

Librarians and Social Work: A Deeper Look at an Evolving Profession

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Introduction

As information grows and changes, so does the role of the librarian. The abundance of information and information delivery systems requires professionals in the information field to constantly adapt and evolve. For many communities, libraries are a “third place”. One’s “first place” is where they live, one’s “second place” is where they work, and one’s “third place” is a community center point (Morehart 2016). As a third place, libraries and librarians have risen to the challenge to meet the needs of their communities through special programming and outreach. Librarians are finding new and unique ways to serve society and are performing the services that are normally associated with social work so much that libraries are now starting to hire in-house social workers. By no means is this paper stating that librarians can do the job of a social worker. However, as public services fail underserved and marginalized people, librarians have stepped up to help those in need and have expanded their role into the realm of social work. Social work became a profession in a response to the need to help the poor, destitute, and disenfranchised in a rapidly changing social order. During the late 19th century, industrialization and urbanization led to mass immigration and large concentrations of people in more confined areas. Over the years, the profession has evolved to include casework, social group work, community development, and social planning (McNutt 2013). Libraries as a community space have incorporated these tasks into various forms of programming to not only help those in search of information, but also those in need.

Libraries in Times of Crisis

In 2014, Ferguson Missouri received national attention when a white police officer shot and killed Michael Brown, a young black male. Following the shooting, the entire community of Ferguson was shut down due to riots and protesting for two weeks. Most schools and businesses

shut their doors to the public. However, the Ferguson Municipal Public Library remained open during this time as an “ad-hoc school” for the citizens of Ferguson. Because librarian Scott Bonner kept the library open, teachers were able to hold their classes in the library and people were able to access information about emergency services. Bonner created a safe haven for Ferguson where people could get away from the violence that was occurring just outside their front doors and come together as a community. A similar situation happened in Baltimore when Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American male died in police custody in April of 2015. The streets were overrun with violence and protests and while Baltimore city schools and as well as other public institutions were closed, the Enoch Pratt Free Library stayed open as an anchor for the people (Chancellor 2017). In an interview with Dr. Carla Hayden, the CEO of the Enoch Pratt Free Library, she states that “in a lot of communities in Baltimore, especially challenged ones, we are the only resource. If we close, we’re sending a signal that we’re afraid or that we aren’t going to be available when times are tough. We should be open especially when times are tough (Cottrell 2015).”

Hurricane Katrina displaced more than a million people when it made landfall in southeast Louisiana in 2005 (CNN Library 2018). In response, reference and IT staff members of the Louisiana State Library created a special website of resources for evacuees. Less than a month after Hurricane Katrina hit, Hurricane Rita dropped down on southwest Louisiana. Hurricane Rita was a category 5 hurricane and the fourth most intense Atlantic hurricane ever recorded. After these two hurricanes, the Louisiana State Library learned a great deal about community expectations and how people turn to libraries during disasters. Citizens went to the state libraries because they thought of them as sources of critical information and communication hubs. This forced the State Library to realize that their existing disaster preparedness policies

were insufficient for the demand of library services during a crisis. Since the two hurricanes, the State Library has dedicated an area of its website as a central place for information regarding disaster recovery. It has prepared a specialized booklist for children that have been affected by natural disasters with topics including adapting to change, moving, resilience, and death of a pet. The State Library sent a librarian to FEMA headquarters (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to assist with reference, information gathering and explaining the infrastructure of Louisiana to representatives from FEMA. Librarians in the state also took over answering emails from a state government website that takes questions regarding public services (Hamilton 2011). In the wake of Hurricane Sandy that hit New York in the fall of 2012, librarians helped thousands fill out FEMA relief forms and provided internet access to those in need. The New Dorp branch of the New York Public Library also hosted free financial planning seminars to hurricane victims. In both cases of the Louisiana and New York hurricanes, libraries got an influx of FEMA and Red Cross workers needing to use the computers, bathrooms, as well as the buildings themselves as gathering places (Rose 2013).

The polar vortex in the winter of 2019 brought record low temperatures to the midwestern part of the United States. The extreme cold forced public schools, universities, and many businesses to close. Minnesota experienced some of the worst of it with temperatures as low as -40 degrees. While public schools closed, all 41 branches of the Hennepin County Library in Minnesota not only remained open but maintained their regular business hours as well. The libraries served as warming centers for members of the community that needed to get out of the cold. To handle the sudden influx of children, librarians would provide impromptu story times. The Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County also aided their community by providing a safe haven from the extreme temperatures. They used local outlets to spread the word that

anybody, including people experiencing homelessness, can come to the library to get warm. The library also reached out to a non-profit social services agency which sent out representatives during closing time of the library to make sure people had a safe place to go. The polar vortex of 2019 resulted in at least 21 people dying of weather-related incidents in United States (Gajanan 2019). Libraries that remained open when other public institutions closed, literally saved lives.

Libraries, Refugees, and Immigrants

Between November 2015 and January of 2017, Canada accepted just over 40,000 Syrian refugees into their country (Canadian Government 2015). In 1994, the IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization) released the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto of which the preamble states: “Public libraries are a world-wide phenomenon. They occur in a variety of societies, in differing cultures and at different stages of development. They occur in a variety of societies, in differing cultures and at different stages of development. A well-used public library will make a significant contribution to the vitality of an urban area and be an important learning and social centre and meeting place, particularly in scattered rural areas (IFLA/UNESCO 1994).” This manifesto’s goal is to inspire libraries to be a global brand for the democratic right to information, opinions, and ideas to all. These values are echoed in the 2016-2019 strategic plan for the Toronto Public Library. In response to the mass amount of incoming Syrian refugees, important documentation pertaining to the library and its services were translated into Arabic and Western Armenian. Private sponsors of refugees were given orientation sessions regarding the City of Toronto’s “Refugee Settlement Program” at various library branches. The Toronto Public Library coordinated with the Toronto Newcomer Office to provide temporary hotels for newly arriving refugees that had not found permanent housing yet.

In addition, the library also provided fun children's programming to these hotels which included Arabic storytelling. Refugees can obtain library cards with permanent addresses and can list the library as their first address. The TPL supports refugee meetups in its various branches, has tripled the budget for the adult Arabic collection, and has doubled the budget for the Arabic children's collection. The library supports dual language literacy as well as offers English language learning classes (Bowles, Glass, and Ngan 2016). The TPL has exemplified the IFLA/UNESCO manifesto and has gone beyond information services to embrace social services as well.

Another library that has put the manifesto into action is the Denver Public Library. In 2006, the DPL started an initiative known as the Plaza Program. The Plaza Program is offered in 10 of the city's 26 branches and targets citizens that are not from the United States, of which make up 16% of the region's population, and speak over 140 languages or dialects. The program offers free citizenship, English, and art classes, as well as childcare, homework help, employment information, and legal resources. The Plaza Program provides 44 hours of programming a week in 15 different languages and is visited by an average of 1,800 refugees and immigrants a month. More than twice the number of citizens obtained their green cards through the program than the number of citizens that were deported from Colorado the previous year. The goal of the program is to provide a non-political safe space for immigrants and refugees to integrate into the United States. The Denver Public Library also partners with non-profit organizations and city agencies to offer services to the program such as help with housing and résumé writing (Oldham 2018). The Rochester Hills Public Library was one of the first libraries to offer English-language learning book clubs in the state of Michigan for its immigrant populations. Also, the Contra Costa County Library in California partnered with a local bar

association and worked with volunteer immigration lawyers to provide free one on one sessions for those in need (Diaz 2016).

A unique immigration situation most librarians would think they would not have to deal with is happening at the Haskell Free Library in northern Vermont. The library straddles the U.S.-Canadian border and has been experiencing emotional family reunions between immigrants ever since Donald Trump implemented his travel ban in 2017. Family members from countries included in the travel ban (for example Iran) have been entering the library on the Canadian side and meeting with their family members on the United States side of the building. The librarian of the Haskell Free Library, Joel Kerr, has had altercations with both the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the U.S. Border Control of which both have threatened to shut the library down. In an interview Kerr states: “we don’t want to put a stop to it necessarily, but we need to somehow control it in order for us to stay open.” Kerr must walk a fine line between providing what is essentially a social service as well as adhering to the laws of two separate countries. As more and more underserved and marginalized populations rely on libraries for needs such as this, librarians are going to have to make tougher and tougher decisions that fall outside of their job descriptions (Torbati 2018).

Libraries and Homelessness

“People experiencing poverty or homelessness constitute a significant portion of users in many libraries today and this population provides libraries with an important opportunity to change lives. As the numbers of poor children, adults, and families in American rises, so does the urgent need for libraries to effectively respond to their needs (ALA 2012).” The American Library Association as well as libraries all over the world recognize the fact that as public institutions, libraries have a duty to serve all people, especially people who are economically

disadvantaged. In Los Angeles County, between the years of 2010 and 2017, homelessness increased by 42%. This is mostly due to sudden loss of employment and financial strain. Between the years 1998 and 2018 median rent in Los Angeles County increased by over 32%. Gentrification has led to unaffordable housing which has led to people resorting to living in encampments, tents, or cars (Neighborhood Data for Social Change 2018). These people need access to information related to finance, health care, legal matters, child care, employment, welfare programs, housing, and education: this is where libraries come in (Wong 2009). By being a freely available resource, libraries are often the only option for people who are experiencing homelessness. To help these people, libraries are beginning to include homelessness resources in their information resource guides. The Santa Cruz Public Library website has links that contain information about counseling services, food services, and emergency housing placement. The Seattle Public Library offers life-skills rebuilding classes to help people who have lost their way to re-enter themselves back into society. The Free Library in Philadelphia partnered with the social services organization H.O.M.E. (Housing Opportunities for Employment, Medical Care, Education) to hire people who are experiencing homelessness to be restroom attendants in the library (Wong 2009). In an article, former assistant director of the Salt Lake City Public Library Chip Ward says that libraries should treat people who are experiencing homelessness “just like any other patron by recognizing their interests and needs.” He continues by saying that “although librarians are not social workers and libraries are not homeless shelters, we have the moral responsibility to help the information poor and treat the chronically homeless as individuals (Soneda 2007).”

Libraries and Hunger

People who are experiencing homelessness are usually also having trouble feeding themselves and their family. Economically challenged families often rely on school lunch programs to feed their children when they cannot afford to do it themselves. Unfortunately, those free school lunch programs end over the summer. In response, hundreds of libraries all over the country are now delivering federally funded summer meals to children who are dealing with hunger issues. The motivation behind this is to not only feed hungry children, but also the belief that children are able to learn better if they are not worried about where their next meal is going to come from. The meals are funded through the United States Department of Agriculture's (U.S.D.A.) summer food service program which fed approximately four million children in 2016. The program has been around since the 1970's and in the past, the U.S.D.A. has distributed meals to public sites like parks, camps, and Y.M.C.A.'s. Through webinars, presentations at conferences, and word of mouth, librarians increasingly became involved and championed the cause. In 2014, the U.S.D.A. began recommending libraries as partners for the program. Since then the number of sites offering food to children has grown astronomically. Between the years 2013 to 2016, library branches that offered food in California went from 17 locations all the way up to 139 locations. In that same period, Ohio went from 88 branches, to 133 branches. Libraries participating in the program have experienced growths in regular patrons as well as a new interest in their various other types of programming (Louis 2017).

Libraries and Government Services

In a Pew Research Center study done in 2019, it was discovered that 10% of Americans do not use the internet. In some instances, this is by choice (the elderly) but many cases involve financial hardship and lack of access. In the past decade, e-government has made a large impact

on libraries. People are relying on library computers to be able to fill out immigration applications, medical insurance claims, tax forms, Department of Children and Families forms, and job applications. Librarians are now tasked with helping people with these online documents because online government services lack adequate customer service. Some libraries are going as far as offering workshops in e-government to train their staff in this growing issue (Cathcart 2008).

The 2-1-1 service initiative was launched nationally on July 20, 2000 by the United Way of American in partnership with AIRS (Alliance of Information and Referral Systems) (“2-1-1” 2019). The service is to connect community members with public services related to utilities, housing, childcare, and protective services with an easy to remember three-digit phone number. In some cases, a community’s chosen site for the call center is the public library. One such library is the Memphis-Shelby County Public Library. The Memphis-Shelby County Public Library installed a separate phone line and reference librarians are answering local 2-1-1 calls. Having this service inside the library facilitates frequent communication between librarians and social service organizations and increases awareness of the library’s services and collections to the community. Similar to how social workers refer people to different agencies and services, librarians are now doing that as well through this initiative (Cathcart 2008).

Libraries and Domestic Violence

Victims of domestic violence often must leave their home and their belongings in a moment’s notice. This leaves them vulnerable often with no money and no means to communicate with those that can help them. Libraries, which are freely available and easily accessible, are an ideal place for these people to go. Some of the major needs for victims of domestic violence are information on how to leave their abusers, legal protections, and locations

of local shelters. All this information can be accessed through a public computer provided by a library.

In 2003, Legal Services of Eastern Michigan (LSEM) created a program dedicated to outreach for domestic violence. This program was implemented in 85 libraries in 10 different counties. The LSEM used pro bono lawyers to train library staff on what services the LSEM offers as well as gave legal education presentations to the community at the libraries. The LSEM also constructed information kiosks at the libraries which contained information brochures about the LSEM and documentation that covered common legal problems. The libraries also offered on-site pro bono lawyers to help patrons with any document preparation or legal advice (Benson 2015).

The Surrey County Council of Libraries (located in southeastern England) won the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professional's (CILIP) "Libraries Change Lives Award" in 2013 for providing resources and support to domestic violence survivors. The Senior Team Officer for Surrey County Council of Libraries Holly Case began the program when she noticed a significant lack of information in the library catalog regarding abuse towards women such as female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and abuse in LGBTQ relationships. To remedy this, she created a specialized collection covering all aspects of domestic abuse and promoted it by making posters and distributing flyers (Benson 2015). This idea spread throughout the libraries in the county and resulted in various types of outreach and programming geared towards domestic violence. The council created a dedicated web page with links to local and national services regarding domestic violence. They created events which included self-esteem workshops and poetry sessions organized by local survivor support groups. They started domestic abuse survivor reading groups and established communication links with the local

police, Crimestoppers (a non-profit organization that works with law enforcement and media to help solve crimes), and the Surrey and Sussex Probation Service (CILIP 2018). Domestic violence is a serious problem and it is important to utilize all resources that can help, especially libraries.

Libraries and Mental Illness

The Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA) published the “Guidelines for Library Services for People with Mental Illnesses” in 2007. The document states: “Information is considered key in the management of mental illnesses and in reducing the discrimination that is so often associated with it (American Library Association and Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies 2007).” The committee that wrote the guidelines calls upon libraries to support people suffering from mental illness in three ways: by providing programming, by sharing information, and by working to reduce discrimination (Pressley 2017). Nearly one in five adults in the United States live with a mental illness (“NIMH » Statistics” 2017). In a recent survey of public librarians in the country, 95% of the librarians surveyed stated that some portion of their users appear to be people who are experiencing mental illness. Of the 557 participants surveyed, only 3 reported that they had been through a formal training in dealing with people who are experiencing mental illness (Pressley 2017). Fortunately, the California State Library is doing something about this. The California State Library launched a mental health initiative in 2019 in which branches of the State Library can apply for funding to provide various forms of programming and outreach related to mental health for their libraries. There are three different funding opportunities in the initiative: to provide financial resources for training opportunities for library staff, to create library partnerships and target programming for community members, and to put on community

resource fairs. The goals of the training programs are to increase the competence of library staff in understanding the fundamental types of mental health issues and illnesses, to help staff become more comfortable approaching patrons who may be experiencing mental illness, and to create safe places for information and conversations about mental health wellness. The goals for the partnerships with community members funding opportunity is to build connections with mental health agencies and to serve as a hub for mental health information and resources. Finally, the goals for the community resource fairs are for libraries to collaborate with local health agencies to distribute information about mental health resources and to bring together both local and statewide mental health organizations to increase awareness of accessible mental health services in the area (California State Library 2018). By doing this, the California State Library is expanding the skillset of its librarians and library staff to better serve an often marginalized and ignored part of the library community.

Libraries and Substance Abuse

In 2015, drug overdose killed more Americans than homicides and car accidents combined. More than 6 out of 10 of those overdoses are related to opioid addiction (Ford 2017). Libraries as public spaces with easily accessible restrooms are popular places for drug users to get their fix. Librarians must deal with discarded needles and actual overdoses in their bathrooms. In September of 2017, the Public Library Association and WebJunction offered an online virtual town hall meeting to discuss issues of substance abuse in libraries. The panelists consisted of library staff from different parts of the country as well as representatives from community organizations. Over 500 people attended this event and discussed topics including how to interact with patrons that are suffering from drug abuse, how to intervene when drug abuse is occurring in the library, and how to collaborate with community organizations that also

deal with the problem. The Public Library Association plans to use the information gained from the town hall meeting to develop informational resources to be distributed to libraries nationwide both in print and online (Deutsch 2017).

Naloxone is a medication that can be administered through a nasal spray to an unconscious person that is suffering from an opioid overdose and in some cases can save a person's life. It is safe for pregnant women, can be rapidly administered, has few known adverse side-effects and has no potential for abuse (California State Library n.d.). The FDA has approved it to be administered by people without formal medical training as well (Weiner 2019). In Texas, at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, students are receiving formal training on how to administer the drug through Operation Naloxone (an opioid prevention and resource initiative funded by the Texas Hyman and Health Services Commission) (Melendez 2017). Along with social workers, librarians are also being encouraged to learn how to give naloxone to an individual in need. In June of 2017, a patron in San Francisco's main library suffered a fatal opioid related overdose. In response, the library has distributed naloxone to its employees as provided them formal training on how to use it. The California State Health Officer has issued an order which allows libraries to administer naloxone to a person at risk of an overdose. On the California State Library website there are links to how libraries can obtain free naloxone as well as training videos on how to recognize signs of an overdose and when and how to administer the drug (California State Library n.d.).

The Macpherson Square Library in Philadelphia has had an especially bad problem with opioid abuse because of drug encampments that have been constructed in the public park where the library is located. The staff of the library was having instances of drug overdoses about once a month. In response to this, Judi Moore, the McPherson Square Library Branch Head asked the

city administration to provide naloxone training to the staff. The training was voluntary and all but one of her staff members took it. Since then, one of her librarians, Chera Kowalski, has administered the drug six times, and has saved six lives (Rosales Jr. 2018).

In 2018 the New Orleans Health Department teamed up with New Orleans public libraries and established educational programming to help prevent the spread of opioid abuse. The program consisted to six 90-minute classes that rotated between each public library in New Orleans. The topics of these classes included how to recognize opioid addiction, how to respond to an overdose, where addicts can get help, and information on how to obtain and administer naloxone (Woodward 2018). Programs like these are not only saving lives, but they are making libraries safer for both the library staff and their patrons.

Social Workers in Libraries

It is believed that the first social worker to be hired full-time by a public library was Leah Esguerra in 2009 by the San Francisco Public Library. From her time working at the library, she has helped more than 120 library users experiencing homelessness find stable housing (Schencker 2018). Esguerra's was hired through a partnership of the San Francisco Public Library, the San Francisco Department of Health, and the San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team. Esguerra's initial responsibilities were to give direct social services to patrons and train library staff on issues regarding homelessness, substance abuse, and mental health. However, now she is also an advocate and liaison for libraries that are considering hiring a social worker (Blank 2014). In 2015, the Denver Public Library hired social worker Elissa Hardy who revamped the library's Community Resource Program. Since she took over the program the amount of library customers it serves went from 434 in 2015, to 3,500 in 2018 (Nonko 2019). As

of June 2018, it is estimated that there are over 30 public libraries that employ full-time social workers (Schencker 2018).

In March of 2018, the Public Library Association Conference held in Philadelphia hosted an informational seminar entitled “A Social Worker Walks into a Library.” Panelist Jean Badalementi was hired in 2014 by the DC Public Library in Washington D.C. to be their human services assistant manager. She was not hired to do outreach or take on a caseload of clients, she was there to develop a new systemwide approach to homelessness that the library staff could implement as well as connect with homelessness service providers. Badalementi developed her system based on a survey she did with the library staff on their experiences dealing with people experiencing homelessness in the libraries (Dankowski 2018).

Justin Janis was hired as a full-time social worker for the Evanston Public Library in Illinois in 2017. In an article, she describes the social work program at the EPL as a “referral-based model to help connect patrons to long-term resources.” She also provides training and consultation for librarians on topics such as de-escalation and how to correctly document incidents that occur at the library (Janis 2018).

Conclusion

Having full-time social workers inside a library has proven to be an invaluable resource to the library staff and community. One cannot expect a librarian to become a social worker, but it is possible for librarians to act like social workers when the time arises. Whether it is properly reacting to a drug overdose, interacting with a person who is experiencing homelessness, helping someone who is dealing with domestic abuse, or handling an influx of survivors of a natural disaster, librarians are becoming more and more equipped to handle these situations. As public services continue to fail, more and more people are going to need libraries and librarians to

provide things that cannot be found on bookshelves. It is important for librarians and other information professionals to accept this new role and move forward into the future with a mindset of empathy and compassion to those that come through the doors. Through proper education, training, and professional development, this can be achieved.

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