request that all ALA units undertake poverty-related projects and programs.

So far the vast majority of these policy changes have not been actively pursued with any real commitment by the ALA.. But we'll see. There are a few glimmers of light in the ALA. American Libraries, their official journal, published an article about the street newspaper movement by Chris Dodge, entitled "Words on the Street: Homeless People's Newspapers," in August, 1999. The May, 2000, American Libraries was a special theme issue entitled "Reaching Out to Poor People," which contained five articles on how libraries can provide better services and outreach to poor and homeless people.

Library of Congress and Classism

Another important step in our campaign to convince public libraries to provide better access to vital information on homelessness and poverty-related topics emerged in 1996. In that year, Charles Robinson, director of the Baltimore County Public Library, candidly declared (in the course of an interview in a national library journal where he reflected on his work in the public library system) that he and his deputy director are "middle-class people serving the middle class."

The implication of this revealing state ment would appear to be that poor people aren't the ones who count, aren't the ones who vote, and aren't the ones who use the library. Robinson probably did not even know (much less care) that the United Nations had declared 1996 to be the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, a crucial occasion that passed unnoticed by most of the American public, since the mainstream media paid scant attention to this important milestone. But the library press should have known and cared, especially since working and poor people have just as much a right to library service as the middle and upper classes. not to mention an arguably greater need.

In response to the continued neglect and dismissal of poor people's concerns even during the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty, activist librarians began pressuring the Library of Congress to greatly improve the public's access to poverty-related topics.

After a long career as Head Cataloger at Hennepin County Library in Minnesota, I can attest to how inadequately libraries provide access to povertyrelated resources. In an attempt to try to remedy that sorry situation, the Social Responsibilities Round Table of the ALA drafted a resolution to the Library of Congress that seeks to improve resourceaccess by changing several unhelpful headings (for instance, converting PUB-LIC WELFARE to simply WELFARE) and finally establishing dozens of forms to represent real topics - like CLAS-SISM, CORPORATE WELFARE, ECO-NOMIC DEMOCRACY, HOMELESS PEOPLE'S ADVOCATES, POOR PEO-PLE-EMPOWERMENT, POOR PEO-PLE-RIGHTS, RIGHT TO SHELTER, VIOLENCE AGAINST HOMELESS PEOPLE, and WORKING POOR PEO-PLE - that so far have been unrecognized and thus rendered invisible and unreachable in library catalogs

Our resolution noted that "Library of Congress subject headings can importantly affect access to vital library resources on hunger, homelessness, and poverty, as well as shaping library users' attitudes toward those topics." The current Library of Congress headings, we stated, "impede or distort access to much relevant material because of antiquated or insensitive language, coupled with a failure to recognize a host of significant subjects actually represented in library collections."

The resolution urged the Library of Congress to (a) replace PUBLIC WELFARE ADMINISTRATION with the more familiar forms WELFARE and WELFARE ADMINISTRATION; (b) humanize the current heading, POOR by transforming it into POOR PEOPLE; and (c) swiftly establish and assign a list of warranted and essential headings related to poverty, hunger, homelessness and social policy:

Classism and elitism in libraries

It may sound like an unduly harsh judgment, but classism and elitism truly pervade the library profession. I've already furnished illustrations at the national level. Unfortunately, there's plenty of evidence locally, too.

At one Midwestern public library, Chamber of Commerce bulletins and publications from a right-wing think tank are routinely circulated among managers; the administration adamantly refuses to acknowledge that these materials are clearly biased toward property, wealth, and power and, at minimum, should be complemented by newsletters and reports from labor, consumer, and antipoverty sources.

At another institution, the first proposal to emerge from a Revenue Generation Team — expected to produce some \$100,000 yearly — was to double the fine rate on juvenile materials.

The Minnesota Library Association, which in 1990 adopted a Poor People's Policy identical to ALA's, afterward declined to include as legislative platform planks such MSSRT recommendations. all explicitly mandated by the 1990 policy, as "Support for fair and affordable housing, especially in suburban areas," "Support for single-payer health insurance system," "Support for extended transitional housing for homeless people," and opposition to "'Workfare," "Learnfare," and similar "welfare reform" proposals unless endorsed by poor people and welfare recipients groups.

In effect, the MLA arbitrarily nullified whole portions of its own policy. (Earlier, the organization decided not to support a higher minimum wage — also specified in the policy — in large part because such a hike might adversely impact some lowwage Minnesota libraries!)

For librarians and citizens committed to social justice and a genuinely fair playing field, there's still so much to do. One place to start is to read the ALA policy, 'Library Services For the Poor," along with the recommendations for action in implementing this vitally needed resolution.

Colleagues who believe that libraries have both an obligation and opportunity to serve everyone in their communities not just the comfortable and wealthy, can contact or join SRRT's Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty.

For further information contact Karen M. Venturella, Task Force Chair, at Sprague Library, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043 Phone: 973-655-7153, E-mail: venturellak@mail.montclair.edu

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