

**That's Not My Job - Or Is It? The Unclear Boundaries Between Librarians and Social
Workers in Public Libraries, and the Need for Both**

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Libraries have historically been places that provide individuals with a specialized kind of social service, specifically in the form of access to information, and various tools to interact with and process that information. Over time, the scope of library services has changed, and patrons often visit the library seeking a different type of social service: assistance with addressing various crises in their lives. Librarians have adopted many roles that social workers have traditionally fulfilled, and the line between the two professions has become considerably blurred (Gross et al., 2024). The unclear distinction between librarians and social workers desperately needs to be addressed, and both professions should be represented in public libraries to provide patrons with access to information and resources.

Patrons now come to libraries to meet much more urgent needs: shelter, warmth, internet connection, and assistance when experiencing mental health crises, among other things. Library staff are often tasked with addressing potential drug overdoses, domestic violence and human trafficking issues, homelessness, and patrons' physical and mental illnesses (Gross et al., 2024; Urada et al., 2022). Library staff feel unequipped to effectively handle these demands (Urada et al., 2022), either because they were not adequately trained, or they do not have the time and resources to dedicate to these high-need patrons (Gross et al., 2024). Numerous libraries nationwide now employ social workers or take on social work interns to meet the growing and ever-changing needs of their patrons, with great success (Urada et al., 2022).

Public libraries are a safe haven for many individuals with no other options. They are community hubs for individuals living in areas lacking resources. Those living in rural areas, or communities that lack funding for adequate social services, may need to turn to their public

library to receive assistance, lest they fall through the cracks (Gross et al., 2024). If the needs of these patrons are not addressed, a public health crisis could quickly arise. Now is an ideal time for public libraries to partner with social workers to address these gaps in service and provide comprehensive care for their patrons.

While librarians should have training and experience in de-escalation, active listening, and mental health first aid (Gross et al., 2024), they should not and cannot be expected to be experts in social work, or to provide that service to their patrons. If librarians were to attempt to provide their patrons with comprehensive social work services, they would not only be exposing themselves and the library to potential liability issues, but they would also be doing a disservice to their patrons by potentially causing them undue harm if they were not fully educated about the services they were attempting to provide (Gross et al., 2024; Urada et al., 2022). Therefore, social workers should be present in all public libraries to not only ease the burden on librarians, but to also provide patrons with access and knowledge about resources patrons desperately need.

Public libraries often struggle to obtain funding for their daily operations (Abram 2022). Asking libraries to locate funding to employ a licensed social worker seems to be an impossible task at first glance. Some public libraries have utilized social work interns as a way to mitigate this issue, but that leads to the question of who supervises those interns (Gross et al., 2024). Though there is not a perfect answer, any possible solution starts with creating and supporting policies to provide public libraries with the necessary funding to employ social workers. Those in crisis have fewer and fewer spaces where they can seek help, and the burden on public libraries will continue to grow. The nation's administration should proactively seek solutions to this ever-growing public health issue, as public libraries will continue to be on the front lines of solving this problem.

References

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