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How Public Health Partners Perceive Public Librarians in 18 US Communities

ABSTRACT

Public librarians are increasingly recognized as community partners who improve the reach of organizations focused in whole or in part on public health promotion. The capacity of librarians to support public health initiatives has previously been studied through case studies of particular communities. Few national studies have considered how and why public librarians are perceived as part of the public health infrastructure. This article analyzes data from interviews with 59 public library partners in 18 communities in 16 states across the United States. These interviews were collected as part of a larger study on how public librarians collaborate with partners to promote healthy eating and active living, or HEAL. Case study selection utilized a purposive sampling technique to recruit public libraries that self-identify as actively involved in public health initiatives. Representatives of those libraries introduced the research team to their community health partners. Findings indicate that in these communities, librarians are seen as trusted connectors, community experts, and as professionals that share goals with public health partners. Nevertheless, the strength of these partnerships is diminished by several factors. The discussion focuses on how a) increased knowledge and b) more strategic conversations on this topic, both within the public health and the public library sectors, could contribute to building better collaborations, locally, regionally, and nationally. Building and sustaining these collaborations could, in turn, help public librarians make more strategic and effective contributions to public health issues that appear both in their workplaces, and in their communities.

KEYWORDS

Collective impact, community partnerships, health promotion, public libraries, qualitative research, community coalitions, health coalitions

The public librarian may play any of several roles in a community-wide action system: information specialist, catalyst change agent, interpreter of community need, channel to community resources, expert in planning and group process. . . . The versatile librarian may exercise leadership and bring library resources and services to bear in a variety of ways

—Margaret E. Monroe, a public librarian before becoming a professor of Library Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Library Trends*, 1976

In 2017, the health-focused Robert Wood Johnson Foundation characterized “public libraries” as one facet of community-based “cultures of health,” alongside “housing affordability, access to healthy foods, youth safety, residential segregation, early childhood education, complete street policies,

and air quality” (Chandra et al. 2017). Despite being increasingly framed as part of our public health infrastructure, public libraries and public librarians are not widely studied as partners within the public health research literature. Within that literature, the topic of the perception of librarians among health partners remains unexplored.

Existing evidence suggests that health partners tend to focus more on the public library as a site than on public librarians as partners. For instance, within the sub-field of public health focused on prevention, or “intervening before [negative] health effects occur” (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention n.d., 1), public libraries have been studied as sites for Play Streets (Umstattd Meyer et al. 2019), healthy aging classes (Matz-Costa 2019, 1007-1016), and summer meal and nutrition programs (de la Cruz et al. 2020, 2179-2188). This literature tends to focus on the potential of the public library as a trusted community space, and not on public librarians as active community agents.

This article aims to empirically understand how public librarians in particular communities are framed by the organizations that work with them to support public health. The focus of the partnerships studied is the promotion of what public health professionals call HEAL, or healthy eating and active living (Journal of Healthy Eating and Active Living, 2021). Results, derived from qualitative interviews with partners who have worked with public librarians in 18 communities across the country, illustrate some of the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities associated with these partnerships. These case study results lead into a discussion of the further work needed to integrate the public library sector more fully into our understanding of public health infrastructure.

Literature Review

What Is Public Librarianship? Perceptions and Realities. Public libraries are dynamic, socially responsive institutions that change and evolve along with their communities. A study commissioned by the American Library Association found that over 20% of public libraries offered fitness and nutrition classes in 2014, primarily by leveraging community partnerships (Bertot et al. 2015, 270-289). As these public health partnerships have become more widespread, they have prompted public librarians to reassess what skills are critical to being a public librarian. The Public Library Association (2018) found that the second most needed job skill in the profession is how to be a “Community Liaison/ Partner.” Public librarians increasingly work as community partners to address topics as diverse as homelessness (Terrile 2016, 133-146) the opioid crisis (Allen et al. 2019) early childhood development (Tilhou et al. 2021, 111-123), the reading gap (Pasini 2018), and adult education (Daurio 2010).

Although the idea of public librarians as community partners has received increased national attention over the last decade, it is not a new idea. In the 1960s and 1970s, work by scholars such as Margaret E. Monroe at the University of Wisconsin-Madison analyzed the various ways in which public librarians participate in community organizing efforts (Monroe 1976), finding that librarians across the country work creatively and nimbly alongside their partners.

Nevertheless, a gap in our knowledge centers around the perception of public librarians among actual and potential community partners. Scattered evidence suggests that public librarians are typically not considered as community partners on contemporary community concerns. Aldrich (2018) notes in her analysis of media representations of public librarianship that, “rarely does a writer miss the opportunity to speak to her own nostalgia about libraries, the printed word, and the quiet solitude of the libraries of her youth” (1). She argues these media messages make it difficult for librarians

to be seen as community partners; she also points out that librarians struggle to embed community outreach and community partnerships into their work. Empirical work supports the idea that librarians are not always seen as community partners, even in core areas like literacy. In a study on adult literacy partnerships, Daurio (2010) concluded potential partners “did not see the library as a partner” (ii). This finding was confirmed in a recent study of library partnerships relating to the opioid crisis (Allen et al. 2019), wherein researchers found that potential partners did not think of librarians until librarians reached out to them. A report commissioned by the American Library Association found that most voters do not see public librarians as individuals who are well known in the community, knowledgeable about the community, or understand community needs and how to address them (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018, p.10). The literature suggests those working outside of libraries would generally tend not to see public librarians as community partners, unless librarians first suggest the idea to them.

Public librarians as HEAL partners. Despite the absence of a national conversation on public librarians as community partners, over the past decade an emerging research literature has highlighted how, in particular places, public librarians do work with partners to promote public health, including in the domain of healthy eating and active living.

A state-wide study in South Carolina found librarians there already doing initiatives “around healthy eating and active living and [wanting] to do more” with community partners (Draper 2021, 1). A state-wide study in California found that librarians there recognized a need for a summer meal programs, and were thus motivated to serve meals at libraries in collaboration with summer meal sponsors, such as school districts (de la Cruz et al. 2020).

Similar findings have emerged from studies of particular communities. An Appalachian Regional Commission (Cecil 2018) study highlights how in McCreary County, Kentucky, library director Kay Morrow

“understands that the library is an important component of a community that can offer a lot more than books The library’s meeting room serves as a place for healthy-cooking classes Always eager to make a better life for residents here, Morrow is spearheading efforts to rebuild the crumbling sidewalks downtown, secure more lighting at night, and organize a downtown walking club to boost physical activity.” (Cecil 2018, 49)

McGladrey, M., et al. (2019) examine the efficacy of a multisectoral approach to development of rural physical activity promotion coalition in Clinton County, Kentucky, concluding that public librarians are key participants in multi-sector efforts to increase physical activity in rural America. In Eastern North Carolina, Flaherty and Miller (2016) discussed how the Farmville Public Library director worked with a parks and recreation department and a university public health department to start circulating pedometers and to organize the town’s first 5K fun run. In rural Oklahoma (Umstattd Meyer et al. 2019) and Columbus, Ohio (Adhikhari et al. 2021), two separate research teams independently found public librarians to be willing and eager participants in multi-sector efforts to bring Play Streets, temporary closures of streets for active play, to their respective communities. Bedard, Bremer, and Cairney, (2020, 101-117) recruited four public librarians in Southwestern Ontario to become trained Move 2 Learn program leaders, demonstrating “the feasibility of teaching staff without specialized training [i.e. librarians] in physical education to implement” (114) a physical literacy intervention. Also in Canada, kinesiologists made 90 pedometers available for circulation from five public libraries, finding libraries to be ideal sites for this form of physical activity promotion (Ryder et al. 2009, 588-596). Freedman and Nickell (2010) studied the impact of after-school nutrition

workshops in a public library. Sandha and Holben (2021) analyzed stakeholder perception of a summer meal partnership at a rural library in Mississippi. Together, these studies give us some glimpses into how those outside public librarianship frame librarians as health partners, but since the partnership itself was not a central focus in these studies we are left without any in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the partners working with the librarians.

This study seeks to apply this literature to assess how librarians are perceived by the organizations with which they work to advance HEAL outcomes:

Research question: How do partners that work with or include libraries in HEAL initiatives frame libraries and/or librarians?

Methods

Case studies show how certain practices are developed in specific communities and, therefore, help elaborate theories related to those practices (Ospina et al. 2018). Qualitative case studies allow the study of research questions in depth, while leaving room for unexpected, interesting findings that can form the basis for concrete hypotheses to be tested in future research (Yin 2013). Case studies are especially useful when there is little existing research on a topic, as is the case here. Case study research has been successfully used in the public library research literature, most recently by Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020) and by Norton, Stern, Meyers, and DeYoung (2021). The former studied how in eight communities, public librarians worked with others to respond to the opioid crisis. The latter studied how in 12 communities, public librarians support social wellbeing. The goals in these and other case studies are to identify and articulate practices and trends that can be further elaborated in subsequent studies.

Case study research has also been widely used in the field of public health, which has as one of its goals conducting “epidemiological surveillance,” or “the systematic collection, analysis and dissemination of health data for the planning, implementation and evaluation of public health programmes” (Thacker, Parrish & Trowbridge 1988, 11). Over the last thirty years, public health researchers have recognized and struggled with the limitations of existing surveillance systems, leading to a call for more case study research on how cultures of health emerge from the ground up in particular places. Most notably, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded a series of case studies on what they call sentinel communities, geographical communities selected not because they are normal, but because they may be unique, because they may offer researchers the opportunity to observe how a culture of health takes hold and evolves at the local level in a particular place (Chandra et al. 2017).

The broader study of which this article is a part has the goal of understanding “how, why, and with what impacts do public libraries collaborate with others to co-develop programming around healthy eating and active living?” (IMLS 2020). To answer that question, public libraries in 18 communities across the United States (Table 1) were purposively sampled to try to secure representation of an array of community types and regions. The purpose sampling of communities emerged in part through public librarians in these 18 communities self-identifying as communities involved in multi-sector HEAL promotion efforts through a call for participation circulated online in the Let’s Move in Libraries newsletter in February 2020.

“The literature suggests those working outside of libraries would generally tend not to see public librarians as community partners, unless librarians first suggest the idea to them.”

The participating libraries are in 16 states, and serve a range of communities, with the largest library serving a population of 2,095,545 and the smallest serving a population of 12,960. Like libraries nation-wide (IMLS 2021), most of their funding comes from local governmental sources, with some exceptions, such as the McArthur Public Library, which as a 501(C)3 nonprofit receives large amount of revenue from donations, and Delaware's Laurel Public Library, which like other Delaware libraries, receives a substantial amount of revenue from the state government. The total revenue libraries have per capita also varies widely, with a high of \$88 per person per year at Elgin, Illinois, and a low of \$9 per person per year in rural Rutherford County, North Carolina. Per capita library funding serves as a barometer for both the political climate of a community and its relative affluence.

In these communities, the identification and recruitment of public library partners for interviews emerged through interviews with public librarians.

State	Library Name	Population served	% revenue from local government	Total revenue per capita
IL	GAIL BORDEN PUBLIC LIBRARY DISTRICT (ELGIN)	144,597	92.90%	\$87
MI	ORION TOWNSHIP PUBLIC LIBRARY	35,394	93.50%	\$66
NJ	SCOTCH PLAINS PUBLIC LIBRARY	23,510	96.00%	\$63
ME	MCARTHUR PUBLIC LIBRARY (BIDDEFORD)	21,514	42.50%	\$52
KY	MCCRACKEN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	65,385	92.10%	\$50
MD	ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	564,195	81.90%	\$46
NC	HIGH POINT PUBLIC LIBRARY	111,472	98.10%	\$43
IA	MARION PUBLIC LIBRARY	46,330	90.00%	\$43
VA	LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	374,451	95.50%	\$42
MT	BELGRADE COMMUNITY LIBRARY	12,960	76.80%	\$41
IA	PELLA PUBLIC LIBRARY	17,840	93.00%	\$37
MA	BIGELOW FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY (CLINTON)	13,805	93.10%	\$32
DE	LAUREL PUBLIC LIBRARY	15,877	46.30%	\$30
ME	BAXTER MEMORIAL LIBRARY (GORHAM)	17,651	97.90%	\$28
TN	MEMPHIS PUBLIC LIBRARY	824,805	98.10%	\$25
PA	BETHLEHEM AREA PUBLIC LIBRARY	114,175	75.50%	\$23
TX	HARRIS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY	2,095,545	99.30%	\$15
NC	RUTHERFORD COUNTY LIBRARY	67,796	75.40%	\$9

Table 1: Data on funding for public libraries participating in study. Source: IMLS, 2021.

Librarians introduced the research team to their partners. The 59 partners interviewed (Table 2) represent a heterogeneous array of community partners – including local non-profits, public health departments, parks and recreation agencies, and K-12 schools – that work with public librarians in these communities. As with any case study research, these interviewees represent a small number of the potential respondents at their organizations, and therefore their experiences cannot be generalized as the experience of the entire organization. The research team did not construct a sample of potential partners to interview but instead interviewed partners through the case study process of identifying key stakeholders (Yin 2013).

The interview guide was developed from the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory, a widely used tool to understand how different sectors collaborate in communities (Perrault, et al. 2011). The guide was further developed based on the first author’s previous work on this topic (Lenstra 2018, Lenstra and Carlos 2019, Lenstra and D’Arpa 2019), as well as with the input of the project’s advisory board, which includes experts from both the public library sector and from the sectors that would engage in the interviews as partners (e.g. public health, parks & recreation).

The recorded interviews, which took place over Zoom in Fall 2020 and Spring 2021, were semi-structured and based around a series of prompts designed to elicit narratives about the development and utilization of public library partnerships, and of the roles of particular individuals, including the interviewee, in those partnerships. These methods received IRB approval from the UNCG Office of Research Integrity. The protection of stakeholder identities in case study research is a complicated process, particularly when communities are named (Yin 2013). Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020) discuss these ethical dilemmas in their research on public librarians and the opioid crisis. All efforts have been made to protect the privacy of interviewees, but they were informed there is a risk of being identified. This study’s IRB application was modeled on that used Coleman, Connaway, and Morgan (2020), and one member of their research team served on the advisory board of this project and provided input to this project’s ethical framework (additional details in Allen et al, 2019, p. 25).

Data analysis drew upon the case study tradition of qualitative analysis

Sector	Non-profit	Hospital	Cooperative Extension	Individual Volunteer	Business	K-12 School	Parks and Recreation	SNAP-Ed	City Government	Health Department	Senior Agency	United Way	Boys and Girls Club	Community coalition	YMCA	Total
#	15	6	4	4	4	3	5	4	2	5	2	2	1	1	1	59

Table 2: Partners interviewed in study. Source: Authors.

(Yazan 2015). Transcripts were analyzed to develop case study narratives about how partnerships formed, impacts, and how they were sustained over time. Simultaneously, the P.I. and graduate student researchers used grounded theory techniques (Charmaz 2014) to extract themes that cut across the different conversations and cases. Table 3, below, which conceptually lays out the framework developed from this iterative coding process, emerged from four months of intensively moving across the three levels of analysis (interview quotation, thematic code, theoretical memo), until the research team came to a consensus about the nine themes that encompass the range of attitudes partners conveyed about their experiences collaborating with public librarians on public health initiatives. Each of these themes is illustrated below using a representative example from the different case studies.

Limitations

As with all case study research, this study does not claim to offer generalizable trends. At every level of sampling (community, partner organization, partner representative), purpose sampling techniques were deployed that undercut generalizability. It is impossible to extrapolate from a case, or from 18 cases, to make broad conclusions on a topic. Future research will need to do that extrapolation, and the discussion section concludes with a call for precisely that.

	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities
Themes relating to connection strength	Trusted connector	Weakly connected to partner	Cultivate more connections
Themes relating to librarian roles	Community experts	Partner library seen as aberrant	Cultivate awareness of public library transformations
Themes relating to overlapping goals	Shared goals	Other libraries don't share goals	Cultivate librarian champions

Table 3: Strength, weaknesses, and opportunities associated with public libraries as HEAL partners. Themes developed from qualitative analysis, see Methods, above.

Findings

Across the interviews, libraries are seen as trusted connectors (Table 3). In some cases, though, the partnership is diminished because of weak ties to the institution. An opportunity identified is to cultivate more connections between public libraries and partners. Public libraries are seen as community experts. Weakening this perception is the idea that library partnerships are aberrant. An opportunity emerges to cultivate more awareness of transformations in public librarianship. Partners see librarians having shared goals with them. Weakening this perception is the fact that other librarians do not share those goals, with a related opportunity being to cultivate more HEAL champions within the library workforce.

Section 1: Connections

Trusted connector. Since 2009, the staff of the Laurel Public Library have worked to cultivate a reputation as a trusted community connector, with that work leading to transformations in partner perceptions. An early institutional partner was the University of Delaware Cooperative Extension. An Extension agent said that although he has worked in Laurel since the 1990s, he did not perceive the library as a connector until 2009. He now sees the library as: "Instigators. So basically I reached out to the library and said, 'Can we use you?'" As a result, the library became the host of the Extension's 4-H program, and as that relationship developed it led to the library and the Extension working together to transform the built environment in 2014 (Figure 1). Another of the library's long-term partners, a faith-based organization, remembered that:

"The first big thing that... we partnered with them to do [was] to put exercise stations in a local park down the street. They got the grant. They got the equipment shipped in. I put people together to get it done. And it still is used today. That was one of the first and biggest things we did together."

Since 2014 the library has extended their connections, offering nutrition classes in partnership with the Delaware Food Bank (a SNAP-Ed implementing agency), becoming a summer feeding site in 2017, adding indoor exercise equipment and 2019, and during COVID-19 starting a Farm-to-Patron initiative where extra produce from surrounding farms is dropped off at the library for anyone to take.

Weakly connected to partner. Since 2006, staff of the Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin, Illinois, have participated in Activate Elgin, a city-wide initiative to engage all sectors of the community to provide opportunities to improve health, particularly around HEAL. One librarian had been the key liaison to Activate Elgin since 2009, and when she retired in summer 2020, the partnership was put into jeopardy. The combination of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the retirement of a key staff member illustrates weaknesses that can emerge when HEAL partnerships are dependent on particular individuals.

A community educator at a local hospital stated she was, "heartbroken when I heard that [the librarian] was leaving, because we have a super good relationship." At the time of the interview, she did not know if the library would appoint a new representative to Activate Elgin. She said that during the pandemic she has been thinking about, "how can we continue to work with the library? [For example] can I download or check out a DVD from the library that would lead me in yoga because I can't go in and see my yoga instructor? Can I go check out a cookbook that would have some healthier recipes? So what can we do? How can we partner together?" She said that she is unable to answer these questions because she no longer has a contact at the library. Having lost a key contact in the library, she feels the partnership has ground to a stand-still. The future of the library's role in Activate Elgin is uncertain.

Cultivate more connections. The McCracken County Public Library in Western Kentucky has been a key player in multi-sector coalitions organized by a local hospital and the United Way. As the library director became more involved in these coalitions, she sought to involve library staff at all levels. The leader of the Healthy Paducah community coalition said that as a result of her efforts the library is "so visible in the community." As much as possible, library staff spend time outside of the library, attending community meetings, doing programs at farmer's markets, and bicycling around town on their 'Brary (short for library) Bike.

This example illustrates how the library director empowered staff to cultivate connections with partners. A youth services librarian shared the story of how the library became a summer feeding site through her community connections:



Figure 1: Broad Creek Community Fitness Trail, an example of an outcome of the Laurel Public Library functioning as a trusted connector in the community. Source: Laurel Public Library.

"[It] started with a conversation I had at the food bank, when I was volunteering there with the nutrition coordinator from the school. I was at the food bank because [a local nonprofit that] was bringing meals to the library parking lot. [The nonprofit] put out a call for volunteers, and since I knew him through his work in the library, when the call went out, I decided to volunteer."

Throughout the interviews with librarians and partners of the McCracken County Library, stories like this one occurred again and again. Partnerships lead to partnerships, creating a dense weave of different institutions working together to address persistent community health issues. The leader of Healthy Paducah said they "would be lost without them [library staff]."

Section 2 : Community expertise

Librarians as community experts. In the sprawling jurisdiction of Harris County, Texas, staff from Harris County Public Health see the public library as their "go to partner" for everything from mosquito control and testing to childhood obesity prevention. This intergovernmental partnership began around 2005 with jointly hosted "kid dance parties.... We've had smoking cessation, we've had exercise, family nutrition, and it's just grown through the years," particularly once the library became a member of the health department's Healthy Living Matters coalition.

Three staff from Harris County Public Health were interviewed. In 2015 they started working on creating Mobile Health Villages that include free check-ups alongside fun activities like active play stations and farmers' markets. From the beginning, library staff were involved in planning:

"I had met with the library early on. We started partnering with Harris County Public Library because we felt they had tremendous reach into the community. All you have to do is look at their branches to know what the needs are in that community. That was one of the reasons we wanted to work with them. And they've been such a good partner [with the Mobile Health Villages] since then. They make it easy, and we've established so many different kinds of partnerships on so many different levels [with them]."

Throughout the interview, they identify libraries as valuable partners because of their expertise on community needs. Health department staff later stated that library staff are "in touch with the community, integrated with target communities, they know how to connect with everyone in the community," and "the community that we're trying to target already perceives libraries as much more of a resource than a place where you can get a book [and] not only is the library a resource for us, but we're a resource for the library." The shared goals at the heart of this partnership will be returned to later in this article.

Partner library seen as aberrant. In Clinton, Massachusetts, the library director has been an avid proponent of HEAL partnerships, even serving on a multi-sector HEAL committee convened by the Community Health Network of North Central Massachusetts. Nevertheless, partners tend to see their library partner as aberrant, an exception rather than the norm.

The local hospital started working with the library in 2017 to co-sponsor a Walk with a Doc(R) program. The library had a walking club, and the hospital added their program on top of that. Asked how that partnership became established, the hospital's community health specialist stated "we like to collaborate with non-traditional organizations that we wouldn't typically partner with in the community." The framing of the library as an organization a hospital typically would not work with recurred again and again throughout the conversation.

This attitude appeared in other interviews in this community. The food bank coordinator said her partnership with the library, focused around cooking classes, emerged “because [the library director is] so open to it. When I look at her, I really don’t look at her as a librarian. I guess because I have a stereotype in my head about what that means. She actually is more of a community advocate, and she’s kind of turned that whole position into that.”

The framing of “community advocate” and “librarian” as separate roles illustrates how partners, even as they work closely with librarians, see those partnerships as aberrant.

Cultivate awareness of public library transformations. When a new director of parks and recreation moved to Scotch Plains, New Jersey, the second person he met was the public library director. From that moment, the public library and parks and recreation department have worked closely together on everything from StoryWalk installations in parks to taster classes of recreation center offerings provided for free at the library. He stated, “at the end of the day they have resources I can’t get,” including their community expertise.

His awareness of the public library as a partner was not shared with his predecessor. According to the library director, there were no park-library partnerships until the new director came to town. His success, and his knowledge that not all parks and recreation personnel share his recognition of librarians as community experts, has led him to seek to inspire others. At the time of the interview, he was working:

“With the New Jersey Recreation and Parks Association on a [continuing] education opportunity, ‘Leverage the Library.’ I have a whole outline for it. It’s something that I’ve considered, how to work with your library: Obviously, you need to have trust. And, obviously, you need to understand that you’re going to benefit as much as they’re going to benefit. There are all kinds of ways to leverage and work with them and, and provide the programs and facilities that can benefit both [partners].”

“When I look at her, I really don’t look at her as a librarian. I guess because I have a stereotype in my head about what that means. She actually is more of a community advocate, and she’s kind of turned that whole position into that.”

Section 3 : Cultivating shared goals

Shared goals. In Anne Arundel County, Maryland, a community health educator who has worked with the health department since 2000 said that during that time she has always seen the library as “a spot to hold classes and meetings. It was a location to be at, rather than a deep, deep partnership.” This transactional relationship evolved over time into a “deeper partnership. Connecting [with library staff] about how to work more together” which led to the realization that both partners have the fundamental goal of “better serving the community.”

The realization of shared goals emerged through a community coalition. The coalition was “key in opening up the connection between [library staff] and me. The [librarian] is an active participant in those meetings, and so I got to know what she’s trying to accomplish, and then how she can help [meet our goals]. Being part of coalition meetings: That’s something that libraries do, they are active participants, I really wanted to emphasize that.” Her desire to emphasize librarians as active coalition partners emerges from her reflecting on the fact that earlier in her career she merely saw libraries as passive spaces.

Asked to give an example of what kinds of shared projects emerged through the coalition, she responded:

"They even helped us with some of our research: We did a food assessment and we utilized the library staff in designing this project. In the food pantry that we are working on, [we asked] 'How can we have a better volunteer system?' [The librarian said] she runs a volunteer system for the library. So we connected with her about how to develop that volunteer system for the food pantry. She's got great experience, and advised in an important way."

By cultivating awareness of their shared goals, these partners work together to develop solutions.

Other libraries don't share goals. In Biddeford, Maine, the library works with the Coastal Healthy Communities Coalition, a SNAP-Ed implementing agency. A Nutrition Education Program Manager shared both her positive experiences working with the Biddeford library, and her struggles securing similar partnerships in other parts of her service area. She said the adult cooking programs she had at the library have "the most diverse class I've ever worked with. When it comes to age, race, ethnicity, gender, it was very diverse, which I think is a sign that they're doing something right [at the library]."

Based on this success, the Nutrition Educator naturally sought out similar partnerships in other libraries, but has thus far been unsuccessful:

"The issue is I have reached out to all the other libraries [in my service area], and I get no response. If there's something I could do [differently], I'd love to try that because while I've had a great relationship with this library [in Biddeford], I have yet to find another library to work with. So if there's anything I could do, that makes that connection smoother, I want to try that."

Cultivate more champions within the library workforce. Before moving to Western Montana in 2005, the director of the Belgrade community library worked in the corporate sector, and there became passionate about workplace wellness, eventually becoming a part-time fitness instructor with training from the YMCA. As a library director, she has infused the principles of workplace wellness into her leadership, and in the process has cultivated champions of HEAL within her workforce. She said that workplace wellness is "part of how I live and work and breathe. It's a natural thing, a natural component of being a librarian." She empowers her staff to see health as a priority, for themselves, and for communities.

One of her initiatives has been to work with the town government to secure paid walking breaks not only for library staff, but for every employee of the town of Belgrade. For her, the library can not only be a space that cultivates wellness among library staff, but can also be a community hub for health and wellness. These efforts culminated in the library securing the title of Library Journal's Best Small Library in American in 2015. These efforts have led to the library being seen as a partner by everyone from the senior center to the regional hospital. By foregrounding the importance of workplace wellness, this library leader sets the stage for librarians to become champions of HEAL partnerships.

Discussion

Public librarians are increasingly recognized as community partners work with others in their communities to support public health (Allen et al. 2019), including around the promotion of healthy eating and active living (McGladrey 2019, 62-67). This study found that partners in these case study communities see librarians as individuals who help them increase their reach, while also creating opportunities for new voices to be heard in community planning.

By extending the lens beyond a single community or intervention (e.g. Bedard et al. 2020, 270-289; de la Cruz et al. 2020, 2179-2188), this study

broadens the national conversation about public librarians as partners in the public health infrastructure. Although much more is needed to understand this topic, this study has set the stage for future research on the unique roles of this poorly understood (Aldrich 2018), if ubiquitous (IMLS 2021), social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018).

The idea of public librarians as community partners on heterogeneous community concerns has been part of the research literature since at least the 1970s (e.g. Monroe, 1976), and yet there is still much to learn about why in some cases librarians partner with others while others do not. This study shows how in some cases partners work well with some libraries but struggle to connect with others, in others librarians struggle to sustain partnerships across staff turnover, while in other cases strong leadership and investment in partnerships by library administrators support this practice.

This research could be extended by surveying the membership of national organizations that represent the professional interests of the local organizations interviewed in this project, such as the National Recreation & Park Association, Feeding America, the American Public Health Association, Partnership for a Healthier America, Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the Society for Public Health Education, the Farm to School Network, among others. Such a survey could use the perceptions identified in this study as a starting point for more systematically evaluating how public librarians are perceived by others working in communities across the country to promote healthy eating and active living. The research could be extended even further to more systematically understand how potential partners more generally perceive public librarians as community partners. Much work remains to be done, and this study does not claim to be the definitive research on this topic.

Implications

To ensure the power of public librarians is fully leveraged in multi-sector initiatives, it is important to understand the characteristics of successful partnerships, as well as what motivates partnerships. One promising practice is the identification and/or cultivation of health champions within the library workforce, as well as finding ways to more strategically educate those outside of librarianship to the reality of librarians as health partners. This work may require over-turning stereotypical ideas of libraries and librarians (OCLC and American Library Association, 2018) within the perceptual frameworks of partner organizations.

Beyond addressing perceptions of librarians, work could be done to better institutionalize “partnerships” as a core facet of public librarianship. Library leaders could share how they support partnerships at their libraries, as well as how they make investments of time and resources to enable library staff to participate in community coalitions and in other settings that would enable library staff to build relationships with others in their communities.

Within partner organizations, coalitions play a vital role in bringing librarians to the planning table. A concrete tactic would be to encourage anyone organizing or leading a health coalition anywhere in the country to, at the very least, reach out to their local public library to see if anyone on staff there may wish to attend a meeting, or join the coalition. Public librarians can also be on the lookout for such convenings. A convenient way to identify such health coalitions is through regular library participation in general community organizations -- such as United Way, Chambers of Commerce, or the Rotary -- that will typically include overlapping memberships with health coalitions.

More generally, this study suggests that a promising practice for public librarians is to simply talk more about public health. The results of this research suggest that the more public librarians talk about public health within their institutions and within their communities, the more potential partners see them as partners. The power of conversation is not to be under-estimated in terms of its capacity to change cultures of health.

COVID-19 Addendum

This study was conceived and proposed before the COVID-19 pandemic's arrival in North America. All the interviews were conducted during the pandemic. The fact that public and community health workers were willing to take time out of their efforts to combat the pandemic to talk about their experiences partnering with public librarians illustrates the critical nature of these partnerships to the work of public health, in both good times and bad.

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