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Public Library-Based Social Work Field Placements: Guidance for Public Libraries Planning to Become a Social Work Practicum Site

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Abstract

Public libraries are increasingly faced with patron psychosocial needs, including mental health problems, substance use, homelessness, or poverty-related needs. Since library staff are often not trained to address these needs, many are choosing to host on-site social work practicum students to provide information and referrals for patrons presenting with psychosocial needs. However, little existing guidance is available about initiating a social work practicum placement, which can leave libraries unprepared and often "reinventing the wheel". This manuscript provides guidance on the steps that should be considered by libraries intending to host their first social work practicum student.

Keywords: *social work, student, field placement, collaboration, patron needs*

Public libraries are increasingly met with patron psychosocial needs, which include homelessness, mental health problems, substance abuse-related challenges or other needs related to psychological or social functioning, and are often adapting services to try to address these needs (Geisler 2017; Green 2020; Pressley 2017; Provence 2019; Terrile 2016; Torrey, Esposito, and Geller 2009; Wong 2009). With the economic and personal fallout of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, needs such as housing instability and financial problems are expected to increase in the coming years (National Alliance to End Homelessness 2020), leading to a probable increase of public library patrons requesting assistance with related needs. However, the extant literature demonstrates that library staff are often not prepared to assist patrons with these types of psychosocial needs, may feel conflicted about their role with such patron needs, and often lack the adequate skills to effectively intervene or respond (Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher 2012; Wahler et al. 2019; Westbrook 2015; Williams 2016; Wray 2009).

Sharing a similar mission to serve the public (Zettervall and Nienow 2019), social workers can complement public libraries' approaches to meet the varied needs of patrons (Soska and Navarro 2020). Due to limited funds, many libraries rely on free services provided by social work students (Johnson 2019, 2021) and such library-based practicum placements are increasing across the United States (Aykanian et al. 2020; Cuseglio 2020). There is little guidance provided for these new placements, which results in libraries and schools of social work "reinventing the wheel" every time a new library placement begins. Thus, the purpose of this manuscript is to provide the necessary information to guide libraries that are planning to host their first social work students.

Literature Review

Contemporary Psychosocial Needs of Patrons

Public library patrons often present with complex psychosocial needs, with housing insecurity (Aykanian et al. 2020; Giesler 2017; Pressley 2017; Provence 2018; Soska and Navarro 2020; Terrile 2009; Wong 2009) and mental health problems (Aykanian et al. 2020; Dankowski 2018; Green 2020; Pressley 2017; Soska and Navarro 2020; Torrey, Esposito, and Geller 2009) as the two most often researched and discussed patron needs in the extant literature. Patron substance misuse is also gaining attention, particularly the rise in overdoses within public libraries observed in the midst of the U.S. opioid epidemic (Aykanian et al. 2020; Soska and Navarro 2020; Wrigley et al. 2020). Additionally, library staff have identified further psychosocial needs among their patrons which include complex trauma histories, domestic violence, [un]employment, food insecurity, inadequate hygiene, medical problems, legal and technological illiteracy, and cultural/linguistic challenges for immigrants and refugees (Aykanian et al. 2020; Morgan et al. 2016; Morgan et al. 2018; Soska and Navarro 2020; Wahler et al. 2019). These issues have gained such distinct recognition within libraries that the American Library Association (ALA) developed policy statements or guidelines to address them (American Library Association [ALA] 2007, 2012) in addition to forming its Hunger, Homelessness & Poverty Task Force.

Emerging Challenges of Library Staff

Despite ALA's endeavors, library staff frequently struggle with adapting to meet patrons' psychosocial needs – in addition to fulfilling their traditional public service roles – particularly when library budgets are tight, and time is scarce (Wilkins Jordan 2014; Soska and Navarro 2020). Compounding these issues, library staff struggle with physical and verbal outbursts,

episodes of psychosis, and even homicidal or suicidal ideation among patrons experiencing volatile mental health crises, incidents which could result in significant harm to patrons or staff while further destabilizing the public environment and potentially compromising the wellbeing of library employees themselves (Anderson 2018; Clark 2019; Torrey, Esposito, and Geller 2009). Even when no threat of violence is evident, patrons' urgent psychosocial needs often demand substantial energy and time which library staff are unable to give to other patrons (Torrey, Esposito, and Geller 2009).

As socioeconomic conditions of both local communities and the broader society continue to evolve and periodically decline, as with the advent of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic (Amadasun 2020), library staff are not trained to address the complex psychosocial needs of many patrons (Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher 2012; Aykanian et al. 2020; Morgan et al. 2018; Williams 2016; Wray 2009). In fact, high patron psychosocial needs may impact libraries' ability to retain staff (Aykanian et al. 2020, Soska and Navarro 2020; Westbrook 2015; Wilkins Jordan 2014; Williams 2016; Zettervall and Nienow 2019).

Social Work/Public Library Partnerships

To meet these patron needs, many libraries are adding on-site social workers (Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher 2012; Aykanian et al. 2020; Soska and Navarro 2020; Williams 2016; Wray 2009; Zettervall and Nienow 2019), hiring patrons who previously experienced homelessness to serve as peer navigators (Badalamenti 2019; Kritz 2017), or are contracting with social service providers in the community (Aykanian et al. 2020; Schweizer 2018; Soska and Navarro 2020; Zettervall and Nienow 2019). One rapidly increasing form of social work and public library partnership, perhaps favored due to its low cost, is for libraries to host on-site social work practicum placements (Aykanian et al. 2020; Cuseglio 2020; Johnson 2019, 2021; Soska and

Navarro 2020). There are now approximately 100 public libraries serving as practicum

placements for undergraduate and graduate social work students (Zettervall 2021), a number

consistently increasing every year.

Public Library/Social Work Practicum Placements

Because of the growth in library-based social work practicum placements, there is recent

literature detailing the types of activities social work students can do in library spaces and the

mutual perceived benefits of placements for both the library and the learning experience of the

student. In their analysis of initial library placements, Aykanian et al. (2020) note that early

social work student practicum experiences commonly involve activities falling into five general

categories: (a) assessment, case management, and referrals; (b) community engagement and

mapping of assets, anchors, and challenges; (c) program enhancement or development; (d)

targeted community outreach; and (e) facilitating mutual aid support groups. In addition to these

activities, many interns conduct needs assessments of their library's patrons and staff (Johnson

2021), which have proven to be a crucial method for identifying and addressing the central

concerns of all parties (Pavlik 2019; Provence et al. 2020; Soska and Navarro 2020; Wahler et al.

2019) since the needs of individual libraries and communities naturally vary. Needs assessments

can inform interns about what forms of professional training would be relevant to the library

staff, while also enhancing outreach to patrons at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels (Johnson

2019, 2021; Soska and Navarro 2020).

Tasks such as those listed above have simultaneously provided social work students with

real-world experience and enabled libraries to gather important information regarding their

community members' struggles (Pavlik 2019). Social work practicum placements also offer

students an opportunity for both civic engagement and contribution toward institutional change

(Aykanian et al. 2020), specifically for individuals who are often systemically overlooked, disregarded, or oppressed. However, despite some early literature about the activities of library-based social work students, no known literature exists instructing libraries exactly how to initiate these placements.

In summary, public libraries face challenges in meeting patron needs since these needs have increased and changed over the years (Anderson, Simpson, and Fisher 2012; Westbrook 2015; Williams 2016; Wray 2009). Social work partnerships, particularly social work practicum placements, have been one cost-effective way that libraries can attempt to address patron needs (Aykanian et al. 2020; Cuseglio 2020; Johnson 2019, 2021; Zettervall and Nienow 2019). However, there is little information published to facilitate libraries with their initial social work practicum placement and adequately prepare both the student and library staff for this collaboration. Thus, this paper offers guidance for libraries desiring to host their initial social work practicum student.

Social Work Practicum Requirements

To conceptualize and design a library-based social work practicum placement, it is essential for libraries to first understand the requirements of social work practicums in general. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredits social work programs in the United States and establishes the standards and expectations for social work education, including field placements. Social work is considered a competency-based profession and education programs are required to design a curriculum that prepares students to demonstrate the following nine competencies (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] 2015, 6):

1. Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior
2. Engage diversity and difference in practice

3. Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice

4. Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice

5. Engage in policy practice

6. Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

7. Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

8. Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

9. Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

Although these competencies are consistent across undergraduate and graduate programs, their applications differ at each educational level. Undergraduate programs are generalist programs which prepare students to "use a range of prevention and intervention methods in their practice with diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities" and "practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels" (CSWE 2015, 11). In contrast, master's level social work programs "build on generalist practice… adapting and extending the Social Work Competencies for practice with a specific population, problem area, method of intervention, perspective or approach to practice" (CSWE 2015, 12). In practice, this means the first part of a master's program is spent learning about generalist practice and the latter is spent applying those skills, knowledge, and behaviors to a more advanced or specialized area of practice. Some master's level programs have special focus areas or concentrations, such as clinical/mental health, substance use disorders, child welfare, or other areas of specialized practice; others are advanced generalist programs which prepare students to work across a variety of populations and client needs. Because of these differences, expectations and required learning activities of practicum students vary at the two levels of education and between the generalist and specialized practicum at the graduate level. Public libraries are typically viewed as generalist placements due to their

focus on serving the public and the variety of needs which arise. Additionally, students can typically practice skills at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in a library setting as required for generalist practice (Johnson 2019, 2021).

According to CSWE (2015), fieldwork is considered the "signature pedagogy" of social work education (12). Placed in various community organizations, students have an opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge and practice skills in a real-world setting and receive constructive supervision to further meet the required social work competencies. Although individual schools of social work can set higher requirements, the minimum expectations for hours spent in a practicum are 400 hours at the bachelor's level and 900 hours split between two different placements (one at the generalist level and one in the area of specialized practice) at the master's level. While in practicum, students must have a qualified social work supervisor ("field instructor") but may also have a non-social work supervisor. Because there are typically not social workers in most library settings, libraries should be prepared to assign a library "task supervisor" and consult with the school of social work to determine who will provide the required social work supervision. These two supervisors would then collaborate to assist the assigned student with gaining and applying social work skills within the mission and guidelines of the library.

Initiating the Student Placement

Many library-based social work placements are initiated by the library (Johnson 2019), although some may be initiated by the school of social work or the student themselves. If initiating a social work placement, libraries should begin by contacting a field coordinator at a local school of social work. If the school's website does not clearly indicate who is the field

coordinator, the library should start with a program director and/or dean and ask to be connected to someone working with the field placement process.

Regardless of whether the library initiates the placement or it is initiated elsewhere, the library administrator should consult with the social work field coordinator prior to the placement to understand:

1. How to begin negotiating the "affiliation agreement" which is required by universities for organizations hosting students in internships or practicum placements before a student can be placed in your library. This is a legal agreement that states the distinct obligations of the library and the school of social work. It is often created for clinical environments so many libraries have to request changes in language due to their non-clinical environment. In the authors' experience, this negotiation process usually involves attorneys on behalf of both parties and can take weeks or months depending on the size of the university and the speed of legal review process. It is important to initiate these steps as early as possible to avoid delaying a student placement.

2. The required learning objectives and/or activities students need to complete in a field placement. Advance awareness of these objectives can help the library consider possible activities students can conduct at the branch. Know that the student(s) themselves will be responsible for collaborating with their library supervisor to design the specifics of their learning plan, as long as the intended activities meet the broad learning goals and help students demonstrate the required social work competencies.

3. The duration and time of year students can be placed in the library. Some schools place students year-round at the library while others only place students one or two times per year. Gaps in student coverage impact the type of services that can be provided and should be considered in advance.

Preparing for the Student Placement

Preparing staff. While negotiating and consulting with the field coordinator, library administrators should begin preparing staff and the library space for the practicum student. This includes discussing the pending placement with staff and addressing concerns they have about hosting a social work student. In general, most staff are amenable to social work partnerships, although some staff may feel these partnerships are beyond the role and responsibility of the library (Wahler et al. 2019). Thus, it is essential for library administrators to facilitate conversations with staff that openly acknowledge the struggles of the library in meeting patron needs, reasons why the administrators and/or staff desire a partnership, and collective hopes for the partnership's outcomes. Additionally, library staff may feel unclear about their expected role with patrons' psychosocial needs, requiring library administrators to clarify expectations for library staff in contrast to expectations of the proposed social work practicum student. In the authors' experience, it can be helpful for library staff to understand existing models of social work partnerships and ways that social workers can provide services in a library without making the library a clinical site or duplicating other community services. Staff who are hesitant to have social work students on site are often concerned about mission creep, when in reality a social work student typically focuses on conducting a needs assessment, providing information and referrals for patrons, staff training and capacity building, and crisis intervention. It is also helpful for staff to understand the existing gaps in resources and societal shifts which affect community

members experiencing homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, or mental illness (and subsequent increases in patrons with such challenges who are using the library). There are webinars available on Niche Academy (n.d.) about social work and public library partnerships that can be helpful for preparing staff. When staff better grasp the services social work students can provide, they typically welcome the student and are relieved to have this kind of assistance with the psychosocial needs of patrons.

Planning logistics of the placement. Prior to having a student begin the placement, the library should consider logistical needs such as identifying a confidential space for the student to meet with patrons and ensuring access to a phone and computer. Libraries should prioritize student safety when determining the location or availability of private space; although it is ideal to have a location where others cannot hear the discussion, the space should not be so removed that the student could inadvertently be at risk or unable to easily access assistance if needed. In addition, the library should determine where records may be kept in advance of being assigned a student. Libraries and social workers have different requirements regarding record-keeping; although public libraries prefer not to retain private or confidential information about their patrons, social workers and social work students are required to keep records about individuals with whom they work. Navigating this difference requires forethought and creativity. In one of the authors' locations, the university created a HIPAA-compliant, protected drive on which the students could save documentation about their clients due to the library's policy about maintaining records on-site. Due to the time involved in solving some of these challenges, it is best to collaborate with the field coordinator and problem-solve this documentation issue prior to the student beginning a practicum in the library.

Selecting the Student

  Interview process. Typically, potential students are put in contact with library administrators for a formal interview prior to finalizing a placement. Library staff or administrators should collaborate with the field coordinator to determine exactly how student resumés will be received and referred for interviews since different schools have various selection processes and timelines. During the interview, the library should be open about what they hope to gain from having a practicum student, challenges the student may face, and how the library will attempt to support them so the student can have a realistic understanding of the opportunity. The library should discuss their mission and values and ask students to identify and consider potential conflicts or points of tension between social work and public library work. The library should also ask prospective practicum students about their experiences, training, and preparation for the practicum and their knowledge base of community resources.

  Ideal practicum students. The ideal students for library-based placements are individuals who have some prior work experience with mental illness, substance use and misuse, homelessness, and/or poverty and an awareness of primary community resources for related patron needs. Additionally, the student should desire a generalist placement and understand they will not be diagnosing or conducting clinical interventions in the library. Although most social work placements are positive experiences for all involved, the authors are aware of a failed library-based placement with a student who had difficulty working in a non-clinical environment and repeatedly crossed boundaries with patrons and record-keeping requirements established by the library. Despite multiple attempts to problem solve and assist the student with understanding appropriate limits of the placement, this placement did not succeed due to the misalignment between the library setting and the student's goals and subsequent behaviors.

Beginning the Placement

   Orientation. Orientation is essential to a successful field placement. On the student's first day, the library should ensure the student knows who will be their primary library contact/on-site supervisor. Practicum students often collaborate with multiple library staff and administrators, may sometimes receive conflicting advice from different staff members, and may be confused if this is not clarified from the beginning. This single point-person should also serve as the primary contact for the social work supervisor if questions or issues arise that require supervision or consultation from both individuals. The library point-person should also ensure they have the name and contact information for the identified social work supervisor, so the two supervisors can remain in regular contact with one another throughout the student's placement.

   In the beginning of the placement, the library should provide relevant material or information to the student that helps orient them to the library's context and values. For example, annual reports or other information about the local library and community context could be helpful. Additionally, existing articles on library-based social work placements, patrons' psychosocial needs, or resources about library and social work collaborations in general should be provided to students and read as part of the student's orientation to the placement.

   The learning plan. Students must develop a formal learning plan to guide their activities over the practicum placement and ensure these activities help address the competencies required of social work education (CSWE, 2015). The student's library supervisor should be prepared to collaborate with the student to plan the specific learning activities, with guidance from the social work supervisor. For generalist placements, students need to determine activities they can do at the micro (individual), mezzo (group), and macro (organizational) levels. Adapted from

Aykanian et al. (2020), Johnson (2019), and Zettervall and Nienow (2019), examples of common learning plan activities for each level include:

    a. Micro: Patron resource information and referrals, advocacy, crisis intervention

    b. Mezzo: Programming for patrons, non-clinical/mutual aid support groups, book groups focused on trauma, family issues, or health or mental health problems

    c. Macro: Library needs assessments, staff training

If working with individual patrons is part of the student's plan, the library should understand that students may not begin this until after the first few weeks of the placement. At first, they may be familiarizing themselves with community resources, the library's mission and goals, and information about social work/library partnerships. These types of orientation activities must occur before commencing work with patrons, so students have the necessary information to adequately respond to patron needs. Because patrons and staff may rush to meet with the social work student once they become aware this person is on-site, it's preferable for libraries to wait to advertise the student's services until they have completed their orientation. This timeline for orientation and meeting with patrons or staff should be planned in advance with the social work supervisor.

As part of the learning plan, the student may need to conduct a needs assessment and/or a policy analysis and might be asked to make suggestions for the library based on their perspective. For this process, the library should remain open and receptive to the feedback, but also be prepared to explain their perspective if the student's recommendations seem inappropriate or unrealistic. In order for the practicum to be a true collaboration between the library and student, this requires open communication about the views and perspectives of both sides.

Ongoing Supervision of the Student

Regular communication throughout the practicum placement is essential for the student's learning experience and for the library to benefit fully from the practicum placement. Social work students will be required to meet regularly with their social work and library supervisors to get feedback and guidance about the quality of their work and supervision with day-to-day activities. The student's library supervisor should remember throughout the student's practicum placement that the librarian's expertise in the field of library and information science is necessary for a successful learning experience, even if that person has limited knowledge of social work. The library supervisor should feel empowered to make decisions, create boundaries around the partnership or the work of the student, clarify roles, and problem-solve as needed. They should communicate with the student and their social work supervisor if problems arise and should work as a team to ensure the practicum meets the library's needs as much as the student's learning requirements.

Evaluation

To ensure a satisfactory placement for the student and the library, and most importantly to ensure benefits of the social work placement for the library's patrons, the library and the student should be prepared to periodically evaluate the practicum activities and the student's performance while making adjustments as needed to meet needs of both the library and patrons. During initial practicum placements, adjustments are often necessary. The library supervisor and the student should develop metrics for measuring impact of the placement on the library staff and patrons. These metrics can be output measures like the number of patrons seen, the number of referrals made for patrons to community partners, or the number of patron or staff workshops conducted,

or outcome-related metrics such as how satisfied patrons or staff feel with the student's services or whether or not patrons experience a reduction in their overall psychosocial needs.

Conclusion

Social work practicum placements in public libraries are steadily increasing in the United States. The guidelines mentioned here can help libraries navigate steps to successfully initiate new placements and supervise practicum students in their space. Many libraries and schools of social work are needlessly "reinventing the wheel" when beginning nascent library-based social work student placements. With preparation, flexibility, and open communication between the library, student, and the school of social work, such placements can have a substantial impact on the library, its staff, and patrons while providing a rich learning experience for a budding social worker.

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