

# From Shelves to Showers?

## *The Evolving Mission of a Public City Library*

GAYLEN W. MOORE, JORRIT DE JONG, AND MARK H. MOORE

“I’m sure it will make headlines, but I doubt they’ll be the ones you want!” the library board chair exclaimed. Jenny, the executive director, had just suggested adding shower stalls and changing rooms to the plans for a redesigned central library. “People are washing in the bathrooms already,” Jenny replied, recalling a mother shepherding her children into a stall with water bottles, soap, and paper towels that very morning. Residents without stable housing frequently used the sinks to brush their teeth and wash up. But as she looked around the room, even her usual allies looked skeptical.

Jenny reflected on how the library, and her job, had changed over the decades. When she was an assistant librarian, middle-schoolers with working parents had started using the library as a gathering spot after school. Some patrons complained about rowdy behavior—even going so far as petitioning the city to ban the students. The first time Jenny spoke before city council was to defend the youths’ right to be there. Instead of a nuisance, she saw an opportunity to reimagine library programming and inspire a new generation of readers. Under her leadership, the library had transformed into a bustling community hub with partnerships and events that reflected the full diversity of the city.

Jenny felt that the library kept getting better, but she had to admit the job kept getting harder. Staff were absorbing the consequences of inadequate housing and social services for city residents, and burnout was at an all-time high. They had faced threats and harrassment, broken up fights, and learned to treat opioid overdoses. The single social worker on site struggled to keep up with service referrals. Still, Jenny took pride in her ability to find creative and pragmatic solutions for her patrons, and the upcoming redesign was a once-in-a-career opportunity to think more expansively about how library infrastructure could address community needs.

“There are showers at the shelter on Green Street,” a board member reminded her. Jenny nodded, but explained that many patrons found that facility unsafe or inaccessible. She knew she was on shaky ground; her proposal was well outside the library’s “core business.” Could families be reassured the library was still a safe place? Would staff revolt? She began enumerating possible benefits: there would be new opportunities for connecting vulnerable patrons to services; well-managed and purpose-built showers would help prevent misuse of the restrooms, improving safety and accessibility for all. A non-profit had already offered to lend staff and expertise. She knew board members’ worries—costs, liability, “mission creep,” public perception—were valid, and the proposal could slow momentum on the entire project. But if the library could meet a basic need of patrons and serve the community at large, wasn’t it worth exploring the possibility?