



BEYOND BOOKS:

EMPOWERING PUBLIC LIBRARIANS
TO ADVOCATE FOR
UNHOUSED PATRONS



POV you're at the desk & one of your regulars comes in.



You know their name, when they visit, and...



You think that if something goes wrong, it will probably involve them.



Picture this patron. What do they look like? What else do you know about them?



For many of us, these patrons are a mystery. When we don't understand behavior, we stop asking why, and start asking *how do I avoid this person?*

Many unhoused patrons have experienced trauma that permanently alters how their brain responds to perceived threats.

Homelessness itself is a chronic trauma.

By changing our approach, we can achieve better outcomes in our libraries.



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YOUTH SERVICES LIBRARIAN

WICOMICO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Relevant Experience

- 3+ years in public libraries
- Daily frontline interactions with unhoused patrons
- Community outreach and advocacy

This session is grounded in real interactions, real people, and the real limitations we face in our work.

AGENDA

01

WHY

02

WHAT

03

HOW

04

IMPACT

+ REFLECTION

01

WHY

WE ARE NOT ASKING:

How do we address homelessness in our libraries?

When we ask this, we risk:

- generalizing behaviors
- reinforcing stigma
- marginalizing people



Our **real concern** is behavior, not housing status.

By recognizing the resiliency and humanity of all patrons, we can address behavior through a framework rooted in **dignity, respect, and clear boundaries.**

This approach benefits **all** patrons.



TODAY'S GOAL:

Improve public library employees' comfort, empathy, and skills when interacting with patrons experiencing homelessness.

WHY THIS TRAINING MATTERS

- Frontline library work is emotionally demanding
- Uncertainty and conflict drain staff energy fast
- Trauma-informed approaches reduce escalation and stress
- Clear expectations and boundaries make interactions more predictable



Because when interactions are clearer and more predictable, everyone leaves less stressed, including us.

WHY NOW? LOCAL LEVEL

**1/10
students**

**Wicomico County students
experiencing homelessness
(2024)**

**THIS IS
ALREADY
HAPPENING
IN OUR
COMMUNITY.**

329

**Lower Shore
Point-in-Time Count
(2023)**

WHY NOW? STATEWIDE

↑ 4%

Increase
from 2023
to 2024

**THIS ISN'T
JUST LOCAL,
IT'S
STATEWIDE.**

6,069

Marylanders without
a place to live
(2024)

www.endhomelessness.org

WHY NOW? STATE LEVEL

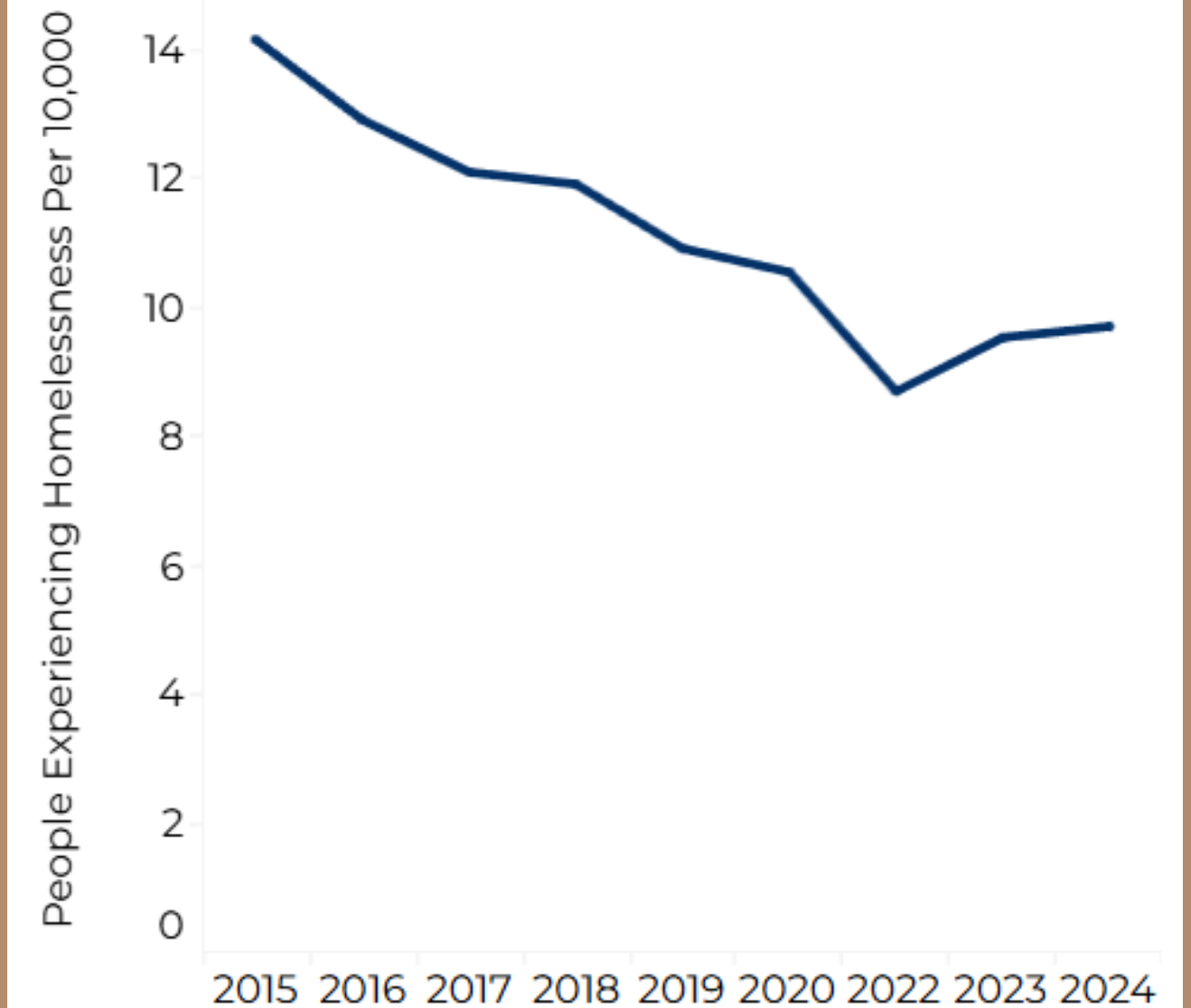
**THIS IS DRIVEN
BY STRUCTURAL
CONDITIONS.**

Median Gross Rent (2024)

- Maryland: \$1,379
- Washington, DC: \$1,935 (*highest in U.S.*)
- Puerto Rico: \$376 (*lowest in U.S.*)

Higher housing costs are strongly associated with higher rates of homelessness.

**People Experiencing Homelessness
Per 10,000 Residents**



WHY NOW? NATIONAL CONTEXT

- Homelessness is at a **record high**
- Communities lack **enough housing and services**
- Vulnerable populations are being hit the hardest
- Disabled people, children, and older adults disproportionately affected
- BIPOC and gender-expansive individuals face higher rates of homelessness
- Rural and suburban areas see higher unsheltered homelessness
- Funding cuts and punitive policies worsen public health outcomes

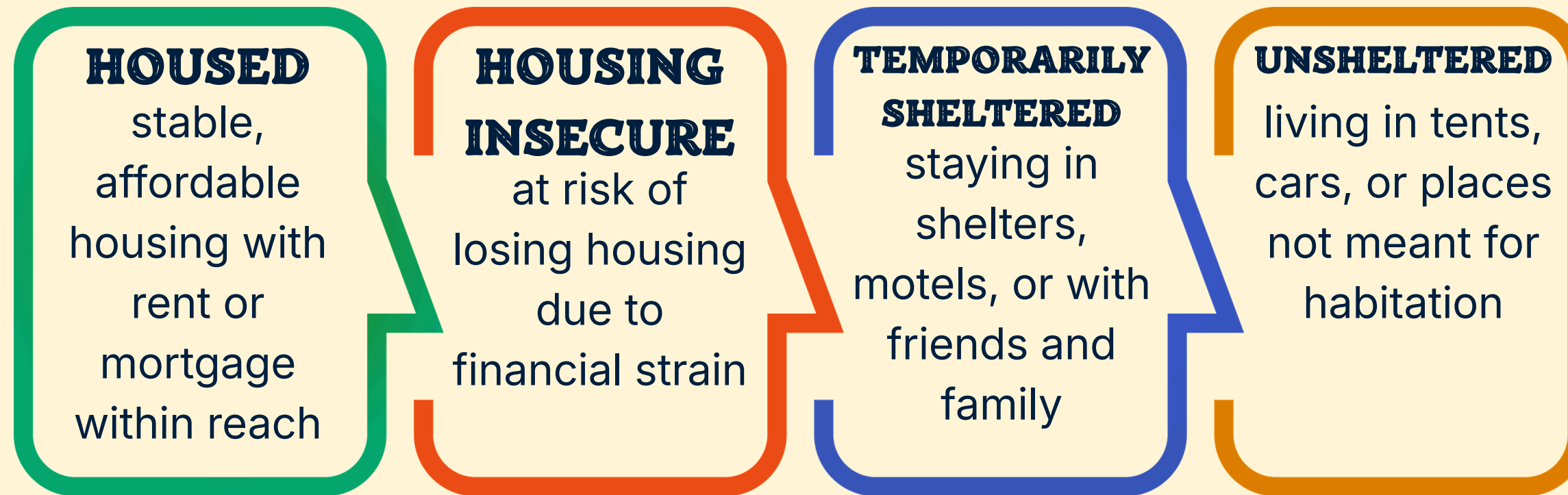
**HOMELESSNESS IS SOLVABLE
AND WE'VE SEEN PROGRESS WHEN
WE INVEST IN PEOPLE.**

02

WHAT

UNDERSTANDING HOMELESSNESS

HOUSING IS A SPECTRUM



- Lack of stable, safe housing
- Not limited to street living
- Trauma is both a cause *and* a consequence

- Many people are one crisis away from homelessness (Berman, 2005)
- Youth and families are increasingly affected

BARRIERS FACED BY UNHOUSED PATRONS

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

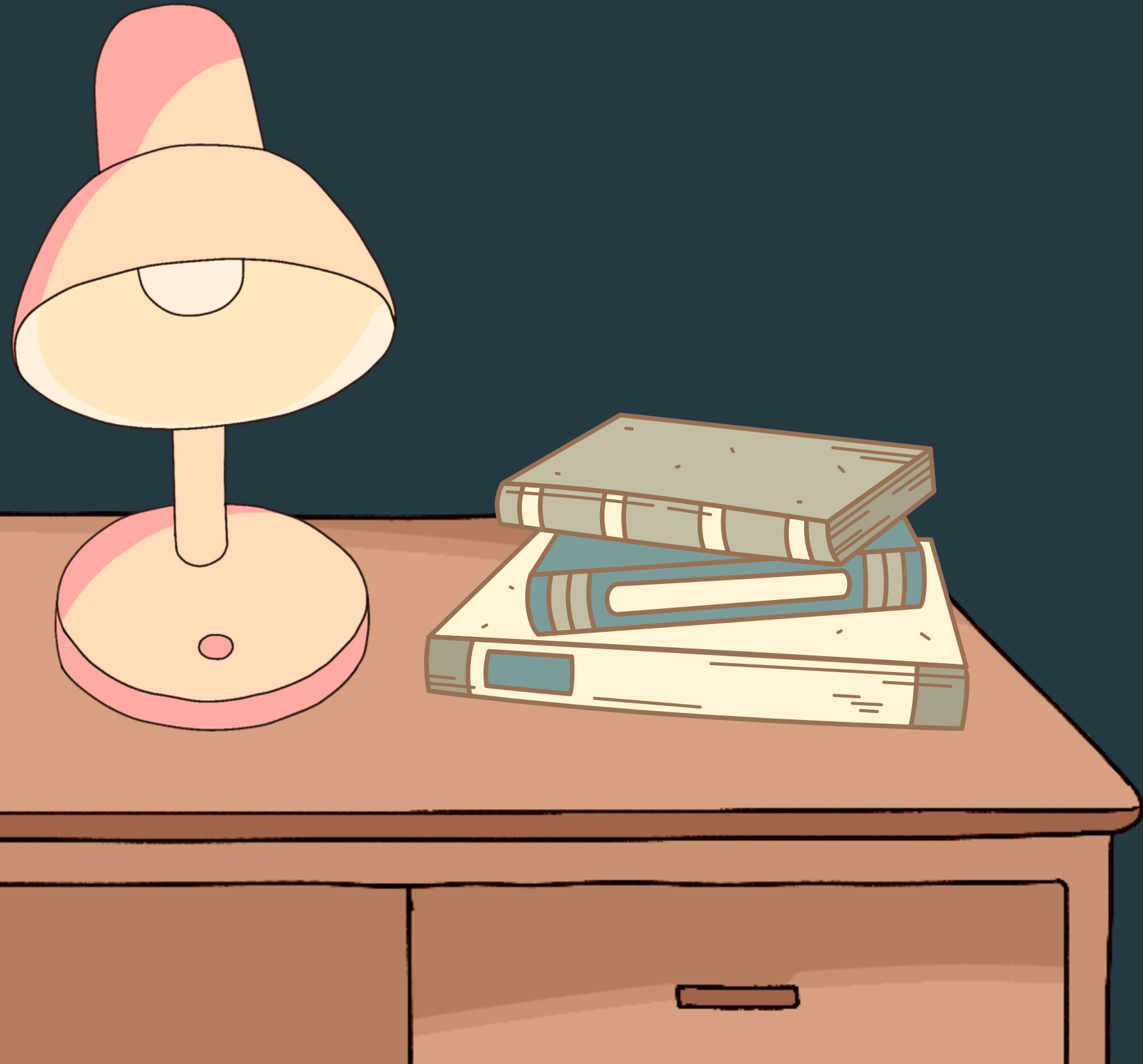
- Systemic discrimination and classism (Berman, 2005)
- Policies that exclude people from public spaces



EVERYDAY BARRIERS

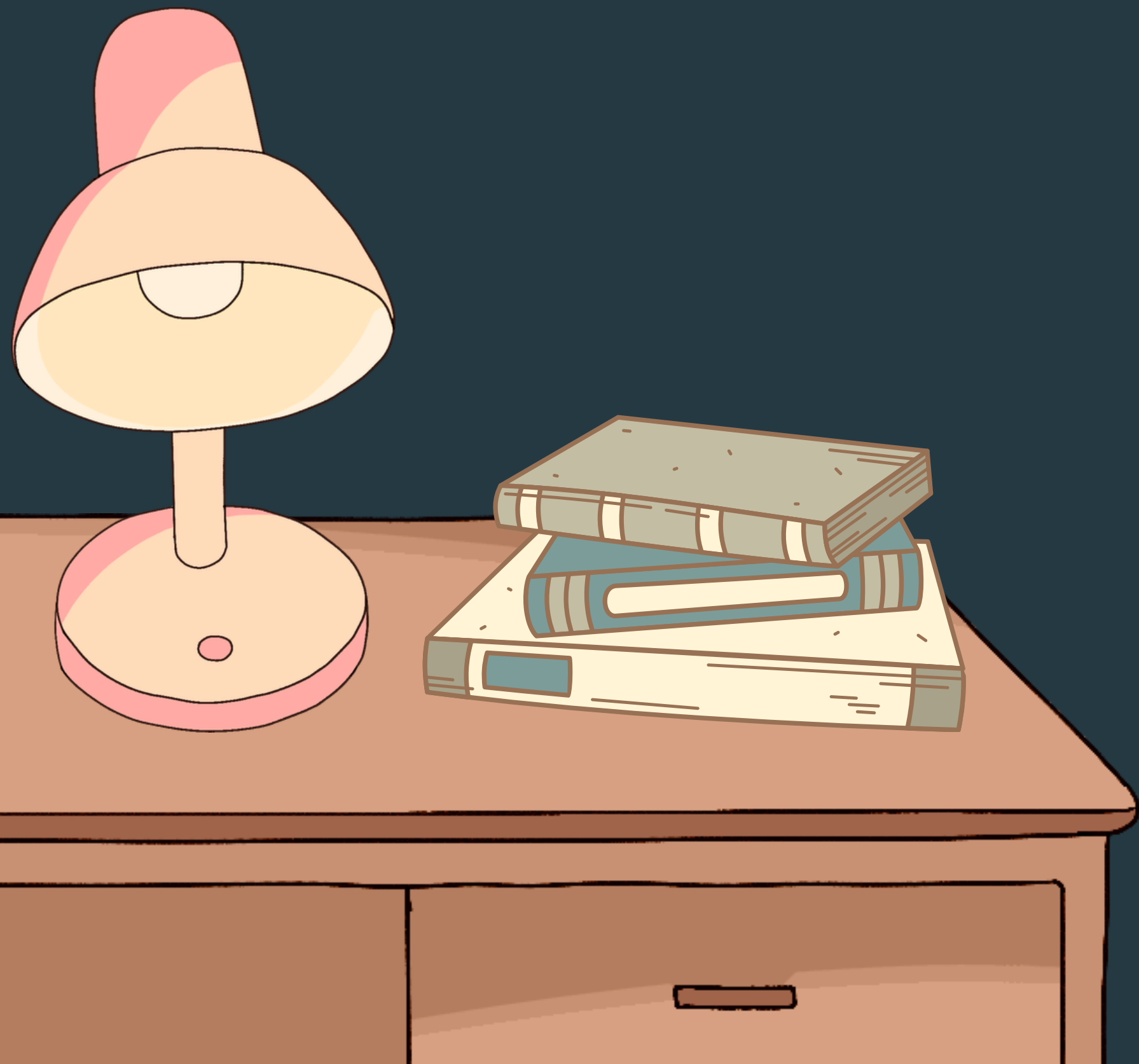
- Stigma and misunderstanding
- Limited access to hygiene, technology, and shelter

TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICE



- Recognize trauma responses (Dowd, 2018; PLA Task Force)
- Approach patrons with compassion, not judgment
- Focus on behavior, not labels (Badalamenti & Hardy, 2019)
- Use people-first, strengths-based language

RECOGNIZE TRAUMA RESPONSES



- Trauma can stem from abuse, poverty, or discrimination
- Trauma shapes how people perceive safety and threat
- Social norms exist on a spectrum

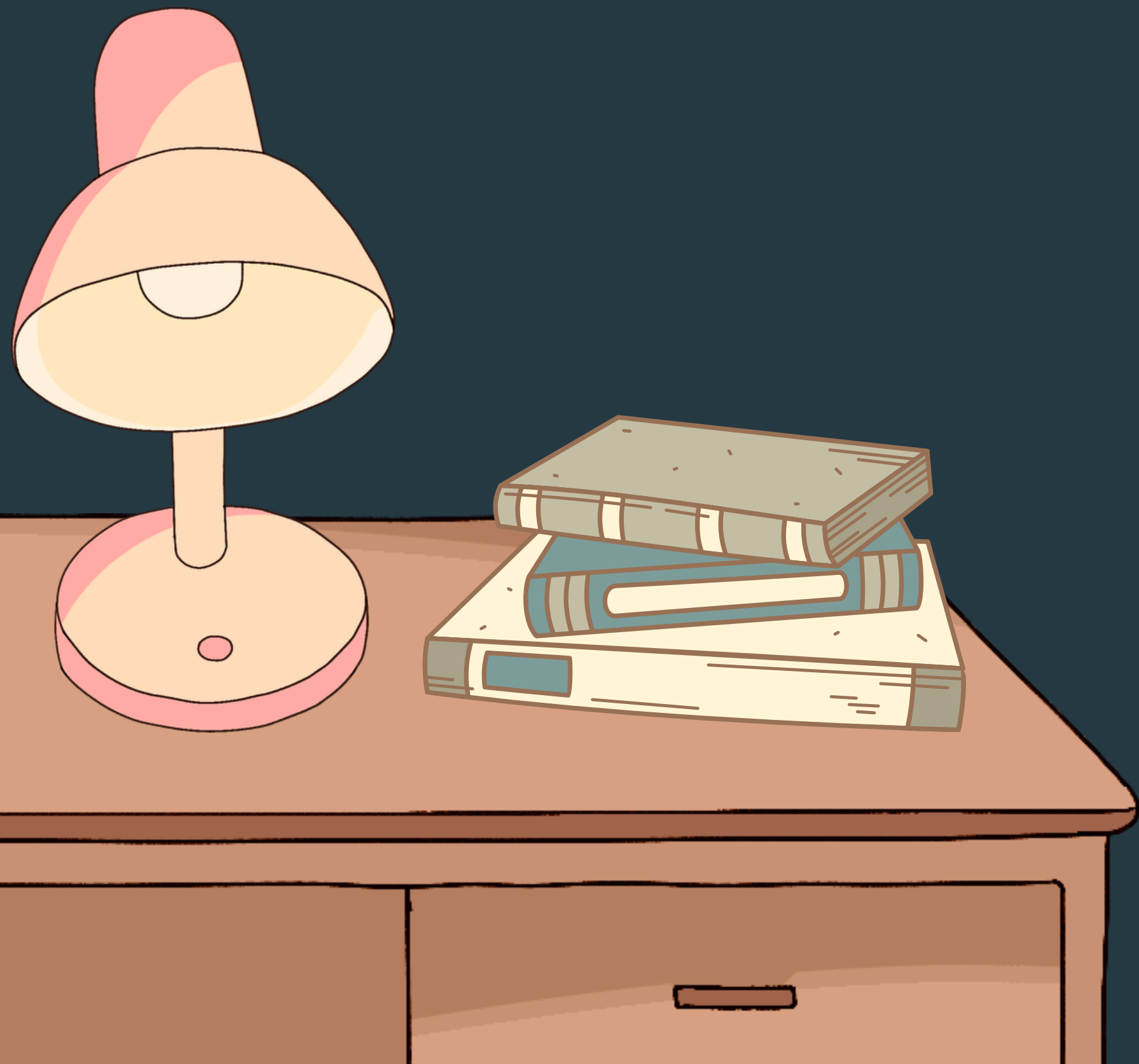
No one enters the library neutral.

APPROACH WITH COMPASSION, NOT JUDGMENT



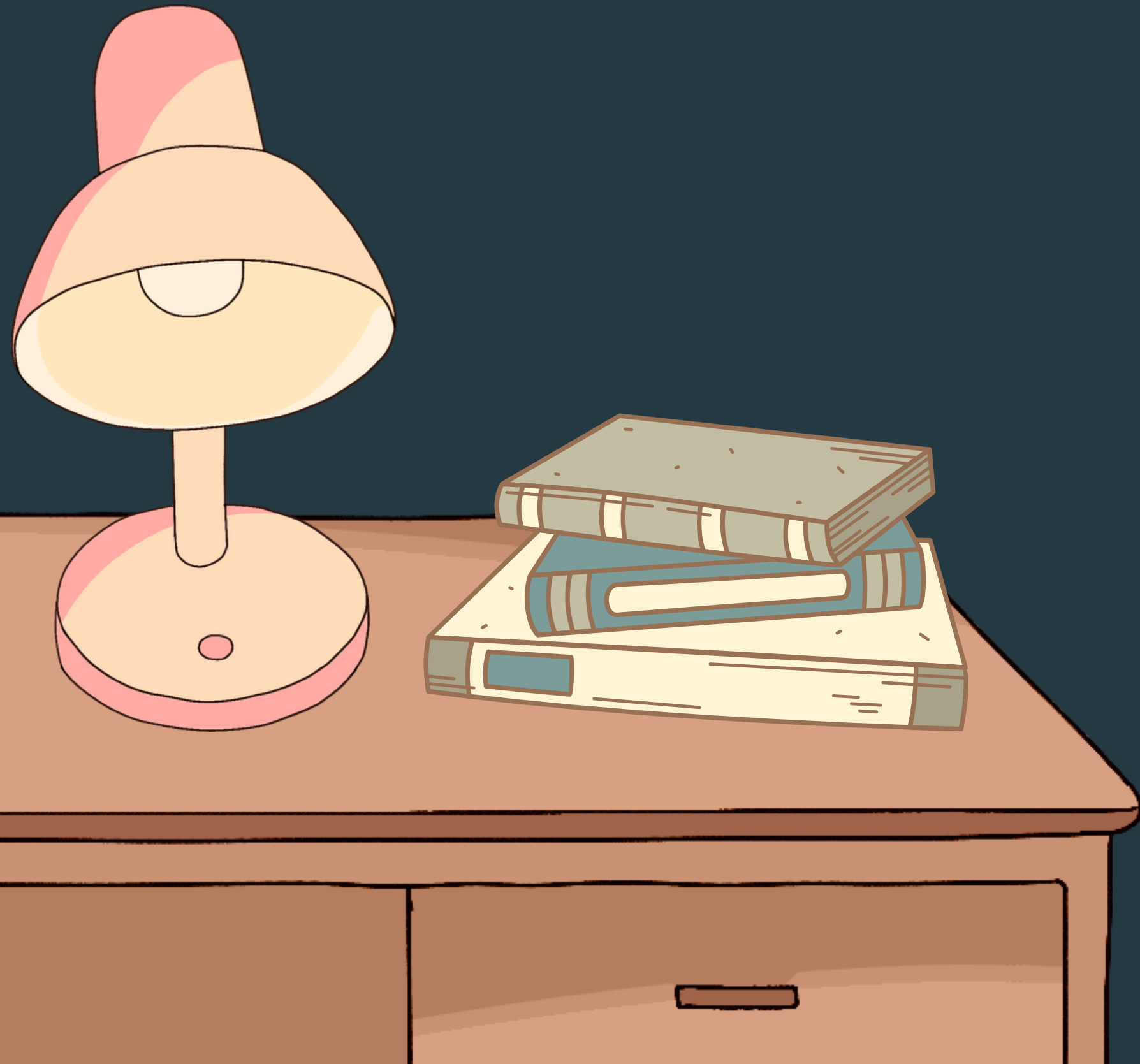
- Behavior often reflects systemic barriers, not personal failure
- Every person has strengths that can support change
- Staff strengths matter too. Your skills and experiences are assets.

COMPASSION WITHIN SYSTEMS



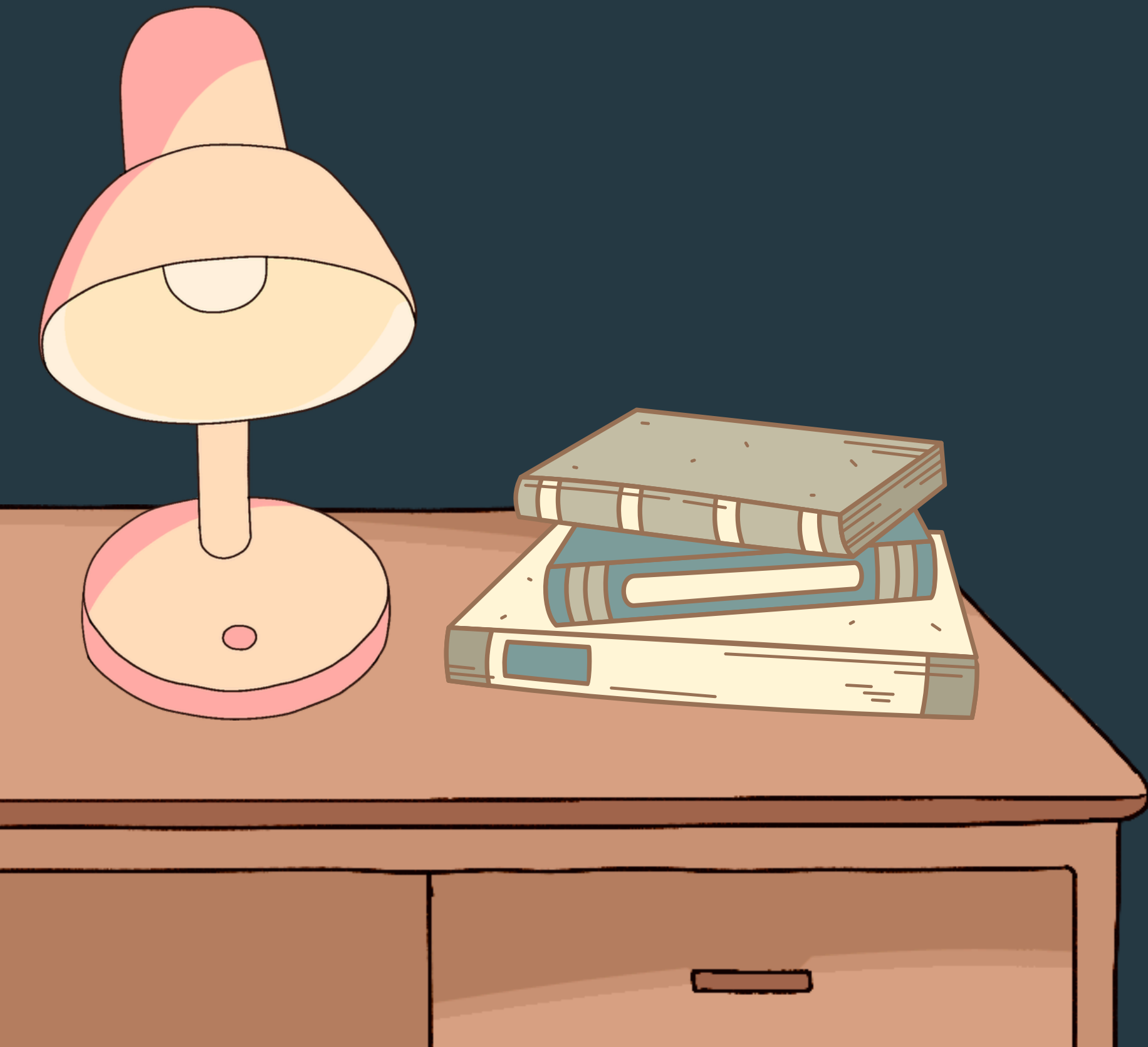
- Libraries cannot solve homelessness alone
- Policy, advocacy, and compassion work together
- Trauma-informed services reduces harm while larger systems catch up

RELATIONSHIPS MAKE BEHAVIOR EASIER TO ADDRESS



- Clear expectations are easier within relationships
- Welcoming spaces reduce defensiveness
- Learn names when possible
- Explain policies before assuming shared social norms

FOCUS ON BEHAVIOR, NOT LABELS



- Behaviors can be challenging, people are not
- Behavior is shaped by experience
- Language shapes safety and trust
- Shared ownership of space leads to fewer conflicts
- Understanding behavior changes how we respond

03

HOW

ALA POLICY FRAMEWORK

LIBRARIES ARE COMMITTED TO:

- Equitable access
- Reducing barriers
- Inclusive services
- Addressing poverty and economic inequality (B.8.10)

B.8.10 Addressing Poverty, Economic Inequality, and the Responsibilities of Libraries

B.8.10.1 POLICY PRIORITIES

- Remove barriers to service (fees, conduct policies, access)
- Provide training for staff
- Partner with community organizations
- Ensure respectful and person-first language
- Review policies for unintended harm
- Include voices of people experiencing poverty

THE ROLE OF POLICY

- **Policies must be trauma-informed and enforceable with dignity**

(Barone et al., 2020)

- Staff need training, not just policy documents.
- *That's why we're here today!*
- Advocate for library policies that recognize homelessness as a community issue, not a disciplinary one.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Clear, consistent response to behavior
- Wellness checks for sleeping patrons
- Non-threatening body posture
- Access to headphones to reduce conflict (between staff and patron)

- Odor addressed respectfully and with resource referral



KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

- Greet every patron with respect
- Offer clear, consistent communication about policies
- **De-escalate with empathy (Dowd, 2018)**
- Maintain safety and dignity
- Avoid assumptions about needs or background

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

**There are two equally
challenging problems:**

- staff members who are terrified of conflict and avoid all confrontation by not enforcing any rules
- staff members who think they are Rambo, turning every mild conflict into World War III

(Dowd, 2018)

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

The goal: empower staff to be confident in empathy-driven approaches

What that looks like:

1. Less is more when it comes to rules. When they are easy to remember, they are easier to follow (and enforce). When our scope is too wide, we can't enforce everything, and our rules seem meaningless.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

2. Red vs. Blue rules.

Red rules: should never be broken under any circumstances.

Blue rules: keep things running smoothly but should be broken when common sense dictates.

It may seem obvious which rules are red and which are blue, but that's not always the case.

Managers should make sure staff know the difference.

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

Ask yourself:

Is this about safety? (Red)
or smooth operations? (Blue)

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

Examples of **Red Rules** at WPL:

- Engaging in any activity or behavior that... is illegal under State or Federal law, e.g. using alcohol, illegal drugs or behaving as though under the influence...
- Behaving in a violent or threatening manner including abusing or harassing staff or other visitors verbally or physically, or using obscene or abusive language.
- Stealing, mutilating, or defacing library materials and property.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR SERVING UNHOUSED PATRONS

DE-ESCALATE WITH EMPATHY

Examples of **Blue Rules** at WPL:

- Misusing a cell phone, including loud conversations and/or not silencing ringers.
- Interfering with free passage (blocking entrances, aisles, or exits)
- Not wearing shirts or shoes or removing shirts or shoes.

These rules are important to the operations of the library, but if they are broken for a short period of time, they may resolve themselves or can be easily addressed with a solution, rather than a punishment.

PENNIES IN A CUP

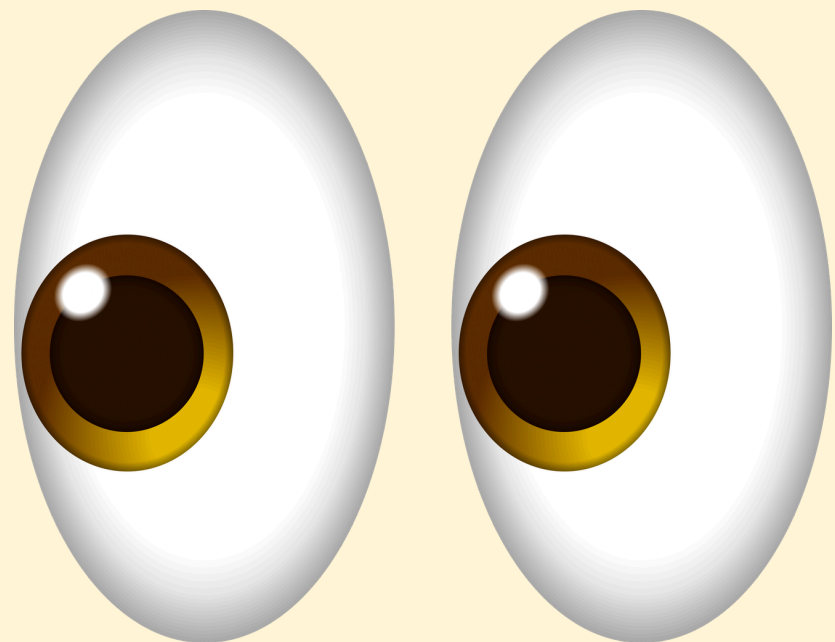
BUILDING POSITIVE SENTIMENT OVERRIDE

- Every small kindness = 1 respect penny
- 5 pennies shifts negative sentiment → positive sentiment
- Enforce rules after relationship is built



THE 4 BIGGEST DE-ESCALATION MISTAKES (DOWD)

1. Saying the wrong thing with your body
2. Violating the 5-second rule
3. Falling into the bully trap
4. Correcting behavior in front of an audience



STAFF LANGUAGE SHIFTS

Instead of → Try This

"You can't sleep here."

→ "I can't allow sleeping in the library, but you're welcome to sit up and stay."

"You need to leave."

→ "I want you to stay, but this behavior can't continue."

"Those are the rules."

→ "My job is to apply the policy consistently."

04

IMPACT

ADVOCACY BEYOND THE LIBRARY WALLS

- Partner with local shelters, food banks, and service providers
- Host service fairs
- Advocate for public policies that address root causes of homelessness
- Challenge anti-homeless narratives within the community

SHIFTING THE CULTURE

Serving patrons experiencing homelessness is not extra work.
It is core library work.

This looks like:

- Training that is proactive, not reactive
- Policies reviewed for unintended barriers
- Supervisors modeling calm, dignity, and consistency
- Staff supporting each other after difficult interactions

A trauma-informed library is built intentionally.

ONGOING LEARNING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Preschool to Prison Documentary
- Ryan Dowd's The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness & Niche Academy (ESRL Homeless Library Academy)
- ALA Poverty & Inequality Policy (2012)
- PLA Social Work Task Force resources
- Collaborate with Community Support Specialist/Local Social Workers/Advocacy Groups



REFLECTION

REFLECTION ACTIVITY

Scenario: A patron who appears unhoused is sleeping in the library.

What's your first thought?

What policy applies (Red or Blue)?

What would you say in your first sentence?

How can you respond compassionately while maintaining library policies?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Everyone deserves a safe, welcoming library.
Compassionate service is professional service.
Small actions can make a major difference.

THANK YOU!

Want to chat more? Reach out!

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