

Is There a Social Worker in Your Public Library?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a survey of heads of public library administrative units in a Southeastern state in the United States concerning the employment of social workers in public libraries. This is a topic of growing interest in librarianship that has been given little attention in the research literature. The main objectives of this study are to establish baseline data on the employment of social workers in public libraries in one state and to explore the perceived benefits and drawbacks of having social workers on-site at public libraries. A short online survey using Qualtrics was employed attempting a census of public library administrators. Findings provide important baseline data in a developing area of inquiry that will support future research. Implications for research, for the profession, and for educating information professionals are discussed.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

public libraries; social justice; critical librarianship; education programs/schools

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

social work in libraries; social services in libraries; survey research

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In 2009, the San Francisco public library was the first to add a social worker to its staff (Knight 2010/2012). Since then, there has been an increasing trend in hiring social workers to assist with the social problems our communities are confronted with, such as homelessness, Nienow (2019) explain, social workers are trained to “‘serve the whole person,’ paying attention to the multitude of factors impacting including homeless veterans; food insecurity; affordable legal help; access to the Internet for individuals and families from low-income situations; and

accessible adult education programs. As Zettervall and individuals in society, especially those who are vulnerable and often oppressed due to their race, religion, gender, or economic status” (p. ix). They refer to this approach as “Whole Person Librarianship.”

As advocated by Abubakari, DiNicola, and Lee (2020), social service providers and public libraries should collaborate to help people with limited education and economic resources access information about and apply for social services. As such, opportunities for engaging in the Whole Person Librarianship social work approach to library services are growing. In fact, the incorporation of social work-informed library services is becoming a powerful movement in the United States. The increasing decision to have social workers on staff in the library as well as librarians with knowledge about social work was the focus of a story on the NPR program *All Things Considered* (Dwyer, 2019) and the subject of an interview on the inSocialWork Podcast Series (Draper & Foster, 2019).

In response to this trend, in 2018 the Public Library Association established a Social Worker Taskforce to consider “how social work methods can be integrated into libraries” (<http://www.ala.org/pla/about/people/committees/pla-tfsocwork>). One way is for public libraries to partner with schools of social work to offer internships for social work students in library settings (Aykanian et al., 2020). In recent years, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has supported the placement of social workers in public libraries through the National Leadership Grants program. As an example, in 2017, the IMLS funded a collaboration between the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the University of Maryland School of Social Work to develop a “Social Worker in the Library” program that assists library patrons with their social service needs and trains library staff to handle patron-based crises. In 2018, the IMLS funded a proposal to place social work interns from the University of Georgia School of Social Work in local libraries to identify the needs of at-risk patrons. In 2019, the New Jersey State Library received IMLS funding to help with the re-assimilation of citizens returning from prison to their communities. As part of this project, two social workers established community resource fairs and assisted parolees in educational and job skills development. More broadly, the IMLS has demonstrated a commitment to understanding and enhancing the impact of libraries on the quality of life and social wellbeing of their communities, as evidenced by their recent study, *Understanding the Social Wellbeing Impacts of the Nation’s Libraries and Museums* (2018; <https://www.imls.gov/news/imls-announces-national-study-museums-libraries-and-social-wellbeing>).

The impact of the Whole Person Librarianship partnership between libraries and social work is promising, yet knowledge about best practices in this area is preliminary. More research is needed with regard to understanding current practices in order to identify and address gaps in the development of these programs, including education and training.

Specifically, our project seeks to describe social-work-informed public library services by exploring the experiences and perceptions of the heads of public library administrative units in a Southeastern state that employ social workers as well as those who do not employ social

workers in the delivery of social services to their communities. Findings from this study will provide a foundation for future research on the provision of social services in public libraries and will have implications for educational programs that prepare information and social work professionals to provide social services in a library context.

STUDY GOAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The incorporation of social-work-informed library services is becoming a powerful movement in the United States. To date, little research has been done describing or evaluating this emerging trend. The main objectives of this study are to establish baseline data on the employment of social workers in public libraries in one state and to explore the perceptions of library administrators about the benefits and drawbacks of including social workers as staff. The research questions to be addressed are:

RQ1: To what extent are social workers currently employed in public libraries in the state?

RQ2: What are the perceived benefits of having a social worker available in the public library?

RQ3: What are the perceived issues around having a social worker available in the public library?

METHOD

This study employed an online survey in Qualtrics to collect data from the heads of public library administrative units in public libraries in a state in the U.S. Southeast about the employment of social workers in public libraries as well as their perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks of having a social worker on staff. Library administrators do “Highly responsible administrative work involving the direction of a broad range of public library functions” (WebJunction, 2012, General statement of duties, para. 1) and so they are in a position that allows them to take the whole organization and its legal service area into account into their opinions and decisions.

There were 21 questions on the survey and it took less than 10 minutes to complete. The project was determined to be exempt by the Human Subjects board at the researchers’ home institution. Invitations to participate in the online survey were emailed to public library administrators as identified by the State Library. In all, 150 invitations to participate were sent. The email contained a link to the survey, which was available for six weeks. Reminders were sent three times: once at two weeks, once at four weeks, and once a week before the survey closed. Participants were not offered any compensation for their participation. The response rate was 34.7%, which is within the typical range for survey research in information studies (Sivo et al., 2014).

Data analysis used descriptive statistics for closed questions. Open questions were analyzed by the researchers and responses were categorized and frequencies and percentages calculated.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Preliminary findings revealed that a little less than half of the respondents (45%; n=19 out of 42 responding to this question) said they would consider hiring a social worker in the future. The main concerns about hiring a social worker were funding, licensure, and liability. Small libraries were concerned about having appropriate space and the ability to provide privacy. There was also a concern that if there was only one social worker in a library system, that person would be overrun by demand. Respondents revealed many issues of concern, but also many benefits that a social worker would bring to the public library environment. The primary benefits respondents sought were more partnerships with community agencies, better staff morale, increased library use, and improved user services.

Respondents who currently employ social workers (12.50%; n=6), reported increased library use, better staff morale, and more partnerships with community agencies. These are the same outcomes respondents who did not have social workers expected from such a hire. It was noted among those who had a social worker on staff that increased traffic meant more attention needed to hygiene and mental health issues (as with COVID), but half of these respondents saw no downside to having a social worker on staff. A wide variety of services were being provided by social workers, including helping with food stamps, providing health and mental health resources, making appointments with social service agencies, providing employment and emergency services, staff training, outreach/community building, therapy/counseling, affordable housing, educational opportunities, and immigration. Again, these were the same services respondents who did not have social workers would expect from this kind of hire.

Implications for Librarianship

Although the employment of social workers in public libraries is an idea that is gaining traction, it is only one potential way to achieve these outcomes. The question of funding is critical as library budgets are tight and in the absence of additional funding resources it is unclear what impact a social worker position might have on current staffing levels. While mental health assessments and the provision of therapeutic interventions are outside the scope of professional librarianship, it is not clear that this is the function of library social workers either. However, community outreach and assistance with obtaining governmental and other supports are services that librarians have long provided in their communities.

Implications for Educating Information Professionals

In terms of working with vulnerable populations, there is much librarianship can learn from theories and practices in social work that would be applicable to reference work, community outreach, and communication. There are also many models of collaboration with social workers that librarians need to be aware of as well as understanding the professional scope of the two professions. Librarians who are interested in administrative or managerial positions need to know how to write job descriptions for these positions as well as how to supervise and assess the performance of social workers on their staff. It is unclear how library social workers become oriented to the history and norms of the library and develop the “library sense” based on our foundations, ethics, and advocacy for underserved populations and intellectual freedom.

Dominican University (n.d.) and the University of Michigan (n.d.) have anticipated the educational needs of librarians and social workers at the master's level by offering dual degrees in information and social work. This approach would likely ensure that graduates understand and are rooted in both professional domains. To date, there is no mandate that social workers in libraries have a graduate degree or even an undergraduate degree in social work. The choice of who to hire to perform social service functions is an open one and some would say that librarians themselves are in the best position to perform functions that do not include mental health and other assessments or the provision of therapy. This is a discussion worth engaging in among practicing information professionals as well as in preservice classrooms.

Implications for Research

Although library social workers were first introduced in 2009 by the San Francisco Public Library, little research has been done concerning this trend (Provence, 2020). The current study provides a first look at the experiences and perceptions of the heads of library administrative units. There is much to know about the experiences and perceptions of other stakeholders in this trend, including users, librarians, and social workers. It is important to establish current practices, best practices, and the effectiveness of various service models designed to meet social service needs in communities. Perhaps there is no one-size-fits-all model, and so understanding the benefits and trade-offs of various approaches would be a boon for administrative decision-making.

CONNECTION TO CONFERENCE THEME

Public libraries have long sought to respond to the social crises that arise in our communities. They are a source of resilience for many people. In crafting a resilient future for the profession, issues of social justice and critical librarianship lead us to consider how we can best serve our constituencies and provide empirical data for decision making, improving the education of information professionals, and supporting leadership initiatives. Whole Person Librarianship and the utilization of social workers may be one way to galvanize efforts to grow our capacity to recover from difficulties and further integrate the library into the life of the community.

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