

Case Study 3: Providing Resources for a Reluctant Patron

SCENARIO:

A police officer brought a woman to the library because she was in need of emergency shelter due to a domestic violence situation. This was all the information passed on to the branch head. As it got closer to closing time, the branch head decided she needed to find assistance or shelter for the woman. She called a board member of the local food pantry/community outreach organization asking for suggestions of local resources, but the board member did not have any suggestions. Next, the branch head looked up resources on the county website and saw that in case of emergency domestic violence situations, to call the sheriff's office. She did this and got a recording. She left a message, and the call was never returned. Next she called a women's shelter in Lansing, 45 miles away, to ask for help. The person she talked to said the shelter had no room, but she would talk to the woman to see if she could find a way to help. When the branch head approached the woman to ask if she would like to talk to the person on the phone, the woman said she didn't want to talk to anyone, so the branch manager ended the call. It was now closing time and the woman left the library and walked down the street. A few minutes later the police officer came back, and staff directed him in the direction the woman took.

RESPONSE:

The staff member in this case was wise to get her branch manager involved on this one. The branch manager went "above and beyond" the call of duty in her assistance with this patron. Calling the board member, looking up community resources, and making a call to a shelter—all work that doesn't necessarily fall in the wheelhouse of this administrator, but certainly can. What happens when a patron doesn't want to take advantage of these efforts? Could the branch manager have done anything different to keep the patron engaged to the point that she agreed to speak to the women's shelter staff member? Probably not. However, this scenario raises a few thoughts and more questions that both librarians and administrators can ponder:

- How available is a list of community resources for staff librarians? What if the branch manager had been unavailable or not there? How empowered are reference librarians to be information-gatherers when the information goes beyond what is in the stacks?
- What might have been going on with this patron that prevented her from taking the call? Are there prohibitive mental health concerns here? Had she had a bad experience with shelters? How would finding any of this out help or change the encounter? Would it have?
- When does our responsibility for patrons end? The staff felt a need to point the police officer in the direction of the woman. Is that enough follow-up? Does anything more need to be done? How should the branch manager leave it with the shelter staff? What kind of documentation, if any, needs to be made regarding this encounter?
- What follow-up needs to happen in the way of debriefing for these staff members? Knowing that a woman is likely to be without shelter, despite all efforts to prevent that scenario, can be emotionally taxing. Are there resources available for helping the staff members de-stress from this experience?