Library Services to People with Special Needs Section

Theme:

The Homeless and the Libraries: the Right to Information and Knowledge for All
The “problem” of homelessness goes unnoticed in most public libraries in Botswana.
Library services in Botswana are provided by the government.

Two types of public libraries, the Branch Libraries

Village Reading Rooms (VRRs).

Branch libraries are the traditional public libraries built in all the major villages.

The VVRs are located in schools and others in Village Development Committee (VDC) houses.
Holt (2010) describes a homeless person as:

- Someone who has no regular residential address does not really tell us much about the homeless, why they are homeless and so forth.
How did they get to be homeless?

- They don’t have a family to support them
- They are poor (poverty)
- They lack coping skills
- Runaway kids (street kids)
- Immigration issues
Are the information needs of the homeless met in Botswana?

Botswana National Library Policy (BNLP) 2012 (unpublished) goal is

“To foster the growth of an informed and educated nation through facilitating access to information for Botswana.”

It further states that everyone, including people with disabilities, the homeless has the right to visit and use the libraries.
Is what the BNLP stating happening in the provision of library services?

If the answer is no, what can be done?

- Integrate Library Services into the lives of the homeless but
- How well do public Librarians know their community?
What can Librarians do?

- This is the purpose of this study!
- Interviewing potential and existing homeless users about their information needs such as:
  - Finances
  - Employment
  - Government programmes to alleviate poverty
  - Housing
  - Childcare
  - Educations (for self and others)

- Liaise with Governmental and Non-governmental organizations
Impact of library services to the homeless
For example, description should include
- estimates of how many homeless there are in the library service area
- some demographic information (gender, age, etc) and what other agencies other than the library provide services for the homeless
How to measure impact and demonstrate value

- Opinion surveys and program evaluations
- Qualitative evaluation e.g. “what did you learn about the effects of Foot and Mouth disease (FMD) in the economy of Botswana”
- To find out if the library’s activities were useful or well received by the user, community or funder (Botswana government)
- It is also helpful and important to find out if the users benefited from their use of the library.
What next?

- It is important to understand the user experience when considering the success or failure of the library or an individual library program.
- Real accountability comes from finding out how users feel about the experiences they have at the library.
- Gone are the days when libraries claimed that users learn, enjoy, or change, unless they get that information from the users themselves
Are our Librarians aware of the needs of the underserved?

- The fact that the National Library Policy Document (NLP) is silent on the needs of the poor and the underserved in Botswana is an indication that there is still a lot to be done to make the Librarians in Botswana aware of the needs of the poor and underserved.
In Botswana public libraries, there is no comprehensive and enforceable policy regulating access and client behaviour.

Beginning 2012, Botswana started drafting a National Library Policy. I hope the team has solicited ideas from the underserved and the general public so that no one is left behind.

I will initiate a workshop for Botswana National Library Services (BNLS) and the theme will be homelessness in public libraries in Botswana.

I think doing a workshop will make a strong statement about the importance of this topic more so that not much has been written on it.
Thank you for your time.