

Addressing Patrons' Increasing Psychosocial Needs in the Public Library: Responsive Community Care Through Improved Education, Training, and Partnerships

Jessica Sebastiano

Abstract

The public library remains perhaps the only truly free public space, one that vulnerable community members can easily and safely access. Consequently, public libraries' physical spaces are being used to meet patrons' complex physical, psychological, and social needs. Public library staff are increasingly encountering patrons experiencing mental health issues, housing precarity, and substance use issues (such as opioid poisoning and overdoses), as well as a rise in security incidents. Unfortunately, public library staff are often not adequately trained to navigate these challenging situations before encountering them. As front-line workers, public library staff must be supported by library organizations and institutions to provide the best service for their patrons and protect themselves from burnout, traumatization, and compassion fatigue. This must include clear, consistent policies and procedures and appropriate training that support staff's physical and mental health. Creating more social work-aligned programs in Library and Information Science (LIS) education, partnering with community organizations to address gaps in service and knowledge, and introducing trauma-informed practices to the public library would work to empower and protect staff and strengthen equitable library service.

Public libraries are perhaps the only remaining free public spaces. This not only means that patrons are able to access the public library for free, without money acting as a barrier to entry – no need to justify their presence through purchases, nor worry about being hurried out the door to increase customer turnover – it also means that all community members are invited and welcome. While this certainly involves open access to information, the physical space of the public library is increasingly being used to meet patrons' psychosocial, rather than traditional information-related, needs. Though Wahler et al. (2022) note that the term *psychosocial needs* currently has no standardized definition in Library and Information Science (LIS) literature, the authors explain it as “any unmet need that is known to predict poor social, health-related, or psychological outcomes in general populations” (p. 172). In effect, particularly for community members already experiencing precarity and scarcity, public library access can be more about meeting health and safety needs than educational or recreational information-seeking requests. In fact, recent research observes that

...patrons' psychosocial needs have been increasing in recent decades, with the most common undermet or unmet needs being mental health problems, substance use disorders, homelessness or housing instability, and poverty-related needs ... library staff frequently describe serving patrons with serious mental illness, some experiencing active hallucinations or delusions, who may have disruptive behaviour or be frightening for staff and other patrons (Wahler, 2023, pp. 454-55).

Indeed, substance use, opioid poisoning, and overdoses in or around public libraries are increasingly common, as are security incidents involving patrons and staff. Edmonton Public Library (EPL) statistics count “99 overdoses across the [library] system in 2022” and “nearly 3,000 security incidents as of Nov. 12 [2023], up from just over 2,600 last year [2022]” (Vermes, 2023, para. 16). As well, the COVID-19 pandemic has created precarious circumstances for many people that could contribute to unmet physical, social, or psychological health needs. Wahler et al. (2022) explain, “with the financial and personal fallout of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, housing instability and financial needs are only expected to increase in the coming years.” (p. 173). Evidence of this claim can even be seen locally, as the amount of Edmontonians who identify as homeless has doubled in number since the beginning of the pandemic (Vermes, 2023).

Consequently, the public library is likely to see a continued increase in patrons with needs that “exceed the training and expertise of library staff” (Wahler et al., 2022, p. 173). Vulnerable populations often turn to the library as a social support when other systems of outreach or aid are inaccessible or non-existent. Unfortunately, inadequate training for public library staff “can cause a great deal of workplace stress or lead to unsafe situations for both patrons in need and the staff who are responsible for serving them” (Wahler, 2023, p. 456). It is the opinion of this paper that libraries must be responsive to their communities and provide the services that patrons are coming to the library for – therefore, if patrons’ reasons for accessing the library are changing, then libraries must respond in kind. To be truly responsive to patrons’ psychosocial needs in the library, front-line library staff need to be supported by the library’s organizational structure as well as community institutions to provide appropriate service for their patrons while also protecting themselves from burnout, traumatization, and compassion fatigue. The well-being of public library staff and all public library patrons would benefit from implementing more social work-aligned programs in Library and Information Science (LIS) education, partnering with community organizations to address gaps in service and knowledge, and introducing trauma-informed practices into public library organizations and policies.

Education

In a recent qualitative study (Gross et al., 2024), interviews with a sample population of American public librarians and public library branch managers revealed that “being unprepared for the realities of working with the public was a dominant theme” in their line of work, regardless of job title or recency of graduation from an MLIS program (p. 50). Most of these respondents believe the current LIS education does not adequately prepare graduates for the realities of the workplace. This lack of preparation and training to be able to address the psychosocial needs of patrons (including mental health, substance use, poverty-related, and housing precarity issues and shelter needs) can cause a great deal of stress for both parties. Post-secondary education, then, can prepare students for working with patrons experiencing these issues by developing courses that include social service concepts that reflect current workplace environments.

Gross et al. (2024) found that, of the 51ALA-accredited MLIS programs currently offered in the United States, 22 university programs offer courses focused on building positive relationships between library and information workers and their communities (p. 42). However,

only two universities offer dual degree programs that combine a LIS and social work education; excluding these, only another five LIS programs include any social work courses in their curriculum. In order to compare this information to the current LIS education offerings in Canada, research was conducted for the purpose of this paper to explore the eight ALA-accredited Canadian MLIS programs – Dalhousie University, McGill University, Western University, University of Alberta, The University of British Columbia, University of Ottawa, University of Montreal, and University of Toronto – and their course lists. No Canadian MLIS programs currently offer the option to pursue a dual degree in LIS and social work education (though many programs offer the possibility to add courses from other departments to their curriculum, with the approval of an academic supervisor). Furthermore, only three programs offer any courses or suggested electives that address community-building and equity, diversity, inclusion, accessibility, and decolonization (EDIAD) and that cover concepts such as community-led services, anti-racism, Indigenization, and knowledge justice (Dalhousie University, n.d. -b; Western University, 2024b; University of Toronto, 2024b). Gross et al. (2024) determined that “it may be beneficial to consider reframing social services as a fundamental part of the profession” for American public library workers; considering these factors cited above regarding current Canadian LIS programming, logic follows that their claim can be applied to a Canadian setting as well (p. 51).

In the United States and Canada alike, people and their communities bring their needs to the library. However, these needs increasingly lie outside the scope of what library workers are being educated and trained to address. While students entering the workforce need to “be prepared to interact with people who have been traumatized, are in crisis, or are grappling with any number of personal challenges and societal ills” (Gross et al., 2024, p. 50), the responsibility of obtaining these skills and knowledge should not lie on the individual. Though more psychosocial in nature, the needs of patrons from vulnerable populations are still community needs. Therefore, education practices need to expand to accommodate these societal changes affecting public library patrons and the staff with whom they interact. However, a common sentiment expressed in recent research is that many library workers do not want to be social workers (Gross et al., 2024; Vermes, 2023). Though adequate and appropriate education is inarguably needed to prepare for the workplace, other professions might be better suited to addressing the increasing and varied needs of library patrons.

Community Partnerships

One way to support public library staff in their work is through community partnerships with organizations that already offer services meant to address vulnerable patrons’ psychosocial needs. Library workers – despite training or education, if even available to them – are perhaps not always the appropriate option to offer specific services.

For example, the City of Edmonton and EPL ran a pilot program (2022-2023) that stationed overdose prevention and response nurses at its downtown branch, which sees the largest percentage of on-site overdoses across the library system (Vermes, 2023). Naloxone training for library staff is increasingly common; however, where staff are likely to have their attention split between many on-shift responsibilities, a dedicated staff member can monitor and

address any substance use issues among patrons. As part of EPL's program, the nurses walked through the Stanley Milner Library twice a day, checking on patrons and distributing clean supplies and snacks (Vermes, 2023).

Social workers are another community resource that can aid library workers in navigating crisis intervention, de-escalation, and providing referrals to social services. This community partnership is not new. Wahler et al. (2021) point out that "partnerships between libraries and social workers emerged as early as the 1980s" (p. 298). The authors elaborate that this partnership addresses "nontraditional needs" (p. 302) that require more time, energy, and knowledge than library staff alone can provide. Social workers can also provide staff with training. However, employing social workers in the public library cannot entirely solve library staff's problems. Interviews with librarians and branch managers in a 2024 study concluded that

regardless of their dedication to serving library users, there is a limit to the number of people social workers can serve in a day. It is unlikely that social workers will completely relieve the librarian of the need to respond to users' social-service information needs (Gross et al., pp. 50-51).

Additionally, many public libraries can't afford to employ a social worker. Even a practicum student is only one person who can only work certain days and certain hours – and eventually, the practicum (or pilot program, as in the case of the overdose prevention nurse) will come to an end. Thus, community partnerships are a vital component of public library service, but staff training is still required to address the challenges public libraries are facing. Specifically, trauma-informed training provides the foundations for effective service to vulnerable populations as well as meeting the physical, psychological, and emotional safety needs of public library staff.

Trauma-Informed Library Work

In *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (2020), Rebecca Tolley states that "providing the highest level of service without an understanding of trauma-informed principles is impossible" (p. 28). These principles encompass all patrons and staff members, employing a lens of empathy, compassion, and understanding. This extends across all sections of library organization, including management structures and library policies. As Wahler (2023) notes, "individual-focused solutions are often inadequate when the causes of stress and strain are structural or organisational" (p. 453). Thus, in a trauma-informed workplace, the "organisation as a whole commits to reducing barriers and trauma for people interacting with it, both internally and externally, and works to change their policies, practices, and procedures accordingly" (Wahler, 2023, p. 458).

There are six pillars of trauma-informed approaches: safety, trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues (Tolley, 2020). To begin, a sense of physical safety must first be established in the library for all who occupy that space; it is the foundation from which all other forms of safety (psychological, cultural, social, and moral) – indeed, all trauma-informed care and practices – can build upon. In short, this requires that library staff and patrons alike feel physically, emotionally, and psychologically unthreatened in all actions and interactions with

each other, as well as with the physical and figurative spaces of library structures. Next, the pillar of trustworthiness and transparency is, in effect, the repeated and deliberate demonstration that this safety is genuine and enduring – Tolley (2020) explains that this “boils down to our actions matching our words, values, and beliefs” and “establishing and maintaining credibility, reliability, and intimacy” (p. 61). Tolley highlights two specific ways these principles manifest in trauma-informed libraries: transparency through making library policies, procedures and budgets available and accessible to the public and cultural change within library organizational structures that foster (and actively demonstrate) trust between administration and front-line staff (p. 63). Once safety and trust have been established, the remaining tenets of trauma-informed service work to dismantle the damaging hierarchical systems that create power disparity in the library.

In particular, the next pillar of peer support establishes individuals in the library as equals – partners who share goals and values and who voluntarily offer their time and energy to help others out of a desire to create and foster a system of support, connection and care (Tolley, 2020). Likewise, collaboration and mutuality are firmly rooted in shared power and reciprocity. Tolley (2020) uses the reference interview as a picture of mutuality in libraries: “Each person brings strengths and information to the situation as *equals in collaboration* [emphasis added]. They progress toward a common goal—finding an answer, not finding an answer, or referring the patron to another librarian, library, or external resource” (p.85). This kind of relationship building seeks to take apart the traditional hierarchical power structures that posit library workers as knowledge experts, bestowing information upon the patron. Instead, patron and staff work together in “a reciprocal relationship steeped in democracy in which everyone in the relationship symbiotically creates and experiences opportunities for learning” (Tolley, 2020, p. 87). Continuing in the development of these new relationships, the next principle of empowerment, voice, and choice maintains that patrons are equal stakeholders in the creation of library collections, services, and programming for themselves and their communities. Specifically, then, developing trauma-informed services requires trauma survivors to be active in these processes. In a trauma-informed library, collections and services are created *with*, not *for*, those the library serves. Additionally, choice can serve as empowerment in action, as patrons are equitably provided with the options and tools to engage with the library on their own terms to suit their own needs.

Finally, the pillar of cultural, historical, and gender issues requires acknowledging the systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized populations and the library’s role in perpetuating harm. Though a thorough analysis of this pillar would outsize the scale of this paper, it’s imperative to note that widespread institutional change is necessary to adequately respond to these issues in a meaningful way, necessitating that libraries look inward to “move past cultural stereotypes and the biases of the profession” (Tolley, 2020, p. 97). One way this can be put into action is by “examining collections for problematic labels, cataloging, or metadata and actively using alternative subject headings that are inclusive and don’t promote colonialism, sexism, racism, or homophobia...” (Tolley, 2020, p. 97).

The six pillars of a trauma-informed approach to library services not only foster compassionate service for patrons but also help to support library staff workers in managing and

preventing personal stress and trauma responses. Trauma-informed practices in a public library setting endeavour to share power, empower, and provide opportunities for trauma survivors (both patrons and staff) to be in control of their own experiences. Additionally, trauma-informed approaches can address the hesitancy some staff experience around implementing more social work-oriented education and training, lest they be confused for social workers. Empathy, compassion, and understanding for community members experiencing physical, psychological and social health issues in the library is, in fact, library work. In some cases, the beliefs and attitudes of library staff can become an access barrier for patrons when they are made to feel unwelcome or unsafe. Similarly, Tolley (2020) connects trauma-informed library service and professional codes of ethics (in this case, from the American Library Association):

. . .we distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institution or the provision of access to its information resources . . . Until our customer service philosophy, library and information science education, and professional literature address our professional bias against ‘problem patrons’ . . . we will leave our users unserved (p. 29).

Providing all patrons with equitable, non-judgemental service is a foundational principle of all library work. Therefore, trauma-informed library service is not necessarily borrowed from the world of social work but is squarely rooted in library ethics and values.

Conclusion

As one of the last welcoming spaces patrons from vulnerable populations can freely access, public libraries have an ethical responsibility to implement trauma-informed practices across all levels of library organization. This must include clear, consistent policies and practices as well as appropriate training that supports staff’s physical and mental health.

While social-work-informed LIS education, supportive community partnerships, and trauma-informed approaches are all vital components to providing effective and equitable library service, none of these elements can stand alone. One strategy by itself cannot address the issues that create challenges for patrons that inevitably end up in the public library space. Gross et al. (2024) note that “successful outreach and collaboration rarely happen by happenstance; deliberate strategies to ensure effective collaboration and relationship-building require multifaceted approaches that account for the diverse characteristics of contemporary library users” (pp. 42-43).

Society is changing, and public libraries need to change alongside it to provide equitable care to all community members. This is, after all, the reason that libraries exist: to serve their communities and work to meet their needs. Education, community partnerships, and trauma-informed approaches bolster the foundations of equitable library service. The necessary changes to library organization and practices are not so much changes as an expansion of care that stems from the ethics and values that underscore library responsibility to community well-being.

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