SPARKS Episode 15

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Welcome to the 15th episode of Sparks. I'm Deirdre Brennan, the Executive Director of RAILS (Reaching Across Illinois Library System) in Illinois and we developed this podcast to spark conversation and even debate about current issues that are affecting libraries today. Our guests today are Megan Millen, who is the executive director of the Joliet Public Library and Denise Zielinski, who is the Community Engagement Officer at the Joliet Public Library. Our topic is something that is affecting libraries more and more and that is serving what, for lack of a better word at this point anyway, we will call homeless populations. So Megan and Denise and the staff at Joliet have been doing some great work and they are here today to tell us about that so that we can learn from what they've done and what they've learned. So maybe we could start by talking about how you got the idea to start providing the services. I think you're going to do that Denise?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Yes.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Great, take it away!

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Back in 2015 we were doing a new strategic plan and as part of that we did a survey of the community and we did focus groups. One of the big things that came out of that was that the main library was perceived by the public and our users as an unsafe place. One of the things that they felt unsafe about was all the loitering around. I don't think it was just the homeless. It was also the smokers and a lot of stuff going on in the front of the library. So I started meeting with the Will County Continuum of Care.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Can you say a little bit more about what that is? Is that a group of agencies, I presume?  
DENISE ZIELINSKI: The Will County Continuum of Care is an organization that is set up with social service providers from all over Will County. They also cover, I think, Kendall or Grundy, including Guardian Angel which is a service for battered women, Catholic Charities, and we have a mission in our area too. All of these agencies apply to the Continuum. It is funded through a HUD Grant. They receive grants from the program. This group started meeting regularly. They had various committees. One of their committees was called the Consumer Committee and I started right after I got the position, meeting with them. One of the big things that I noticed was that I kept hearing that transportation was such a big problem. They’re meeting on the on the west side of the community and all of them live on the east side of the community. That didn't make sense to me.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: They didn't have a lot of consumers meeting with the consumer committee.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Correct, so one of my first suggestions was that they moved the meeting over to the library, the downtown Ottawa Street branch, because that was more centralized and that was where they were. Well, the first meeting that we had after they did that, we had about fifteen of the actual consumers who were out there on the streets. We got to hear their stories and I began to think about what kind of services or what part the library could play and found that they needed to get the services at the library. They couldn't get to where the services actually were, so again, transportation. That was when I started what I call office hours, where they could meet one-on-one with a social worker or service provider to work on wherever they are in the process, whether that's housing, mental health issues, or getting paperwork, that kind of stuff. So we had providers from the various agencies in the group who would come to the library. We started this once a month for two hours. We immediately found that we needed to make it twice a month, so it is now twice a month. We're finding that it goes a lot longer than the two hours just because it’s no appointments, you just show up and a lot of people show up. So it's been very, very popular.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: And you have a medical van?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: We just started having a local agency bring their medical van to do some simple medical procedures like checking blood, blood pressure, looking for those kinds of signs of any kind of physical ailment, and they have a nurse practitioner and they provide those services. Now what's really cool about that is that not only do they provide for the homeless for the unsheltered but also the public can use the services too and we've had a number of them take part in that.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It's really great. It's inspiring. In my career I've had to, I think libraries in general are having to deal but we’ve certainly learned as we've done some of our strategic planning focus groups, listening tour, that libraries are having to deal more and more with a growing diversity, shall we say, of social problems in libraries. I think that the unsheltered-I like your term, as opposed to homeless- it can be particularly difficult serving them because of the perception in the community at large sometimes that they’re a problem as opposed to people who need and deserve service. I know you have some things to say about that Megan. Can you talk about it from your view as the Director as well?

MEGAN MILLEN: Okay, so I just returned from PLA in Philadelphia and one of my big takeaways from that conference was that time and again you heard libraries talking about the services they are now providing for the public and it doesn't sound anything like the services they were talking about back when I became a librarian 20-plus years ago. It's about dealing with homelessness, with drug addictions, with poverty with all sorts of things that were never in our wheelhouse as providers of material and information. So, my big take away is that more and more libraries are becoming, by default, social service agencies. As funding goes away for the rightful agencies they’re coming to us anyway. So we're having to find new ways to partner and to find ways to serve these people because that's what they are; they’re people, they are our patrons they are not a problem to be gotten rid of or somebody to be shooed away. They are our patrons who are coming to us for help and they're just as worthy as the people coming in for the latest Stephen King novel. Honestly, I didn't get into library service just to provide books for people; I wanted to help people.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Absolutely

DENISE ZIELINSKI: to add to that, I think a lot of libraries look at it like, you know what, we don't have the funding to be able to hire a social worker, so the “oh, woe is us, we can't do anything so we're just going to push them out.” Well, Joliet, despite having a hundred fifty thousand people, is still underfunded per capita-wise and we couldn't afford to have a social worker so this was our answer to what we could do for the community.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: I mean realistically as you said that it dawned on me, obviously that even if you are fortunate and funded enough to have a social worker you're not going to have that person at all hours that the library is open so it behooves the library, just in general, to be part of the solution. As I think you said Megan, to not be part of the problem. We have to do this together. I think that's that is something that has I think become more difficult as we have fewer agencies to rely upon as well. I think that's another thing that we have learned in our strategic planning, is that where we used to be able to, I mean we libraries used to have a more robust network of social service agencies, more and more we're the ones who are dealing with the problems because there's nobody else to deal with it.

MEGAN MILLEN: The other thing that's important is changing the mindset of your staff. No matter who walks through your door, these are your patrons today and you’re to provide a welcoming environment for everyone. I feel just in like the year-and-a-half that I have been at Joliet, I've seen a transition with the staff that they are much more welcoming of our homeless commuter community, or as one Librarian at PLA called them, our daily readers because really they are our biggest readers at our Ottowa Street branch. They seem to be voracious readers. They seem to love our materials. We've recently changed our circulation policies to allow them to check out materials without having a permanent address and I'm very proud that we were able to do that.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That is awesome.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: What is really cool is that our unsheltered Community was actually approached at our consumer meetings about this and they helped to formulate the procedures and the various aspects of that policy. I can still remember them saying, “Not all of us have an ID” and “How am I going to get a photo?” Then someone said, “Well, what about a mugshot-could I use my mugshot?”

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Oh boy, Kind of funny and not funny at the same time, right?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: We’d never really thought about it.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Well, it’s certainly an official ID.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: It certainly is. It comes from an official source anyway. It's that kind of stuff, that kind of way of looking at it, that we couldn't have come up with on our own.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right. So what advice do you have for other libraries who might want to try this on? How do you get started and do you think what you're doing is replicable?  
DENISE ZIELINSKI: Yes, definitely. I've been talking with Wheaton Public Library about the DuPage Continuum of Care and trying to help them get their group started. I've also been talking with Morris, a group down there. They're all at the point where I was in the beginning where, “Okay, we recognize that it's a problem, now what?” One of the things that I keep telling them it is you definitely need to look around your community at what the agencies are providing and what can libraries do. Megan and I were just talking about this and libraries have meeting rooms, they've got meeting spaces, they have, well in our case, hotspots which is an awesome thing.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That you loan?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Yeah, and we have free internet and we have, what was the third thing? There were three…

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Internet hotspots,

DENISE ZIELINSKI: and a prime location

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: and meeting rooms

DENISE ZIELINSKI: We're a trusted location and we have more hours-that was the other one. DIERDRE BRENNAN: Right, which is a big deal.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Most of these agencies are nine to five.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Which is something that's not understood. I remember the community members said to me once, in a community that shall not be named, “I don't know why they have to be in the library during the day, why don't they just go to the shelter?” Well, the shelter isn't open. The shelter can only afford to be open at night for sleeping purposes, essentially, and maybe a hot meal.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Yeah, and that's the kind of stuff that we needed to know too, is if there's an odor issue where can we tell them to go to get a shower? Where can they go to wash their clothes? Where can they get a meal? What times were those meals? We've been slowly gathering that kind of information for them and making sure that the service points all know.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Do you know if there are any grant funds available for these, maybe not specifically for libraries, but for these kind of proactive services? Do you know?  
DENISE ZIELINSKI: Not right off hand but I do know that there's some collaborative grants that RAILS is offering that could possibly help get this started.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Wow, what a great segue to bring up! Yes, I think we are going to be expanding the scope of our collaborative grants for exactly this kind of reason. Libraries work with all kinds of partners, not just other types of libraries.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Oh yeah, we are also looking to expand what we offered during our office hours to include having a dentist van out there. I just recently learned that the county health department has a dentist that will go to different places. I'm like well, I need them to make a stop at the library. We are also looking at legal services for issues, whether it be expungement or-

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: What is expungement?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Where they have like a felony or something on their record that is keeping them from getting housing because somebody does a background check on them and they can't get a place. So, to help with the landlord issues.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So you can get something expunged like that. Just knowing that is important.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: So just to be able to talk to somebody and know that they’re not being charged. We want to bring some more services into the library that can help them.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It does strike me that it's really a matter of, as you said earlier Megan, changing your mindset, not just of the library staff but society in general perhaps. The unsheltered are not all unsheltered for the same reason. They're not all unsheltered, some of them just don't have safe shelters. It struck me earlier when were chatting a bit that we always had this, in my experience, our policy always said no sleeping in the library. I wonder now why do we say you can't sleep? I mean you know maybe it's the noise thing but it's hardly the worst thing that ever happened in the library.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: I think it's a case of we've always done it that way and we're just stuck in that group and we need to really look at some of the ways we're handling certain situations.

MEGAN MILLEN: I think the biggest thing is when it becomes when it's humanized. When you realize that if something went wrong in your life this could be you. I guess that came home to be really strongly at a staff in-service day where we had the homeless com in. We were talking with them about it and with the Will County Continuum of Care and one of my pages stood up and talked about how she and her family had been homeless and we didn't even know that. She told her story and I was astounded that somebody on my staff had experienced homelessness. If everybody would stop and realize that but for some bad decisions or some bad problems befalling you or some medical bills, this could be you, your family, your sister, your brother, so it's in everybody's best interests to work with them, to help them and to try to make their situations better if we can.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: I think we have to quit looking at the “why” they're where they’re at and look at the how can we get them out of where they're at?

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right, and I think it's a shameful stigma that certainly keeps people from being able to get help because they are ashamed to talk about it with anybody. So we have heard this is all very successful. Any downside, any pushback from patrons, any loss of materials?  
MEGAN MILLEN: I haven’t heard directly from patrons but the police have had a discussion with us, that by providing the services we’re somehow attracting the homeless to our facility, not realizing that the homeless are there all around us. We’re smack in the middle of about five or six different homeless shelters and close to the Tent City. We're going to have these problems no matter what we do and if it's up to me I'm going to be part of the solution instead of fighting a problem that we can't win. Patrons haven't really complained about that or it's not even been on their radar what we're doing, I don't think.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Most of what we've been doing has been on the down-low just because when you're dealing with this kind of community, it’s all word of mouth.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Right, they don't want to talk to the social worker, probably.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: They’re afraid. They’re really afraid.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: So talking to library staff in that way, you're more approachable.

MEGAN MILLEN: Even we’re not that approachable; we have a liaison named Richard. Do you want to talk about Richard?

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Richard is wonderful. He is an actual former homeless person who has been housed and he serves as our liaison with that community. He is someone that they trust and so when he tells them that they can come to the library and get help they're going to go “Oh, okay.” I have to say, I had one gentleman who came to one of our meetings who said “I just came to see what was going on because I kept hearing about this and it sounded too good to be true.” He came and he was like, “Wow!”

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: It's good and it's true!  
DENISE ZIELINSKI: Yeah, and he's a unit leader in his area of tent city and he took it back to them which meant that more are hearing about us and what we're doing.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: That is great. Well, I want to thank you so much for talking with us today and I know that if any of our listeners want to reach out to you, you would be more than happy to talk with them.

MEGAN MILLEN: Absolutely

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Certainly

So it’s Megan Millen and Denise Zielinski at Joliet Public Library, Joliet Illinois. So thanks again and please keep up the good work. It's very inspiring.

MEGAN MILLEN: Thanks Dee.

DENISE ZIELINSKI: Thanks.

DEIRDRE BRENNAN: Thank you very much for listening to Sparks today. Sparks is produced by the Reaching Across Illinois library System. If you would like to learn more about the show or share your feedback on the topics discussed, please visit railslibraries.info/sparks.