

Feature

Helping or Overstepping?

Adult Services Librarians Talk About Social Services in Public Libraries

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Abstract

Public libraries are increasingly seeing patrons with a variety of social services needs. Often, the adult services librarian is the first, and sometimes only, point of contact for these patrons. It is important, therefore, to explore adult services librarians' perspectives on and experiences with addressing patrons' social services needs. Two online focus groups were held with a total of 13 adult services librarians from across the United States. Findings indicate that these librarians are seeing patrons with myriad social services needs, and they are collaborating with community partners and, in some cases, social workers to address them. They generally do not feel that their LIS education prepared them to adequately provide these services. Moreover, feelings are mixed about the extent to which librarians should be expected to perform this kind of work. Overall, they desire clearer guidelines about the librarian's role and what the professional boundaries are in this context.

Public libraries are increasingly called upon to provide social services and social services–related information to patrons, including patrons experiencing housing insecurity, food insecurity, and issues related to mental and/or physical health, addiction, immigration status, and employment, to name a few.¹ Adult services librarians are typically the first, and sometimes the only, point of contact for patrons with such needs, yet while these librarians are equipped to provide information, they may lack training in responding to complex social services needs.² Some libraries have addressed this issue by adding a social worker or social work interns to their staff.³ However, while this is a growing trend, it is still the case that most libraries do not have social work personnel available to them.

According to the *Whole Person Librarianship* website, there are 110 libraries in the United States with at least one full-time social worker, eight with at least one part-time social worker, and 183 with one or more social work interns.⁴ By comparison, there are approximately 9,000 public libraries in the United States, with approximately 17,000 library outlets (main libraries, branches, and bookmobiles).⁵ Some libraries have responded by offering training to library staff to help them better serve the needs of vulnerable patrons.⁶ Relatively little is known, though, about the perceptions and experiences of librarians themselves in responding to patrons' social services needs. To gain an increased understanding of librarians' views, this study sought to address the following overarching research question: What are adult services librarians' perceptions of and experiences with providing social services in public libraries?

To address these questions, focus groups were conducted with adult services librarians in public libraries from across the United States. These focus groups were part of a larger study and were used for the purpose of developing a national survey administered to public librarians in the United States.

Related Literature

The research literature indicates that patrons with a variety of social services needs frequently turn to public libraries for help. The needs most frequently studied are housing insecurity, mental health, and, more recently, substance misuse.⁷ But myriad additional needs are evident as well. For example, Lili Luo et al., through 193 phone interviews and 41 surveys of patrons of a large joint public/academic library, found that patrons' needs included physical and mental health, family issues, employment, and housing.⁸ Alanna Kelley et al. surveyed 32 patrons and conducted interviews with five staff members in a suburban library and found that patron needs ranged from concerns about children's success in school to health care, food insecurity, housing insecurity, employment, and mental health.⁹ Mary Provence et al. conducted a needs assessment of 1,250 patrons of a large urban library system, including people with a permanent address and those without. Not surprisingly, those experiencing homelessness reported a greater number of basic needs such as clothing, personal hygiene, and a place to stay warm or cool. Overall, the top unmet needs of both housed and unhoused individuals were employment, financial needs, computer and/or internet access, job-related training, transportation, and health insurance.¹⁰ Similarly, Elizabeth Wahler, Colleen Rortvedt, and Tasha Saecker surveyed 655 patrons of a single urban library about their psychosocial needs and found that the top unmet needs were social connections, mental health, financial needs, dental health, education, and health insurance.¹¹

To address patrons' social services needs, libraries employ a number of different strategies. The most obvious strategies are by offering programs and services with, as Lily Rose Kosmicki puts it, an eye toward social equity.¹² In a comprehensive literature review, she provides an overview of the kinds of programs and services public libraries across the United States are offering, including collection development guided by community need, access to e-government resources, access to computers and the internet, educational opportunities such as language and literacy training, employment opportunities for members of vulnerable populations, financial information, food and nutritional programs, health and wellness, services for immigrants and refugees, legal services, improving quality of life, promoting diversity, reference services—especially those related to crisis situations, safe and welcoming spaces, information on climate change, community partnerships and outreach, library social workers, and special training for library staff.¹³

Employing social workers in public libraries has been widely discussed in the literature. In fact, two scoping reviews have been published in recent years exploring the phenomenon. Monique Shephard et al. approach the topic from the perspective of library and information science researchers; Sunwoo Lee et al. approach it from the perspective of social work researchers.¹⁴ Shephard et al., in a review of 16 research articles, found that social workers engage in direct contact with library patrons and/or provide training to library staff. Articles described the evolving roles of libraries in addressing social justice issues among diverse patrons and also indicated that there are both opportunities and challenges in collaboration between social workers and librarians.¹⁵ Lee et al. cast a wider net, reviewing both research articles and so-called gray literature, with a total of 53 items examined. They found that three different roles of social workers were documented in the literature: engaging in direct interactions with library patrons, providing training to library staff, and facilitating connections between libraries and social services agencies.¹⁶

One of the first libraries to hire a full-time social worker was the San Francisco Public Library in 2009.¹⁷ Since then, more public libraries have added either full-time or part-time social workers and/or social work interns to their staff, though the numbers are still relatively small.¹⁸ Several

studies focus on the various roles of the library social worker. Patrick Lloyd, who is a library social worker in Texas, argues that the library can be a protective factor, helping to mitigate risk factors for vulnerable patrons, and that the library social worker is a key part of that service.¹⁹ Provence, in a survey of and interviews with public library social workers, found that the primary roles of these social workers involved establishing relationships with patrons, developing and providing programs, training staff, and working to modify library codes of conduct to make them more friendly to vulnerable populations.²⁰ In another study of library social workers in three urban library systems, Provence examined the ways social workers engaged in de-escalation techniques with agitated patrons.²¹ A number of studies focus on how public libraries in different countries have integrated a social worker into their library services.²² Other studies describe the use of social work interns in public libraries.²³

The literature documents a number of benefits to having a social worker on staff. Social workers have the training that allows them to deal more effectively with certain kinds of patron needs, such as mental health issues or addiction problems.²⁴ Social workers are also trained in de-escalation techniques, which can help in interacting with agitated patrons.²⁵ Social workers can also assist patrons with time-intensive activities like helping patrons apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits or health insurance or complete job applications.²⁶

Not surprisingly, many librarians appreciate having a social worker on staff to help support patrons who are in crisis.²⁷ There are, however, also potential drawbacks to having a social worker on staff. Issues can arise when the differences between the roles of social workers and librarians are not clearly defined.²⁸ In such cases, the consequent blurring of professional boundaries can lead to tensions between social workers and library staff and may lead to social workers feeling isolated in the library environment.²⁹

Another potential drawback is related to funding, specifically the question of who, considering the budget constraints most libraries face, is going to provide funds to hire a social worker.³⁰ Other potential drawbacks include a lack of space in the library for the social worker to meet privately with patrons, liability concerns, social worker availability to meet with patrons, and supervising social work interns, especially when there is not a full-time or part-time social worker on staff.³¹

A related issue addressed in the literature is education and professional development training for librarians regarding the provision of social services and social services information. Several studies discuss the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed by librarians to respond effectively to patrons' psychosocial needs. Knowledge and skills related to serving diverse populations are frequently mentioned in the literature.³² Also mentioned are KSAs related to using de-escalation techniques in interacting with agitated patrons, providing mental health first aid, working with patrons experiencing homelessness, and having more familiarity with social services resources.³³

A survey of faculty in schools of library and information science found that approximately two-thirds feel that social services coursework is very important or extremely important.³⁴ However, other studies indicate that librarians are not receiving this kind of training in their pre-service education.³⁵ Consequently, professional development training is being employed by some libraries to fill this gap in librarians' KSAs. A study of librarians in Mississauga, Canada, for example, found that after training, they felt more comfortable providing services to patrons experiencing homelessness.³⁶

The implementation of a Community Health Specialist curriculum in the Free Library of Philadelphia (PA) system greatly improved participants' confidence in their ability to serve patrons experiencing homelessness, mental health issues, substance use disorders, immigration issues, and trauma.³⁷

And in Athens, GA, the public library implemented trauma-informed training for library staff.³⁸ A model for how librarians can interact effectively with people in crisis is offered by Lynn Westbrook in her now classic article "I'm Not a Social Worker." This four-part model, called the Information Services for People in Crisis model, emphasizes understanding the various influences a crisis can have on a patron's self-identity: as driven by the crisis, as driven by a specialized crisis service, as driven by a general service, and via transcendent perceptions.³⁹ As Westbrook says, "Librarians are not social workers, but they are asked to and certainly can provide practical, effective problem-solving information."⁴⁰

Method

Two focus groups were conducted on Zoom with adult services librarians in public libraries in the United States. A total of thirteen librarians participated—five in one group and eight in the other. Human Subjects approval was sought from Florida State University's Institutional Review Board, and the research was deemed exempt. Recruitment of participants was undertaken through messages posted to professional association listservs—ALA Connect, Public Library Association (PLA), Black Caucus American Library Association (BCALA), REFORMA, Asian Pacific American Libraries Association (APALA), Rainbow Round Table (RRT), and Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT). Focus group members each received a \$50 gift card for participating.

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour, was facilitated by a consultant, and was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants were asked to discuss the kinds of social services needs they were seeing among patrons, the community partners they were collaborating with, their preparation (education, training) for addressing patrons' social services needs, and the kind of help they would like to have. Data were analyzed independently by the three researchers. Codes were developed inductively from the data, and then coding was compared among the researchers, with consensus being established through discussion.⁴¹

Participants

The thirteen adult services librarians recruited for these focus groups had a range of experience in the field, from one to twenty-two years, with an average length of 6.53 years spent working in the field (SD = 5.63). All participants possessed MLS degrees and self-identified as Asian (n = 1; 7.69%), Black or African American (n = 2; 15.38%), Hispanic/Latino/Spanish origin (n = 1; 7.69%), and White/Caucasian (n = 8; 61.54%), with one participant noting they preferred not to answer.

The types of libraries where these librarians worked were fairly split between urban (n = 6; 46.15%) and suburban settings (n = 7; 53.84%), with most libraries located in the Midwest (n = 4; 30.77%) and Northeast (n = 4; 30.77%) regions of the United States, with three in the West (23.08%), and two in the South (15.38%). Regarding the size of the communities these libraries served, three had a legal service area of 10,000 to 49,000, and nine had a legal service area of 50,000 or more, with one librarian noting that they were not sure of the size of their library's service area. In the sections that follow, participants' real names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Overall, participants reported seeing a variety of social services needs among patrons, collaborating with a variety of community partners as well as library social workers and social work interns, feeling underprepared to address patrons' social services needs themselves, and wishing

administrators would communicate more clearly, both to them and to the community, what the library can and cannot do.

Patrons' Social Services Needs

The most frequent social services needs participants reported are related to housing insecurity, food insecurity, and filling out government forms, such as SNAP, Medicare, Medicaid, health insurance, and Social Security benefits. Other needs mentioned include job help and career counseling, assistance with tax preparation, and legal aid. In terms of the latter, some patrons need help with immigration status or applying for asylum. The most common kind of mental health issue that patrons are dealing with is related to addiction, most frequently related to the opioid crisis. Some need tangible items such as clothing, hygiene products (including diapers), or a cell phone, while some are looking for a place to shower or do laundry.

Addressing these needs is sometimes complicated by the fact that the patron seeking assistance is a non-English language speaker, and the library may not have a translator available. A typical response to the question about patrons' social services needs is Claudia's, who said, "We get a lot of questions about filling out forms and other social services regarding food stamp benefits, housing insecurities, and, overall, just like job help as well." Avery, who works in a large metropolitan library system, commented on the extensiveness of social services needs: "I've worked at several different branches ... and they've had different flavors of social services needs, but every branch in the system has some of these needs, whether they are unhoused people, a lot of job referrals, job help. About 80 percent of our branches provide afternoon snack [for children and teens]."

Collaborators

In helping to address patrons' needs, participants reported working with a variety of community partners. Some of these are part of local or state government, such as city government, job services, the Department of Human Services, and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Libraries frequently partner with local schools as well as shelters, food banks, and family resource centers. Local doctors' offices often provide free health screenings in the library, and local attorneys offer pro bono legal aid.

Several participants reported working with local programs aimed at particular groups, such as women, infants, and children (WIC), senior services, and refugee and immigrant services. Participants' libraries also work with the local police department and with jails and prisons. Connie, who works in a large urban system, said, "Just any general, like, city-related service that you can think of, it's pretty easy to get clearance, so I think if it's a government agency, they're automatically allowed to come in."

Ruth, who works in a much smaller system, explained, "Everywhere is understaffed and doesn't have enough money, and so a lot of times we try to collaborate on different things." Samantha noted that often the partners are other local libraries: "So, the [city] itself has, you know, 30 branches, and they do a lot more, whether it's, you know, computer tech, interviewing assistance, different things like that." And Carol reported, "Most of what I do, at least that I can see, is connecting people with resources, so it's not direct partnership, but it's just knowledge of [local services]."

Overall, participants' experiences with collaborators were positive. Connie, for example, stated, "I'm always really thankful to be able to partner with some expert, you know, because we have so many things that we're trying to help people with, and I don't know everything, and we're here to refer

people to the proper services." And Ruth noted that the benefits work both ways: "[A] lot of times, like, we're offering something for [the partner], whether it's space or people or things, so they're usually very gracious and very thankful."

However, some challenges were reported. Participants noted that because community partners are often as underfunded and understaffed as libraries, what they are able to offer is limited. More than one participant reported being frustrated with the fact that social services organizations do not always follow through on referrals. Some problems arise in establishing policies with partners about who is responsible for what, and participants emphasized the importance of having a clearly written memorandum of understanding. One example offered was when AARP comes into the library to help patrons with their taxes, they need a more secure Wi-Fi connection than what the library has. It was pointed out that such a requirement should be spelled out in advance.

Services Provided

Participants reported several different services their libraries are offering in response to patrons' social services needs. Some of these services are offered in collaboration with a community partner; others are sponsored solely by the library. Among the latter are such things as notary services, services for specific populations such as people with disabilities, access to technology, a place to stay warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and a shelter-in-place location during a storm or other disaster. Some examples of services provided in collaboration with community partners include offering snacks or lunch for children during the summer (in collaboration with a local food bank), exercise classes (with a local fitness instructor), funeral planning (with a funeral home), and supervised family visits (with Child and Family Services).

Library Social Workers

Several librarians reported having one or more social workers on their library staff or in their library system; some libraries are hosting social work interns from local colleges and universities. Others reported partnering with a local organization that provides access to caseworkers, and some have no access at all. Some libraries are providing peer navigators (i.e., people who have formerly experienced a social issue such as homelessness or addiction) available to assist patrons. Community health workers are also available through some libraries.

Although having social workers or social work interns in the library was generally considered a positive thing, some participants expressed mixed feelings. For one thing, a social worker can quickly get overwhelmed by the demand for services and become burned out. For another, confusion can arise about the distinction between the roles of the social worker and the librarian, and participants firmly stated that they are not social workers. Dana described her experience with these issues: "It kind of got to this weird place where it was, like, oh, we have a social worker now. Refer all problems to the social work team, and then it was, like, stop referring your problems to the social work team; they're overwhelmed."

Preparation for Providing Social Services

When asked about their preparation for providing social services to patrons, participants unequivocally stated that their library and information science degree did not prepare them to do this. Several different reasons were offered as to why this was the case. Some stated the courses they took were "too theoretical" with no practical, hands-on experience provided. Connie, for

example, said, "My [LIS program] was very theoretical, and mostly, like, not, at least for working in a public library, it's more—I think you can get so much more out of just actually working there." Several noted they pursued a track in their program of study (academic libraries, for example) that was not focused on public libraries, yet they ended up working in a public library. One even stated, "I'll be mildly controversial, and I'll suggest that I think academic libraries and public libraries don't require the same degree" (Ruth).

Participants acknowledged that courses in research and reference have been useful, as these courses teach how to find information of all kinds. Rachel explained, "My education was very reference and research oriented, but, in a way, that did help because when someone comes to me and they need help figuring out how to get food stamps or ... they lost their job or whatever, I can do that research. I can say, 'Well, let's find that out.'"

Another participant stated that a social justice course had proven useful in her work. As for the kinds of courses or topics they wish they had been exposed to, participants mentioned a variety of things: community building, community outreach, community mapping, forming partnerships, social services agencies, social services resources, crisis intervention, and working with specific populations such as LGBTQIA+ individuals, BIPOC individuals, and senior adults. Many participants said they wished more practitioners had been involved in teaching the courses they took. Overall, as Crystal explained, LIS programs need to offer more social services training: "At the end of the day, when you're talking social services, you need more of a social work, community activist, whatever kind of thought process in the training."

Outside of their formal library and information science education, some participants reported gaining valuable knowledge and skills from previous job experiences; examples included the insurance industry, restaurant and retail management, bookstore management, public library paraprofessional staff, and social services counseling. Claudia, for example, said, "I feel like what helps me most is my customer service background, so I'm able to deal with different types of people."

Several participants reported receiving training provided through their library or the American Library Association or the Public Library Association conferences. This training covered a range of topics, including empathy, de-escalation, crisis prevention/intervention, CPR, and working with individuals experiencing housing insecurity. Several indicated they had received no training through their library and that what they have learned has been from on-the-job experience and training they have sought out on their own. To take one example: Carol explained, "I do my own stuff. I'm very into PD myself, but it's not necessarily [something] my library pushes, you know? As an organization, they pushed the Ryan Dowd [working with individuals experiencing homelessness] training. That was the only type of training I found that, as an organization, they're pushing."

What Librarians Need

When asked what they needed in order to feel better supported in providing social services, participants mentioned more on-the-job training, more networking opportunities with librarians doing similar work, and more opportunities to be mentored. Other helpful strategies include being given work time to visit local city and county departments and agencies and allowing librarians to serve on the board of local non-profit organizations. Having more community partnerships—and making it easier to establish such partnerships—was also emphasized, as was the importance of having more in-library programming by community partners. Another strategy suggested was adding one or more social workers to the library staff.

Several participants expressed the need for better support from library administration, more understanding of public services by library boards, and more support services from cities so that libraries do not have to do so much. Ruth noted the administration's lack of support for training: "[I]f you want me to be a good community member, I need, you know, I need to be aware of what's happening. So, it kind of upsets me a little bit that they tell you you have to do [orientation to city agencies] on your own time." And Dana expressed frustration with city government: "I often say that the city really needs to be doing more so that we're not trying to fill in the gaps. ... [T]here's stuff, like some of the locations for, like, workforce centers or human services are only open during, like, bankers' hours, and they require appointments."

Professional Boundaries

The issue of boundaries was also discussed, with several participants stating that a clearer definition is needed for what social services in public libraries actually entail. Claudia stated, "I think the role of social services in public libraries needs to be clearly defined if it's going to be a role because there are some things about social services that don't necessarily align with the core values of librarianship." Ruth agreed, noting, "Our general library mission is, you know, focusing on sharing information and offering cultural opportunities ... so, yeah, I mean, ideally, we shouldn't be [providing social services]."

Carol, however, offered a different point of view: "I feel like I wanna do more than perhaps the library's comfortable with me doing." Participants felt that library administrators, in particular, need to make it clear to the community what the library can and cannot do. Participants expressed resentment at having to do the jobs of other agencies, although they noted that it is the nature of most librarians to want to be helpful. One said that, while you may want to be helpful, there are limits: "You can only help people so much. They have to wanna do it on their own" (Crystal). Another said they would sometimes like to follow up with patrons but felt that doing so would be outside the boundaries of librarianship; they further noted that co-workers, especially in the absence of clear guidelines, might have different boundaries—and that can complicate things.

One participant suggested that having a social worker on staff might not be such a good idea because "that's overstepping what we're meant to be there for" (Ruth). Avery captured the essence of the dilemma in describing the serious nature of many patrons' social services needs: "I agree that this is reference work ... and that is the easiest way to catalogue it in my brain. But at the same time, as I'm looking at an individual, there seems to be so much more at stake, and it's easier for me to get drawn in and really worry."

The Role of Libraries

Finally, on the question of what role libraries should play in an ideal world, opinions were split. Some participants felt that libraries should provide information and refer people to community resources, but not provide social services directly. Rachel stated, "We're not social workers, we haven't been trained to be social workers, so we can't stand in for a social worker and give people all this—what we can do is give them information." Other participants felt that libraries should embrace doing more, as they could offer many benefits to their communities. Julia said, "I can tell you that the movement towards professional empathy and social work has been fantastic that I've seen over the years. I'm really proud of the profession for moving in this direction." Both groups seemed to agree that, overall, libraries should offer more programs, engage in more partnerships with the community, and help patrons to feel supported.

Discussion

The findings will be discussed in relation to the themes that emerged from the analysis of the data.

Participants are providing a variety of social services and social services-related information, but they do not feel adequately prepared to do so.

The adult services librarians who participated in the study are seeing a variety of social services needs among patrons, although this is somewhat dependent on the location of the library, which confirms findings from previous studies.⁴² Libraries in more affluent suburbs and those not on a public transportation line tend to see fewer patrons with needs related to socioeconomic factors, such as homelessness and food insecurity. By comparison, urban libraries and libraries in lower-income neighborhoods tend to see more patrons with these kinds of needs. Moreover, patron demographics change over time, and that affects the kinds of needs that will be seen by adult services librarians. As more immigrants move into a community, for example, a library will see more patrons seeking help with immigration status.

Participants, in general, felt they were not well-prepared by their LIS degree to provide social services support to library patrons. This also confirms findings from previous studies.⁴³ What they know about the topic they have learned from professional development opportunities, previous experience (in social work, for example), or on the job. The problems with their LIS preparation were twofold: most LIS courses that addressed social services needs were elective courses, so not everyone took those classes; also, many people pursued a different track—academic libraries, for instance—in their LIS program but then ended up working in a public library. As for professional development, most participants were happy to have professional development opportunities but resented having to pay for these themselves and complete them on their own time. The literature offers several examples of and models for such training.⁴⁴

Participants' libraries are using a number of different strategies to address patrons' social services needs.

As noted above, adult services librarians are providing social services information, typically in the form of referrals, but in some cases, they are providing actual social services. Almost all participants indicated they developed social services-related programs and services in collaboration with community partners, including shelters, food banks, government agencies, local non-profits, police, healthcare organizations, tax preparation specialists, attorneys, schools, and (in one case) a funeral home. The results of these collaborations were generally described as positive, with benefits to patrons, the library, and the community partner. However, several challenges were mentioned as well, most notably a lack of clear guidelines about who was responsible for doing what. Several participants emphasized the importance of having a memorandum of understanding between the library and the partner organization. Interestingly, no one mentioned how or if programs, services, and partnerships are being evaluated.

Participants reported mixed experiences with having library social workers on their staff.

Some of the librarians who participated in the study reported having one or more social workers on the library staff. This was not surprising as the literature is replete with examples of social workers being incorporated into public libraries.⁴⁵ Several mentioned having social work interns in their libraries, something else that is widely reported in the literature.⁴⁶ The advantages of having a social worker include having someone available with more knowledge of local social services resources and having someone with the time to meet with patrons one-on-one.

Participants were especially grateful to have a social worker who could help patrons fill out forms for government benefits. The librarians themselves stated they were not able to spend the time required with individual patrons to help in filling out complex forms and, moreover, did not feel comfortable having patrons share their private information with them. In addition, librarians felt that social workers were trained to deal more effectively with patrons experiencing mental health issues.

Disadvantages were mentioned as well, similar to those reported in the literature.⁴⁷ Social workers, especially those working alone in a library, can quickly become overwhelmed by patron demand, a situation that leads to social worker burnout and patron dissatisfaction. Other challenges include funding, or lack thereof, and space constraints; not all libraries have a private space where patrons can consult with a social worker. Some participants, particularly those who felt librarians should provide social services information rather than actual social services, believed that having a social worker in the library further blurred the line between the library's role and the role of other organizations.

Participants expressed willingness to assist patrons with their social services needs.

Overall, most of the librarians who participated in the study expressed a willingness to provide social services information; indeed, they saw this as part of their job. As has been reported in previous research, many noted that they needed more training in order to become more familiar with local social services resources.⁴⁸ Several participants were less enthusiastic about providing actual social services—such as assisting patrons with filling out forms; distributing hygiene kits, face masks, and COVID test kits; and administering Narcan (naloxone) to patrons who have overdosed on opioids. They stated they had neither the training nor the inclination to provide these kinds of services. Almost all of them noted, however, that librarians by nature want to be helpful (as is also true of social workers).

Participants see overlap between librarianship and social work.

Reflecting Margaret Bausman's view in "Two Noble Professions," participants see librarianship and social work as helping professions, and they see librarians and social workers engaged in the business of providing information.⁴⁹ In that sense, the two professions can be complementary. Librarians probably have a broader knowledge of information resources, whereas social workers probably have deeper knowledge of social services resources, especially those available at the local level. Several participants stated that, even though they felt their LIS coursework did not prepare them to provide social services, they did find their reference and research skills to be valuable in serving patrons with a variety of information needs.

The one thing lacking, for many of them, was an in-depth knowledge of local resources available for patrons with social services needs. Participants also indicated that both librarians and social workers encounter people in crisis situations, but social workers have more training in understanding and responding to people experiencing trauma. These gaps—in knowledge of social services resources and knowledge of patrons in crisis—could be remedied by including such content in required LIS courses as well as through professional development training.

Participants find it challenging to draw the line between the professional boundaries of librarianship and social work.

Making a clear distinction between the role of the librarian and the role of the social worker can be challenging, and librarians do not agree on where the line should be drawn. Some participants noted the difficulties that arise when library staff within the same library have differing views on

professional boundaries. Even in libraries without a social worker—or perhaps especially in those libraries—conflict can arise between librarians who are willing to play the role of social worker and those who are not. This is a case where administrators can help define clear roles for librarians and social workers.

Participants want clearer guidelines concerning their role in responding to their patrons' social services needs.

Interestingly, when asked what kind of help they needed to better respond to their community's social services needs, participants did not say more funding. Instead, they said that they wanted clearer guidelines from administrators about their role as librarians, and, related to this, a more realistic view on the part of patrons and funders about what libraries can and cannot do. They found it frustrating that some administrators, patrons, and funders felt that the library should be all things to all people. In short, they wanted permission to sometimes say no.

Limitations

Study participants were a self-selected sample, and the sample size was small. It cannot be assumed that participants' views represent those of adult services librarians in public libraries across the United States. Findings, therefore, represent only the perspectives of the librarians who participated in the study.

Conclusion

This study explored the views of 13 adult services librarians on the topic of social services in public libraries. Participants agreed that patrons approach adult services librarians with a variety of social services needs. Views were mixed on the extent to which librarians should provide social services as opposed to only social services information. Participants expressed a desire for more training and for clearer guidelines on addressing patrons' social services needs.

Implications for Research and Practice

Future research should investigate the topic across a much larger sample of public librarians. It should also explore patrons' social services needs in academic and school libraries. And more research is also needed on how librarians and library social workers can work together so that each complements the other's work most effectively.

In terms of education and training, LIS programs should incorporate more social services content into required courses and should encourage students to be somewhat flexible as they prepare for their careers so that they are not locked into one path. It is also important that library administrators make social services a part of professional development opportunities regularly offered and paid for by the library. These findings raise the question of whether librarians need more social services-related training or libraries need to hire more social workers. It is not an either/or, of course. Social workers can help provide such training, which in turn would empower librarians and take some of the burden off social workers.

In terms of practice, a clearer definition of roles would be helpful, and this is something participants felt administrators could be more proactive in providing. In addition, the professional organizations for librarians (the American Library Association) and social workers (the National Association of Social Workers) can develop guidelines for the professional boundaries between librarianship and

social work. Based on the findings reported here, it seems such guidelines would be welcomed by librarians.

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