



*San Francisco Public Library*

**Public Safety Plan**  
**Patron Behaviors:**  
**Summary of Findings from 2006 Main Library**  
**Staff Survey, Staff Focus Groups and Patron Surveys**

Office of the Chief of Main  
September 2006

## **Background**

Responding to comments by patrons and staff alike, Main Library administration and staff began to focus, late in the year 2000, on ways to help patrons who appeared to need health and social services beyond anything the Library could provide. The group (Ned Himmel, then Chief of Main, Thomas Tavis of General Collections, Rachel McLaughlin, then head of Security and Karen Strauss, then of Access Services) pursued relationships with the Department of Social Services and the Department of Public Health – City agencies with social workers and related expertise – with the goal of situating a mental health professional here at the Main.

Momentum on both sides was lost by early 2001 although contacts had been established with Charlie Morimoto and Barbara Garcia of the Department of Public Health’s Mobile Outreach Services Team program.

In May of 2004, Mayor Gavin Newsom deployed a street outreach team to connect the city's chronically-homeless population with shelter and/or treatment services, based on a Philadelphia model. Main Library staff made contact with Ben Amyes of Street Outreach and had preliminary discussions about the feasibility of the outreach team directing their efforts to needy patrons at the Main. It was made clear that the team had its work cut out for them just providing outreach to people on the streets, let alone in buildings.

Project Homeless Connect (PHC) was launched in October of 2004. PHC is City Hall’s massive bi-monthly effort that brings together City workers, corporate donors and volunteers to aid homeless people directly.

One year later, City Librarian Luis Herrera asked Library staff (Paul Underwood, then Deputy City Librarian and Karen Strauss, now Assistant Chief of Main) to attend the October 2005 PHC to look for ideas and opportunities about social services partnerships with the Library. Through that we met PHC’s director Judith Klain who, in turn, introduced us to Dr. Rajesh (Raj) Parekh, the director of San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (SF HOT), a venture of the Department of Public Health’s Community Awareness & Treatment Services that works year-round to help people off the streets and into supportive housing, treatment programs and other City services.

The City Librarian asked Kathy Lawhun, Chief of Main, to calculate the cost of placing a mental health professional in the building. Working with Klain, Parekh and Alice Gleghorn, Deputy Director, Community Behavioral Health Services, we imagined placing an SF HOT case manager at the Library to develop and provide a viable outreach program that could be a link to housing and treatment services without turning the Main Library into more of a magnet for those in need than it was already. The Library incorporated that cost into our budget request for the following fiscal year.

At the beginning of the new fiscal year in July of 2006, with all indications from City Hall that the budget allocation would be approved, the Chief of the Main's office and Raj Parekh developed a job description and job announcement for the SF HOT case manager and began working in earnest to gather information. (Although the new case manager was not yet in place, we could have the data available for her/him to digest and incorporate into program design and implementation when s/he did come on the scene.)

Again, problematic behaviors are not exclusive to homeless patrons. While staff believes the greatest percentage of patrons expressing themselves inappropriately may be homeless, we know a) not all homeless patrons behave badly and b) not all badly-behaving patrons are homeless.

We administered a staff survey and ran three focus groups. Main Library employees were asked to rank those patron-related issues that gave them the greatest concern (i.e. specific behaviors; vulnerable places in the building; possible successful strategies). We then invited staff to further explore those concerns at employee focus groups (three were held) led by SF HOT.

Then, in August, SF HOT administered a survey on two different days of the Main's patrons and their Library usage habits. The same five questions were asked of patrons on a Friday morning waiting for the Main to open as of patrons inside the building later that month.

## **Summary of 2006 Surveys**

### Step One – Staff Survey

Main Library administration and SF HOT crafted the survey jointly. It was distributed on a Friday and collected five days later, giving all staff on duty an opportunity to weigh in. More than 200 staff out of approximately 400 responded to the survey.

These paraphrased comments are the ones that recurred most often throughout the surveys.

- Thank you for addressing this issue.
- Not everybody who has mental problems is a problem patron. Not everybody who inappropriately uses the library is homeless.
- I am for equal access but resent the libraries being turned into quasi drop-in and homeless shelters. This burden needs to be more equitably shared among City departments and services.
- The Library is not a mental health center nor should staff be acting as counselors.
- Unpleasant behaviors/activities drive away well-behaved library patrons.
- Aggressive surveillance and removal from the facility should be enforced for those damaging or vandalizing it.
- “Social worker,” “policeman” or “undercover agent” is not in my job description.

- Strong odors are left lingering throughout the building; are side-stepped because the issue is subjective and delicate; and drive other users away.
- Possible spreading of disease jeopardizes employees' and the public's health.
- Bathrooms need some type of monitoring system.
- I feel my safety and health are at risk on a daily basis.
- Verbal abuse is fairly frequent as is stalking (especially of Pages as they shelve in public areas).
- Main Security staff are excellent; very responsive to staff needs.
- Clarify and codify the consequences for patrons who break the rules.
- Increase staffing, training and discipline to strengthen the Security team.
- Security should walk the floors regularly.
- It would be useful to be able to make and provide on-site referrals and professional interventions.

### Step Two – Staff Focus Groups

Staff focus groups were scheduled following the distribution of the survey, on a variety of days (weekdays/weekends) and times (morning/late afternoon) so everyone, no matter their work shift, could attend. All respondents to the survey who expressed an interest in joining a focus group were invited; approximately 40 attended one of the three sessions. Two members of SF HOT led each focus group and recorded staff comments. Based on responses from the surveys, they narrowed the discussion to bathrooms, patrons' hygiene, safety and possible treatment services

These paraphrased comments are the ones that recurred most often and most vociferously during the course of the three focus groups. Many repeat the comments submitted on the returned surveys.

- Staff does not assume that homeless patrons all have offensive behaviors or that all offensive behaviors are caused by homeless patrons.
- The overwhelming, non-library needs of some patrons don't make use of the staff's professional abilities. These needs strain employees' impulses to be compassionate.
- People with non-library needs are not asking for our assistance to connect them to available services.
- The evolution of the Library as a place where people perform activities (sleeping, eating, bathing, drug use, acting out, viewing porn, etc.) not related to traditional library functions creates tremendous frustration, fear and low morale. A City-run, non-library facility could offer similar resources (computers, chairs, reading material, bathrooms, showers, lockers, etc.) in a more appropriate setting.
- Inappropriate behaviors in the bathrooms (bathing, laundering, drug-taking, performing sex acts, vandalism of library materials as well as vandalism of bathrooms themselves) make the bathrooms unpleasant – “disgusting” – for other patrons and Custodial & Security staff.
- Well-behaved people who don't have to be here are put off by others' behaviors and, therefore, don't come.

- A disproportionate number of the disturbances are caused by patrons with mental and/or substance abuse problems. Staff is physically uncomfortable serving patrons with strong odors.
- Patrons relieve themselves wherever they choose, both in the building and around it.
- The well-meaning Security department is understaffed and needs more training to effectively respond to this population of misbehaving patrons.
- Security feels limited by Administration in their abilities to enforce the rules and mete out punishments to those who disobey the *Guidelines for Library Use*.
- Collaborations with the police and social service providers are seen as positive.
- Oversized bags create problems when they block walkways, contain vermin and slow patrons' exit from the building during evacuations.
- Staff feels they are exposed to violence (human; animal) and patron-borne diseases.
- Patrons are skeptical that all animals brought into the Main are truly service animals.
- Staff has a perception that misbehaving "others" have more rights than staff and those who follow the rules.
- It seems to many that people can get away with just about any behavior.
- Staff assumes a connection between theft and vandalism of library materials with those whose behaviors are problematic.
- Some staff are reluctant to handle a relatively minor infraction directly for fear of an extreme reaction from the patron; Security is asked to respond or staff lets the incident (eating, drinking, loud cell phone usage) go uncorrected.
- Staff could benefit from knowing the standards applied to those who misbehave and having the confidence the standards are applied consistently.
- Some employees feel they are experiencing workplace harassment brought on by patrons' viewing of pornography.
- The on-site presence of a social service worker would relieve staff of considerable burdens.

### Step Three – Patron Survey

On a Friday morning in August, prior to opening of the Main Library, approximately one dozen members of SF HOT approached patrons waiting to enter the building at the Larkin and Grove Street entrances. Team members offered donuts to those waiting and identified themselves as employees of the City's Department of Public Health conducting a survey for the Library. Patrons were asked five multiple-choice questions plus one open-ended question designed to identify the most popular Library services and spaces; the frequency and durations of visits; and patrons' housing status. Patrons were allowed to name more than one service and space they enjoy. Fifty patrons completed the survey.

Two weeks later, on a Thursday inside the building, four members of SF HOT approached patrons exiting the bathrooms; waiting for Express Internet computers and sitting at reading tables. Patrons were asked five multiple-choice questions plus one

open-ended question designed to identify the most popular Library services and spaces; the frequency and durations of visits; and patrons' housing status. Patrons were allowed to name more than one service and space they enjoy. One hundred-twenty patrons completed the survey.

Highlights of the surveys follow. Responses to the survey conducted on the Friday morning prior to opening show one noteworthy difference from the combined results, specifically that most patrons (44%) say they visit the Library four times a week or more, compared with the majority of users (35%) in the combined results who use the building two-to-three times per week. The most popular Library service is our books (named 39% of the time), followed by the computers (26%).

- The most popular areas within the Library are the individual carrels at the windows at Larkin and Fulton Streets (named 37% of the time), followed by the bathrooms (26%).
- A majority of respondents (47%) stay 1-2 hours per visit and visit the Main 2-3 times per week (35%).
- Close to 20% of respondents identify as homeless, yet 55% who answered the question said they spend their non-Library time in shelters, streets, parks, at 39 Fell Street, bars, ballgames, Starbucks, etc. The remaining 45% are at work, in school or at home.

