

“No One Told Me:” A Dialog on Preparing Public Librarians to Provide Social Services in Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are being called upon to assist with a variety of social problems including everything from housing and food insecurity to disaster recovery. In response, some public libraries have called on social workers to help. These developments beg the question of whether information professionals are being prepared for the realities of public library careers. This presentation reports findings from a series of 28 interviews with public librarians and branch managers to explore their views on how library and information science programs can ensure that students are prepared to respond to their community's social service needs. Findings reveal that the inclusion of social work interview skills, de-escalation training, knowledge of social service resources, and instruction on how to collaborate with and supervise social workers would better prepare students for the realities of working in public libraries.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education of information professionals; curriculum; continuing education; public libraries; social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

social services; public libraries; interviews; education for librarianship; social justice.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of social workers in public libraries (Knight, 2010/2012) has not only spotlighted the need for libraries to provide social services, but also serves as a reminder that the provision of social services has been part of the library story in the United States from the early days of its history (Maack, 1998). Social services in libraries have ranged from helping immigrants assimilate into mainstream culture to responding to user needs related to home and food insecurity, the opiate epidemic, and disaster recovery. In recent times, the social service

roles of libraries have continued to grow (Jaeger, et al., 2014) and since 2010, the trend of placing social workers in public libraries has grown more popular. Kosmicki (2019-2020) provides extensive examples of the wide variety of library responses to community social service needs provided by librarians as well as social workers in libraries. Dual degrees in information and social work are now offered at two schools; Dominican University (<https://www.dom.edu/home/social-work-programs>) and the University of Michigan (<https://www.si.umich.edu/programs/master-science-information/dual-degree-programs>). Despite the social realities that necessitate library responses to community needs, not all librarians and administrators embrace the idea that social services are part of their responsibility (Gross & Latham, 2021; Westbrook, 2015). In line with the conference theme, “Go Back and Get IT: From One Narrative to Many,” this investigation seeks to uncover multiple narratives about how we can re-engineer library and information science (LIS) education to fully respond to today’s social service needs. Toward this end, the experiences and perceptions of librarians and branch managers related to their preprofessional preparation and their sense of how LIS programs can be strengthened were elicited to uncover how to prepare students to provide access to social services and related information needs as well as work with and supervise social workers in the library context. The value of this study lies in its ability to assist the design of education to better prepare students to provide access to social services and related information in libraries.

STUDY GOAL AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objectives of this study were to explore the experiences and attitudes of librarians and branch managers about the role(s) social workers are playing in public libraries and to assess the potential educational needs of public library personnel whose job responsibilities include helping meet the social service needs (e.g., homelessness, health services, fair housing, educational programs, etc.) of their communities. This work will inform future research on the provision of social services in public libraries and inform educational programs that prepare information professionals to provide social services in public library settings.

The study’s research questions are:

RQ1. What skills and knowledge related to social services are needed by public librarians so that they can best respond to the social problems communities are confronted with?

RQ2. What skills and knowledge related to social services are needed by public library branch managers to effectively manage personnel, both librarians and social workers, in public libraries that want to take a social work informed approach to user services?

METHOD

In all, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 participants who were public librarians or branch managers in a public library in one state in the Southeast. The interview time ranged from 12 to 61 minutes. Interview questions were developed by the research team and pretested by staff at the state library. The interviews explored librarian and branch manager views on the educational needs of librarians and branch managers for preparation to provide

social services in libraries and to collaborate with social workers in meeting the community's social service information needs.

Participants were recruited through advertisements in two monthly state library electronic newsletters and through invitations sent out on the state library's administrative and general listservs. Calls for participation were published in each newsletter once a month for three months. In the advertisements, interested parties were asked to follow a link to a Qualtrics survey in order to provide demographic information and to sign up to be interviewed (see Table 1 and discussion below).

Participants included both librarians and branch managers who have worked with social workers in public libraries (n=9) as well as those who have no experience with social workers in their library (n=19). Interviews were performed by the co-PIs over Zoom and then transcribed by a service. Each participant received a \$50 gift card to compensate for their time. Interviews continued until the data collected became redundant and predictable. Transcripts were coded using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis software (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivoqualitative-data-analysis-software/about/nvivo>), using the constant comparative method, by research assistants under the supervision of the co-PIs. Working in pairs, a researcher and a research assistant coded transcripts and compared their work to ensure inter-coder reliability. Initial codes were derived from the interview questions and new codes were added as coding progressed and new themes and insights emerged.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

For this discussion, findings reflect the total sample of respondents. Pseudonyms are used to differentiate participant responses and to protect their privacy. As shown in Table 1, participation was split between public librarians (n=15, 53.57%) and branch managers (n=13, 46.43%). About 46 % (n=6) of the branch managers had experience working with a social worker in the public library context and about 7% (n=3) of librarians had this kind of work experience. All participants work full-time, except for one librarian who is a part-time employee. Almost all participants have a master's degree, although not all have degrees in library and information science (MLS or equivalent). Two participants have social work degrees in addition to their MLS and two indicated that they had other kinds of degrees. Of these, one said they have a degree in elementary education, but did not specify the level. The second respondent indicated they have a doctoral degree in information science. Most participants work in urban and suburban libraries, but six (21.43%) work in rural libraries. The majority of participants work in libraries with a legal service area of over 10,000.

Librarians Need Social Services Training

Almost all participants agreed that librarians currently lack the training that would allow them to help users in a more comprehensive manner. Only one respondent described the training received at library school as excellent in this regard. Others made the point that related knowledge from LIS programs, such as research skills and customer service, is helpful. Several respondents pointed to skills and knowledge they gained through education and experiences

outside of library school that help them in their work. For example, experience in insurance, nursing, education, and working in disaster recovery efforts provided needed skills.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

	Participants n	Participants %
Position		
Librarian	15	53.57
Branch manager	13	46.43
Total	28	100.00
Library Type		
Urban	10	35.71
Suburban	12	42.86
Rural	6	21.43
Total	28	100.00
Legal Service Area		
Less than 2,499	1	3.57
2,500-9,999	1	3.57
10,000-49,000	10	35.71
50,000 or more	14	50.00
Don't know	2	7.14
Total	28	99.99 ¹
Educational Degrees Earned		
MLS	20	71.43
Master's not MLS or MSW	4	14.29
MLS/BSW	1	3.57
MLS/MSW	1	3.57
Other	2	7.14
Total	28	100.00
Job Status		
Full-time	27	96.43
Part-time	1	3.57
Total	28	100.00

Almost all participants felt that LIS programs should include training in social work approaches to the user interview, de-escalation training, and more exposure to social service resources. One participant said, "How do you handle an unruly patron or someone who's in crisis? What are the things that we can do and where do you draw those lines? I think that would be helpful for anyone going into a public library. It exists everywhere" (Ashley). Another

¹ Total less than 100 due to rounding.

participant put it this way, “I am so supportive of that initiative to give librarians some training in social work. I just think that’s going to make them so much more prepared for what they’re going to run into when they leave library school.” (Eileen)

Social Work Training in LIS Programs

Participants had many specific suggestions about topics and skills that would be beneficial to public librarians that they felt should be added to LIS curricula. Participants were interested in learning social work approaches to interviewing users including skills to de-escalate conflict situations as well as how to administer “mental health first-aid.” One branch manager who works with a social worker suggested that skills such as mindfulness, meditation, sensory awareness, and techniques to promote empathy would be helpful to information professionals. Another topic of interest was gaining greater knowledge of social service information resources and information on tailoring social services to different settings (urban, suburban, rural). The most common idea for how to implement this type of education was to design a course that demonstrates how to tailor social service provision to various community settings.

Concerning working with social workers, information on how to supervise and assess social worker employees was considered important. However, a couple of respondents felt that only social workers should supervise other social workers. One branch manager who works with a social worker suggested information students be taught how to collaborate with social workers in the library.

In terms of courses and programs, respondents suggested dual degree tracks where students could earn an MSW as they completed their MLS. As noted above, such dual degree programs currently exist in two schools. Participants also suggested potential minors students might enroll in such as psychology, communication, and mental health as another way to develop needed skills. Another suggestion was to develop a special track of study, as is common for those studying youth services, for example, to study the provision of social services in libraries. And finally adding an introductory course on social services in libraries to the curriculum was suggested.

Benefits of Social Work Training for Librarianship

Perhaps the major benefit of adding social work skills to LIS programs that participants talked about was that these skills will help libraries remain vital to their communities. For instance, participants reflected on the importance of having the ability to provide a higher level of service to users dealing with difficult situations, as well as having knowledge about self-care and addressing their own mental health on the job. One participant put it this way: “I think, as a practical matter, it will probably pay for itself down the road in public opinion, in tax revenue. I think we need to be playing more of a long game here” (Jackie). Another said, “If we’re going to remain vital in our communities then we have to provide more than new books and new movies and stuff; we have to really provide serious assistance to those people who are falling through the cracks” (Eileen).

Concerns about Providing Social Work Training in LIS Programs

A couple of branch managers, while supportive of incorporating social work-inspired courses in the curriculum, expressed concern about the further blurring of boundaries between librarianship and social work and felt that constraints on librarians' time are a barrier to practicing these skills.

Several librarians made the point that librarians are not social workers, and don't necessarily want to be. As one participant put it "The truth is that most librarians are very quick to note that we are not social workers. I hear that across the realm from colleagues" (Terry). Another said, "We went to library school to be librarians; we didn't go to become social workers, that's not what we want to do" (Jackie).

CONCLUSIONS

Increasingly, public libraries are being called upon to assist communities with their social service information needs. One option is to have social workers available to assist users. However, the need for libraries to respond to social ills and disasters brings to bear the question of whether LIS programs are sufficiently preparing students for the realities of social services related information work. Almost all 28 participants agreed that LIS education can better prepare students by including social work skills and knowledge in the curriculum.

Limitations

As with any qualitative study, the experiences and perceptions shared in the interviews only represent the views of respondents. Further, it must be noted that there was an apparent bias in the data, as almost all respondents expressed positive views toward social worker placement in public libraries as a way of meeting community social service information needs. Recruitment of participants discovered few opposing points of view. This is something that future research should investigate further.

Implications for Librarianship

As noted above, public libraries have supported the social service information needs of users throughout their history. However, this has not been without contention on the part of some librarians who feel unprepared to help users dealing with difficult circumstances in terms of both having sufficient time and skills to be effective. The trend of placing social workers in public libraries has brought to light some ways in which preparation for public librarianship might be improved. The participants in this study provided several actionable steps that library and information science programs can take to ensure that public librarians are well prepared to

be responsive to their community's social service information needs whether or not their library staff includes a social worker. Findings have also brought to light that it may be necessary to clarify the professional boundaries between librarians and social workers. Going forward there is a need to define the role of the social worker in the library context for successful integration into the library environment. There are also supervisory issues around measures of job success, setting professional goals, and social work licensing requirements.

Implications for Research

The placement of social workers in public libraries is a growing trend that has received little empirical study. Assessing the impact of this trend will reveal important knowledge about the extent to which this practice benefits communities and enhances the role of the library in the life of the community. It will be interesting to track how the presence of social workers in public libraries affects librarianship. Does it strengthen the profession or weaken it? Finally, if LIS schools begin to incorporate social work education into their curricula, it will be important to track the employability of these graduates, their satisfaction with their programs, and the effect of this education on conceptions of the work of librarianship.

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