

Nobody's Core Business

Confronting Cross-Cutting Problems in the Public Sector

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It was the second overdose in as many months in the central library. In her city, like many other American cities, the opioid crisis was killing two or three people each month, and sometimes more.¹ Watching police administer Narcan,ⁱ Jenny, the head librarian, tried to place the victim. She was the only library administrator who lived nearby and he looked vaguely familiar to her. Had he been among the teens who used to pour into the library after school when she was head of youth services? Was he from the neighborhood? As paramedics arrived and took over resuscitation efforts, she directed her staff to clear a path to the first-floor meeting room, where a meet-up for English language learners was about to begin.

Jenny reflected on how the library, and her job, had changed over the years. It all started with the influx of unaccompanied tweens and teens some fifteen years ago, when the local branch of the Boys & Girls Club had shut down. At the time, she had argued with the head librarian over the disruptive presence of the teens. Where her old boss had seen the teens as a problem, she had perceived an opportunity. Trying to accommodate a new group of clients, she had pushed hard to expand services and reconfigure spaces in the library. She had helped raise foundation money and recruited corporate sponsors to make the library comfortable for the older patrons and stimulating for young people. While she was still pursuing her master's degree, she was promoted from circulation assistant to head of youth services, the first person to serve in this new role.

When her old boss retired, Jenny became head librarian. Under her leadership, the library continued to innovate. She had worked with the community—the teachers' union, the chamber of commerce, the PTA (Parent Teacher Association), AARP (American Association of Retired Persons), and everything in between—to reinvent the library. With every new partnership and initiative, she felt the library became a greater asset to the city. It offered programming for toddlers and seniors, for immigrants and people pursuing high school equivalency degrees, and more. While some programs still focused on reading, many now helped patrons build basic life skills: preparing for job interviews, money management, information literacy, mindfulness, healthy living—even relationship skills. It would not be a stretch to add substance misuse prevention to the list.

ⁱ Narcan is a drug administered by nasal spray that counteracts the effects of opioid intoxication and overdose.

This fictional case is based on interviews with librarians and was inspired by *The Town Librarian* in *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*, (1995) by Mark Moore. The case was written for the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It was developed solely as the basis for class discussion. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. HKS Case No. 2200.0. Copyright © 2018, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023, 2024 President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 4/2024.)



But then again, there were so many things the community seemed to want from the library. People came to the desk looking for tax help, immigration attorneys, help loading e-books onto the devices their grandkids had given them for Christmas. Jenny knew that sometimes she simply had to say “no.”

The library could not be everything to everybody. There was not enough money, and the staff often lacked the skills, time, or appetite for taking on new tasks. The question of which client demands the library should satisfy and which community needs it should meet came up in one way or another at every board meeting. Whenever Jenny proposed new activities, the standard question would be: “How is this part of the core business of the library?” Her reply had always been the same: “Define ‘core business.’” The problem, in Jenny’s opinion, was that many of the issues that emerged in the community—and showed up in her library—were nobody’s core business.

Some teens had wandered over from the youth space to watch as the Narcan took effect. “Yup,” said one to his friend, “I told you he’d be right again. Just like my cousin.” Library staff helped the paramedics lift the revived man to his feet and ushered him out the door. Jenny, still trying to recall how she knew his face, glanced over at the first aid station behind the circulation desk. Was it time to talk about getting a stock of Narcan for the library and training the staff to use it? She returned to her desk to resume planning her upcoming budget meeting.

Endnotes

¹ Salynn Boyles, “Overdose Death Rates Now Highest in Cities,” *Medpage Today*, August 2, 2019, <https://www.medpagetoday.com/publichealthpolicy/publichealth/81383>.