

# **Drawing the Line between Social Work and Librarianship: Public Library Administrators Talk**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As part of a larger, IMLS-funded project, focus groups were undertaken with public library administrators to discuss the professional scope of librarianship in the face of a growing practice of placing social workers in public libraries to help respond to communities' social services-related needs. Findings from these focus groups and focus groups held with adult services and youth services librarians are being used to inform the development of a national survey of public librarians on this topic. The survey will be distributed fall 2024. Preliminary findings from focus groups with public library administrators indicate that librarians want to help, but are stretched beyond their training, and that the placement of social workers in libraries to help serve social services-related needs is a more complex solution than it may sound.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

administration; public libraries; community engagement; social justice.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Public libraries; social services; focus groups; administrators.

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## INTRODUCTION

As part of a two-year study of social services in public libraries funded by the IMLS, focus groups were undertaken with library administrators from across the United States to discuss the inclusion of social workers in public libraries. As people come to libraries for information and referrals to respond to wide-ranging needs, libraries and librarians have taken action with a wide variety of services and programs including the opportunity to meet with a social worker (Hall, McAlister, 2021; Kosmicki, 2019-2020). Since the San Francisco Public Library hired the first library social worker in 2009 (Knight 2010), other libraries have followed suit and this trend has continued largely unevaluated. To date, there are no established professional guidelines or models for librarian/social worker collaboration, and the potential impact of the placement of social workers in public libraries on the profession of librarianship and the public library as an institution has not been fully considered. The profession at large has not fully considered what role librarians should take in responding to social services-related needs, what the relevant issues are for assimilating social workers into the workplace, and/or how to disambiguate the professional scope of the two professions.

This paper will explore the point of view of public library administrators to understand how they see the professional scope of librarianship and what their visions are for how to best respond to the social service needs of their communities. The larger study includes focus groups with adult services and youth services librarians as well as a national survey of public librarians to examine the disposition of the profession on changes to their professional scope of practice in the face of the expanding trend of placing social workers in public libraries to support community social services information needs, perform outreach, and engage in other activities that have previously fallen to public librarians. The data provided by this project will assist the profession in making conscious decisions about whether the scope of practice of public librarianship should or should not change in response to increased social services information needs in communities. The focus group questions were designed to address the following research questions:

**RQ1.** What are the experiences and perspectives of professional librarians regarding the provision of social services information in public libraries?

**RQ2.** How are social services-related needs currently addressed in libraries including how related services and programs are developed and assessed?

**RQ3.** What is the willingness of librarians to respond to social services-related needs in their daily work?

**RQ4.** Where do librarians draw the professional boundaries between librarianship and social work?

**RQ5.** Where do librarians see overlap between the professional activities librarians perform and those performed by social workers?

**RQ6.** If librarians could have exactly the help they need to respond to their community's social service-related needs, what would that look like?

## METHODS

Two focus groups were conducted with library administrators, each approximately one hour in length. Focus group participants were recruited through messages posted to professional associations (ALA Connect, PLA, the Black Caucus American Library Association (BCALA), REFORMA, Rainbow Round Table (RRT), and the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT)). Focus group members each received a \$50 gift card for participating.

As part of the recruitment process, a basic demographic questionnaire was administered to participants before the focus groups. In specifying their role in their library, eight of the eleven participants indicated that they worked as either a branch manager or library director, with one administrator noting that they also worked as an adult services librarian. The other two participants specified their job titles, with one participant stating that they held the title of Senior Director and the other noting that they worked as a Regional Manager for their library system. All eleven of the participants held graduate degrees in library science.

Administrators reported a wide range of experience that spanned from ten years to twenty-seven years in public librarianship. The average length of time in the field was 18.09 years ( $SD=5.70$ ). The types of libraries where these branch managers worked were fairly distributed between urban settings ( $n=3$ ; 27.27%), suburban ( $n=4$ ; 36.36%), and rural ( $n=4$ ; 36.36%), with the majority of libraries located in the Northeast ( $n=6$ ; 54.55%) region of the U.S., three in the Midwest (27.27%), and one library located in the South and in the West. In terms of the size of the community these libraries served, six had a legal service area of 10,000-49,000, and five had a legal service area of 50,000 or more. When asked to describe themselves, eight participants indicated that they identified as White/Caucasian (72.72%), two described themselves as Black or African American (18.18%), and one participant indicated that they preferred not to answer. In the focus groups two participants offered that they have a social worker at their library, two said they have social work interns, one had a community resources coordinator position that a social worker staffed, and another reported using peer navigators to help with social service needs at their library.

Focus group participants were presented with an information sheet about the study when they indicated interest in participation. The focus groups were professionally moderated by a consultant and recorded for later transcription. The co-PIs and research assistant were present for all focus groups to observe and take notes. Meetings were held with the consultant between focus groups to discuss what was learned and to determine if any changes were needed to the focus group questions before continuing. This project was determined to be exempt by the Florida State University Institutional Review Board. Focus group participants could stop participating at any point without penalty.

Focus group data were analyzed by all three researchers using the inductive approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), in which codes are collaboratively developed from data and consensus in meanings is established through discussion. What follows are preliminary findings. In terms of the larger project, the findings from these focus groups will be combined with focus group data collected from adult services and youth services librarians, and compared to findings from previous data collected by the authors (Baum et al., 2023; Crabtree et al., 2024; Gross & Latham, 2021, 2024; Gross et

al., 2024). Focus group data will be used to help design a national survey of public librarians' views of the boundaries of librarianship in providing social services information.

## **FINDINGS**

In preliminary analysis, four major themes were isolated. These are the social service needs users bring to public libraries, the characteristics of librarians, sources of help in the community and through other partnerships, and the educational needs of preservice and professional librarians.

### **Social Service Information Needs**

The social service information needs of communities are a pressing reality for public libraries (see for example Shepard et al., 2023 ). Focus group participants agreed with this statement by citing a wide range of issues people seek assistance with in public libraries. Some of the examples they provided, such as housing and food insecurity, are topics that libraries have been struggling with for a long time (Lee et al., 2022). However, administrators describe users as needing a whole range of services including showers, hygiene products, and clothing; voter registration, citizenship, immigration information; and legal services, especially among non-English seeking users; help with government forms; domestic violence; access to health care and mental health services; transportation; education services such as English as a second language, SATs, and GEDs; and employment support. The concerns of aging, aging in place, and related caregiver concerns such as burnout were also discussed. In addition, libraries are centers of assistance during disaster recovery, they are heating and cooling centers, and provide Narcan interventions in cases of opioid overdose.

### **Librarians and Librarianship**

Focus group participants describe librarians as naturally empathetic, and state that empathy is a trait that cannot be taught. Participants used phrases like, “We don’t know how to say no.” Faced with difficult demands, “we’re going to try our best to make it happen. And then they burn out, stress out, and then, um, they do make it happen. “We’re committed to the work,” but don’t know where to draw the line where “we need[ed] to turn it over to another source.” Other comments include “a lot of us are drawn to this work because we’re here to serve, right?,” “filling needs when other people don’t even know their needs, is really, -it’s really the cornerstone of our profession,” and “in library school we learned tenacity, not to give up.”

Librarians and other staff with backgrounds in working with the public were seen as valuable. Prior education and experience in areas such as social services, nursing, mental health, education, retail experience, shelters, and jail were all seen as useful preparation for

librarianship. Participants noted that librarians are not well-paid and they are asked to take on a lot. One participant made the point that librarians are “not good at separating themselves emotionally from the issues they have. If we ask them to do more, we’re going to lose some really good people.” Another respondent made the case that “social work is a profession unto itself, that is significantly more complicated than us providing directions or a phone number to an organization.”

One respondent commented that librarians should be “connectors” and that librarians don’t have to be social workers to connect users with resources outside of the library. Participants were concerned that many libraries don’t have the space or other resources to support a social worker. When thinking of the library as a community center, one respondent called for more emphasis on programming and the element of fun, “We’re not the answer and shouldn’t be.” Another participant stated their concerns as:

But then what is it like when every day it's this relentless firehose of need coming at you? And that – really boundaries is to me the big thing that I try to teach, uh, and – and talk to my staff about is, we are not a social service agency. We are a library that provides access and resources. And that's a very – I've gotten a lot of pushback when I say things like that. I get very – people get very charged, um, about this. 'Cause a lot of us are drawn to this work because we're here to serve, right? And what that means for me and what it means to [blinded] and everyone else is going to be a little different.

Another participant stated, “I think you have to burn out once, just to realize you can’t change the world from a reference desk.”

## **Sources of Help**

Focus group participants describe the library as wanting to be everything to everyone and yet, there are gaps that the profession is not able to fill. For help, libraries often establish relationships with police, public health, housing, offices for the aging, senior centers, community centers churches, food banks, shelters, Catholic Social Services, charities, and others. These organizations have their own fiscal issues and, like the library, face a lack of resources to respond to community needs. “They are understaffed and under-resourced, just as much as we are.” Participants shared that these agencies, when unable to help, send people to the library without understanding what services the library can provide. Participants warn that more falls to the library as resources become scarce.

Another source of help for libraries is social workers. However, finding and funding a social worker is difficult. To make matters worse, successful library social workers get stolen. It was suggested that libraries need to pay social workers well enough that they don’t get wooed away, but participants also recognized that the pay difference between social workers and librarians is stark. A second approach, collaborating with local schools to provide internships for social work students is less expensive, but flawed as these relationships are temporary and students have limited skills. However, if good interns can be recruited, this might be a way to “grow your own” social worker.

The other way to get needed expertise is to train existing staff. It is unlikely the social worker is always available to patrons and so much of this work falls to librarians even when a social worker is in place. It is noted that sometimes social work skills rub off on other staff,

sometimes they do not. “When you have folk you can call in for more specialized assistance, it depends on the staff member, like where they see their role with the community.” Lastly, participants noted that greater cohesion is needed in librarianship. One participant emphasized that as a profession, we need to work on making better connections between libraries and among information professionals to be as inclusive and responsive with each other as we are with our communities.

## **Educational Needs**

On the subject of preparation for work in public libraries, experiences such as working in a shelter or having foster kids in the family, as well as education in cognate fields were seen as positives. There are skills and knowledge that education could help with, primarily de-escalation and networking with social services organizations. “There needs to be some type of connection in the curriculum at library schools with departments of social work and other medical agencies, because everyone comes into our space, and we want to be as equipped to help as much as we can.” Participants note that being empathetic takes a toll, making the inclusion of self-care as a topic in librarianship critical. Topics such as mental health and human development also need to be addressed.

The orientation of staff to library work was discussed extensively and internships and shadowing activities that allow for full knowledge of the various departments and functions of libraries and social service organizations improve performance. In terms of preservice preparation versus on-the-job training, all participants agreed that their graduate degrees did not prepare them for public library work. One participant said, “I really think it is up to the organization to properly train their folks. “We’re learning through resources that we have in our building. We’re learning through webinars like everyone else. We’re learning from our neighbors in other library systems through their best practices to see what we can deliver.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Libraries and librarians are a trusted resource in communities and want to help people improve their lives. However, they are also presented as overwhelmed and needing practical kinds of help that might involve hiring specific types of expertise offered by other kinds of professionals, such as social workers. Changes in preservice education and on-the-job training could better prepare librarians to respond to social service information needs and to stave off burnout regardless of whether social workers are available in libraries or not. Although the inclusion of social workers in libraries was seen as generally positive, funding and retaining these professionals is difficult, and may not provide the relief to librarians they seem to promise.

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