Intersection: Public Libraries, Reading, and Adult Homelessness

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A deeper understanding of reading as more than a set of word-attack and decoding skills may help to guide public librarians seeking to fully implement the ethical professional standard of equitable access to information for everyone, including marginalized patrons such as adults experiencing homelessness. As public libraries respond to questions about their continued relevance in a digital age, an understanding of how libraries can contribute to solutions to community social needs such as homelessness has the potential to broaden community support for more inclusive library programming. In this qualitative study of the experience of reading among eight adults in a transitional homeless shelter in a small southern city, the power of a reading life to provide respite or "escape" from the struggles of homelessness is documented. Four themes emerge: (1) Reading provides a distraction from negative feelings of loneliness, melancholy, and/or boredom experienced while homeless. (2) Reading experiences temporarily "transport" the reader out of the negative experience of homelessness by allowing the person to "travel." (3) Reading experiences assist in managing personal behavior necessary to maintaining an interface with services to overcome homelessness. (4) Reading experiences ameliorate stress by providing calm and/or comfort in the uncertain circumstance of homelessness.