

Spring 5-2-2019

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, S. C. (2019). Partnering for social justice: Social work students' placement at public libraries. In S. Epstein & V. Gubnitskaia (Eds.), *Social Justice and Activism in Libraries: Essays on Diversity and Change*. McFarland Publishing.

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Partnering for Social Justice: Social Work Students' Placement at Public Libraries

Sarah Johnson

While the collaborative trend among professional social workers and librarians is garnering much deserved attention, literature about social work students partnering with public libraries is virtually nonexistent. Public librarians can advocate for social justice by initiating partnerships with master-level social work (MSW) students to enhance small- and large-scale programs to address the unique needs of patrons. In this chapter, I highlight existing collaborations among public libraries and student social workers to raise awareness of possibilities.

Informal networking groups for social workers and librarians are growing. Whole Person Librarianship (Zettervall 2018) currently has more than 90 members, including some who are MSW students. The skill set required of librarians has morphed, and some find that they are taking on the role of social workers. One way librarians can embrace these blurred lines is to ask budding social workers to help us forge this new path with the aim of helping patrons in need. Having worked with MSW interns in the past, former Public Library Association President Carolyn Anthony affirms ““partnerships should be encouraged, and there’s so much we can accomplish by combining skills...[social workers] enable us to extend our reach and accomplish a lot more”” (Zettervall 2013).

Combining skills to meet the diverse needs of patrons by collaborating with MSW students means pairing with a profession that shares many of librarians' *Core Values* as reflected in its own *Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers 2018). Pairing with social work students helps librarians implement *Core Values* of our profession by:

- working with other “organizations in coalitions to initiate and support comprehensive efforts to ensure that...libraries in every community cooperate to provide lifelong learning services to all”
- upholding our social responsibility to diversity by “providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve”
- working to solve “the critical problems of society” (American Library Association 2004).

Over 64,000 MSW students are enrolled in 254 accredited programs in the United States (Council on Social Work Education 2017). Students are required to complete approximately 900 hours of fieldwork, also referred to as internships or field placements. Most social work students and educators do not consider libraries as an option for fieldwork, therefore it is crucial for librarians to promote such collaborations.

What librarians can do

Though unique in their own ways, many existing partnerships tell a similar story of librarians originating partnerships with MSW programs or a third party to formalize internships, assigning students to conduct needs assessments and staff trainings, and subsequently develop or enhance micro- and macro-level library programming.

Public librarians can initiate partnerships with social work students by locating an accredited MSW program through the Council on Social Work Education and contacting the School of Social Work’s Director of Field Education. If partnering with a university is not an option, connect with the local Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) or equivalent to ascertain if MSW interns are available to partner with the library.

Examples

The trailblazing community-university partnership between San Jose Public Library and San Jose State University began when librarian Deborah Estreicher simply called “the School of Social Work, spoke to Professor Peter A. Lee, who thought a fine partnership might be had, and the rest is history” (Estreicher 2013). Recognizing an opportunity to take diversity to the next level, they developed the *Social Worker in the Library* (SWITL) model in 2007, which has since been adopted at libraries throughout the country. The University of Maryland’s Graduate School of Social Work was recently awarded a prestigious grant to implement this model at three Baltimore libraries (Institute of Museum and Library Services 2017).

After completing her MLS in 2013, Sarah Preskitt returned to her hometown to work at the Anchorage Public Library. She immediately noticed the gap in services for patrons experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, and issues related to mental health, and, consequently, the stress placed on library staff. Soon after, she helped forge an internship with the University of Anchorage-Alaska School of Social Work.

Due to her outreach with the University of South Carolina, *2015 Library Journal’s* Mover and Shaker Heather McCue helped establish an internship at the Richland Public Library for MSW students.

Long Branch Free Public Library Director Tonya Garcia built on her established relationship with Monmouth University to form an internship through the School of Social Work. Eventually, MSW student David Perez began his placement in 2015 as the first social work library intern in New Jersey.

Newark public librarian Leslie Kahn elicited the help of two Rutgers social work professors to bring on its first ever MSW intern, Kenyetta Clark, in 2017.

Georgetown public librarians in Texas also took heed and responded to “seeing more patrons who were struggling with homelessness, mental health troubles, aging-related illnesses and other [instabilities],” (Marczynski 2017). Hired as a result of a three-year grant, social worker Patrick Lloyd subsequently brought on a MSW intern from his alma mater, the University of Texas-Austin.

In Azusa, California, “the city librarian approached the [Azusa Pacific University] Social Work department to ask whether a graduate-level social worker could assist the library staff in the efforts to address a broad array of patron needs” and “for potential solutions to extend expertise and provide supportive social services to city library patrons” (Kelley et al. 2017, 112, 115).

Third party collaborations

When establishing an internship with a university is not feasible, some libraries arrange placements through third parties, such as the local Department of Mental Health (DMH). In such scenarios, students typically intern on behalf of the Department – not the library itself – even though they are physically situated at the library. Advantages of triaging with recognized organizations include secure relationships with the library, connection to resources, and the possibility that DMH social workers can provide student supervision.

Examples

The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (DMH) was awarded a one-year grant to appoint their first MSW intern in 2017 to help social workers facilitate *The Source*, a connection service for homeless patrons.

University of Alaska-Anchorage's School of Social Work joined forces with the Municipal Health Department to regularly staff a table at the main public library answering patron questions and linking them with community resources.

As an alternative to pairing with a local university, Washington D.C. Public Library opted to team with an outside agency to do outreach to the homeless population; the activity utilized their own social work intern for about 20 hours every week.

Brooklyn Public Library indirectly hosts MSW interns from Fordham and Columbia Universities in conjunction with The Osborne Association. Students intern with Osborne to facilitate family visits through video conferencing and offering "support for re-entry after incarceration and assistance to families coping with the incarceration of a loved one" (Brooklyn Public Library 2018).

Assignments

As per requirements for field placement, MSW students must complete various tasks or assignments to align with their established learning contract and educational goals. The following suggestions are assignments MSW interns can begin with.

Needs assessments

As every branch varies, conducting needs assessments of both staff and patrons are excellent starter assignments for MSW interns. Newark public librarian Leslie Kahn explains the aim of such assessments is to "try to figure out what are the priorities for a very diverse community and see what support we can get from that analysis" (Kearney 2017, 9).

Examples

Newark Public Library intern and MSW student Kenyetta Clark identified a service gap to pre-teens and subsequently developed programming with young patrons in mind.

At the beginning of their internship, eleven MSW students at Azusa Pacific University “worked closely with library personnel to collect data about the focal community...the library staff was considered a critical population for the community analysis” (Kelley et al. 2017, 116).

Georgetown Public Library’s Community Resources Coordinator Patrick Lloyd prioritizes patron needs based on questions he receives. Typical queries at his smaller, rural library often pertain to “general financial assistance. Affordable and emergency housing are also common issues, as is the need for pro bono legal assistance” (Marczynski 2017).

Washington D.C. Public Library conducted a staff appraisal about their experiences interacting with homeless patrons. Some survey questions included, “How’s it impacting your day? What do you need from [social workers]? What do you need so that you can do your job and be helpful to these folks — and every single other customer that comes through the door?” (Jenkins 2014).

Library staff training

Evaluating staff concerns often highlights their desire for education and support from mental health professionals. This reflects a core value of “maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills” (American Library Association 2004) in order to better meet diverse patron needs. Social work interns are often well equipped to provide basic information sessions for librarians. The content of such trainings should be tailored to the unique needs of the library

community. Topics can range from mental health literacy, mandated reporting, crisis management, and how to converse with patrons who may be in need of outside services.

Examples

Los Angeles County intern Jeanette Martinez provides trainings to library staff on de-escalation techniques as a means of crisis management. Such trainings also provide excellent opportunities for interns to clarify their role at the library and manage staff expectations. Though equipped with a unique knowledge base and skill set, interns are not responsible for solving significant crises or conducting major mental health assessments. Rather, students can work to empower librarians about how to handle potentially complicated situations; how to involve additional partners if necessary such as public safety or relevant mental health professionals. Dependent on the support staff available, it is preferable that interns begin assisting with smaller tasks, program development, and addressing patrons with manageable needs.

Washington D.C. Public Library social worker Jean Badalamenti hopes trainings can help staff “understand what it means to be homeless, what people experience when they’re homeless. Just a sort of sensitivity training, but hopefully we’ll be doing some other kinds of training, even around de-escalation. Identifying folks who might be in a crisis, so the library can respond and be helpful” (Jenkins 2014).

Social work students can help staff explore options for addressing the current opioid crisis. As this epidemic ~~has landed~~ started directly affecting and is often occurring in public libraries around the country, staff may need assistance determining how best to respond to signs of active use and acute medical needs. Some librarians are now trained in how to administer Narcan and others have aligned more closely with first responders.

Once necessary services are identified, MSW interns can help enhance or develop relevant programming for patrons. Depending on the needs and capacities of a particular branch, this can be delivered on a larger, macro scale or through smaller, micro-focused services, such as referrals.

Programming: Macro

Although they may not have established formal collaborations with social work interns, many public libraries already have existing outreach services to address the diverse needs of patrons. Social work students can help enhance existing programming or develop new projects to address gaps in services as a means of bringing about social justice for marginalized patrons.

A popular outreach program for patrons experiencing homelessness is Coffee and Conversations . This low-stakes, informal platform allows local agencies to meet patrons who are in need of community resources. Popularized by Dallas Public Library, the program is currently organized and facilitated at Kansas City and New York Public Libraries, with the help of MSW interns. Furthermore, in Los Angeles County DMH intern's primary responsibilities involve working with homeless patrons through *The Source* (Los Angeles Public Library 2018).

Based on her needs assessment of Newark Public Library, MSW Intern Kenyetta Clark identified a gap in services for teens. This allowed her to develop programs tailored to youth (Newark Public Library 2017). Likewise, teen programs created by Clark's fellow Rutgers University students are underway at New Jersey branches in Somerville and North Plainfield (TapInto Staff 2018).

At Kansas City Public Library, much of intern Amanda Landayan's work involves collaborating with the branch's Youth and Family Engagement staff, providing food for children

at the Kids Cafe program, and coordinating with community agencies such as Operation Breakthrough and Front Porch Alliance (Landayan, personal communication).

Successful outreach programs at New Jersey's Long Branch Free Public Library blossomed as result of librarian Tonya Garcia noticing needs and working with MSW intern David Perez to help meet them. During his two-year placement, Perez developed Garcia's Fade to Books Barbershop Literacy program and was subsequently recognized with an Innovative Partnership award. He helped spearhead the Fresh Start Re-Entry Program to assist ex-offenders seeking employment. Perez also worked with Long Branch's Community Connects Program, a monthly event for local agencies to showcase their services for patrons in need.

Programming: Micro

Assessments often indicate a demand for individual services such as advocacy and referrals to social services. Many patrons require assistance completing online government forms and job applications. MSW interns can further "guide patrons through the state's online benefits application process, assist individuals in applying for food benefits, help applicants gather necessary documents, connect eligible families and individuals with employment and training resources, and connect with other...agencies to answer questions" (State of Delaware News 2018).

Fundamentally, social work students can help forge connections to community resources. Patrons with questions that fall outside librarians' scope can be referred to interns. They can offer to meet patrons through established office hours, walk-ins, or a basic sign-up sheet. The availability of social work interns to provide references offers a more seamless link to necessary services outside the library. Regardless of whether a branch is operating large-scale programs, interns can offer resource links to patrons who seek them.

With the help of his student intern, Community Resources Coordinator Patrick Lloyd conceptualizes his role “as distributing and gathering information, and hopefully getting that information to the people who need it—both our patrons and the community in general—to try to improve Georgetown [Texas] as a whole” (Marczynski 2017). A possible assignment attached to this information gathering could be drafting grant requests to potential funders.

As an initial exercise, librarian Sarah Preskitt had MSW students from the University of Alaska-Anchorage develop a community resource book for patrons. Subsequent interns drafted a Policy and Procedures handbook for future social work students. Another assignment involved distributing a patron questionnaire about library use. Results of this survey showed nearly one-quarter of regular library users in Anchorage are currently homeless; the library received funding to hire social worker thereafter.

As a measure of addressing social justice, interns can be of great assistance bridging the digital divide by helping patrons navigate online government forms and job applications. Such help mirrors one of our core values that information “should be readily, equally, and equitably accessible to all library users” (American Library Association 2004).

Challenges

Due to the unique nature of such partnerships, challenges may arise. First, it can be difficult to determine if students will obtain the skills and knowledge they desire at the beginning of their internships. One way to account for this is to establish a clear learning contract with both the librarian who serves as the on-site task supervisor and the social worker providing weekly social work supervision. Library placements may not be suitable for students with a strictly “clinical” focus (i.e., maintaining a minimum caseload of patrons; conducting in-depth mental

health assessments). Overall, this type of placement may be better suited to generalist, policy-based students, versus those aiming for a more clinical, micro-focused path. As mentioned above, if crisis situations are commonplace in a branch, interns should not be expected to address such circumstances on their own.

It is worth considering if there will be ample tasks for the student to conduct. One way to ascertain possible workloads is establishing a clear learning contract. Such planning can help determine if a library intern is a suitable fit for a particular branch. Additionally, facilitating internships requires extra time and efforts that some libraries may not be able to afford. After considering the possibility of taking on an intern, some libraries opt out or discontinue their existing partnerships. For all its strengths and good intentions, joint ventures need to ultimately benefit patrons in need, not just the student or library staff who require extra help.

Promisingly, many pilot programs have found success: continuing and expanding current social work/library collaborations as is the case with Rutgers University and Los Angeles County. Additionally, libraries in Anchorage, Kansas City, Newark, and Azusa, California were able to fund the hiring of professional social workers.

Creativity required

The trailblazing nature of interning at a public library requires MSW students who identify as self-starters, who are comfortable negotiating open placements with less infrastructure. While such internships have the potential to provide a great freedom, it may frustrate both students and librarians who desire established protocols.

Such original ventures also require creativity from social work educators and field placement coordinators to assist with supervision, particularly as so few libraries have a

professional social worker on staff. Unless supervision is provided through a third party, placements may need to be contracted with retired or outside social workers.

Summary

Public librarians play a critical role advocating for social justice by reaching out to MSW programs and inviting budding social workers to advance tolerance for a diversity of people and needs. While professional values of both librarianship and social work have a strong overlap, librarians need to summon MSW educators, field instructors, and students to this nontraditional point of social service delivery. In turn, students can work with libraries to develop programming, strengthen outreach, and empower public librarians to advocate for social justice. If we are indeed living in the “golden age of library-social work collaboration” (Zettervall 2015), let’s take advantage of this by partnering with MSW students to bring about social justice and change.

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