

Claudette Richardson, Chair
KFPL Board of Directors
130 Johnson Street
Kingston, ON K7L 1X8

Dear Ms. Richardson,

I am writing on behalf of the Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation Office of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul. It has come to our attention that Kingston Frontenac Public Library is implementing a new Patron Code of Conduct, and we would like an opportunity to comment on its contents.

Our public libraries are public spaces funded by public dollars. As such, we fully support the goals articulated in KFPL's February 2016 Patron Code of Conduct to ensure that everyone using library space and services has a positive experience and that library space be accessible, inclusive, welcoming and safe for patrons and employees alike. However, while it's understood that disruptive behavior can't be tolerated, we are concerned that some of the policies included in the Code are neither welcoming nor inclusive, and instead not only create barriers but also discriminate against particular patrons -- those living in poverty and without a home -- who find themselves in circumstances beyond their personal choosing and control.

People without homes and living in poverty are not a homogeneous group. The causes for their circumstances can range from illness, divorce, job loss, student debt, and lack of affordable housing to addictions. Homelessness and poverty are not permanent states of being either. Most of those who have ended up in poverty or without homes can transition out with support and encouragement.

A person without a home may be carrying all their worldly possessions with them, may not have access to showers or laundry, may be dressed in whatever was donated to them or they could find to wear, and may be desperate to find a safe and quiet space to sit, linger, and sleep. Perhaps more than any other library patron, they will need to use the library to search for information and services of benefit to them, such as finding a meal, a job or a home, or seek out literature that can help them to escape their circumstances for a little while, comfort and uplift them. Learning can change lives. Knowledge can be transformative. Rules which state that they must limit the belongings they bring to the library, wear appropriate attire; not loiter, linger, sit idly or sleep, and that will not tolerate their offensive body odour are barriers and clearly exclude them.

People who feel unwanted and shut out of a community have no incentive to obey rules and behave well. And while it's true that libraries are not homeless shelters and librarians are not social workers, the library could take another approach to those patrons it feels are disruptive and don't fit in. Consult them about what library services would be of benefit to them. Create programs that welcome and include them – book clubs, film nights, peer counselling groups are all possibilities. Provide space in the library for experts to meet with those who need help to navigate the social services system. Partner with community organizations to advocate for better services for those who are marginalized. Remove barriers that limit and prevent patrons from using library services. It is both necessary and important for libraries to track borrowed materials, but people who are homeless do not have permanent addresses and may sleep outside or in shelters, which means ID can be frequently lost or stolen. People without homes also live in poverty, which means they can't pay fines for late or lost books.

While we realize that accommodating marginalized populations presents challenges, sometimes the way business is done has to change to meet their needs and in the end benefits the whole of society. Municipalities and public organizations including libraries had to make changes to accommodate disabled persons when the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act was passed in 2005. We urge KFPL to implement a Patron Code of Conduct that recognizes those without homes and living in poverty having as much right as anyone to access information available in its libraries and which welcomes, includes and serves not just some but all members of the Kingston community.

Yours sincerely,

Sr. Frances O'Brien, SP
on behalf of the Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation Office
of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul

cc: Patti Enright, KFPL CEO; KFPL Board, Barbara Aitken, Judith Brown, Ralph Gatfield, Jim Neill, Annie Peace-Fast, John Purdon, Somnath Sinha, Monica Stewart, Catherine Tang, Mayor Ron Vandewal