Results from the 2022 Needs Assessment
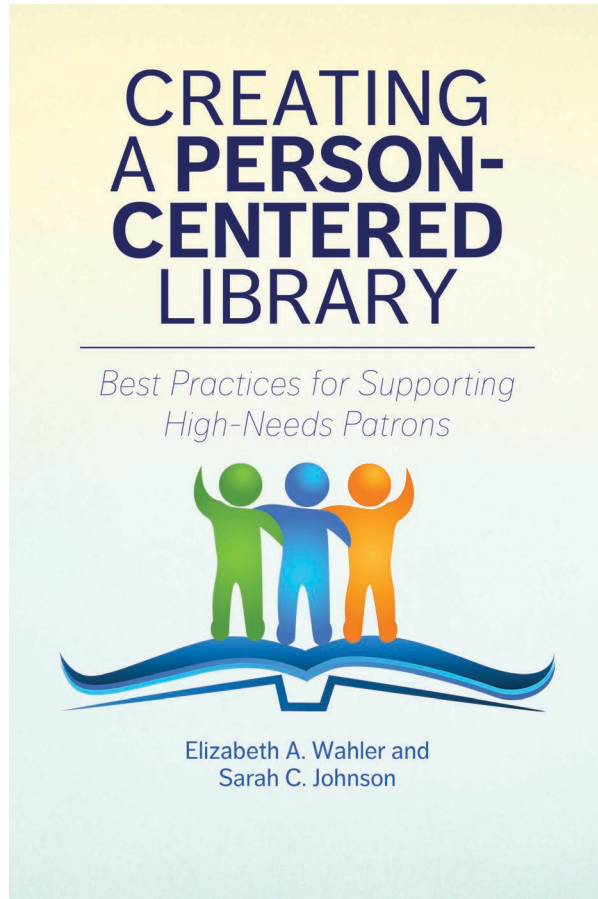## Iowa Public Libraries

Presented by Beth Wahler, PhD, MSW
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Founder/Owner, Beth Wahler Consulting

About Me

- Social work practice experience with poverty-related needs, substance use disorders, mental health, and other barriers to economic stability and mobility

- Social work education and administrative experience

- Experience with social work in public libraries

- Research focused on public library patrons' psychosocial needs, library staff needs, and social work/public library collaborations to address these needs

- Consulting business focused on individual library needs assessments, library-based social service program design/development, program evaluation, and training/professional development

Forthcoming Book

CREATING
A **PERSON-
CENTERED**
LIBRARY

*Best Practices for Supporting
High-Needs Patrons*

Elizabeth A. Wahler and
Sarah C. Johnson

- Published by Libraries Unlimited
- Coming in September 2023
- Focuses on library programming, services, and collaborations for supporting high-needs patrons
- Addresses common challenges to this work and how to overcome them
- Also includes information about organizational and administrative practices for supporting staff with this work
- Features libraries from around the country, including several from Iowa

Objectives

In this presentation, I will cover:

- Background information about why the needs assessment was requested

- Purpose of the 2022 State Library of Iowa public library needs assessment

- Results

- Recommendations and next steps

Psychosocial Needs- Definition

- Any psychological or social/environmental factor associated with chronic stress or strain or poor health outcomes in general populations:
  - Social isolation
  - Mental health problems
  - Substance abuse
  - Poverty-related needs:
    - Housing instability
    - Food insecurity
    - Difficulty with transportation
    - Financial needs
- "High needs patrons" are individuals who have multiple areas of psychosocial need

Psychosocial Needs of Patrons

- Psychosocial needs of public library patrons have been increasing in recent decades
- Top areas of patron need (Pressley, 2017; Provence, et al., 2021; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler et al., 2021)
    - Homelessness or unsafe/unstable housing
    - Mental health challenges
    - Substance use/overdose
    - Poverty-related needs
- Areas of need vary based on housing status (Provence et al. 2021; Wahler et al., in press)
- These needs are expected to continue increasing due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hertz-Palmor et al., 2021; Horowitz et al., 2021; NAEH, 2020)

*Most needs assessments reported in the literature are from urban or suburban libraries. More systematic research needs to be conducted with rural libraries because the frequency of these needs varies in rural versus urban/suburban areas.

Local and National Barriers Impacting Libraries

- Growth in the number of people experiencing homelessness and/or chronic mental illness.
- Shortages of mental health treatment, emergency housing, and other supportive services
- Increasing costs of living and stagnant wages
- Increasing municipal statutes that criminalize homelessness
- Increase in poverty-related needs, both pre-COVID and now
- In Iowa:
  - Inadequate health and mental healthcare for the need and the population
  - Insufficient affordable housing options

Strained Library Staff

- Libraries are feeling the strain
  - Staff are not often trained or qualified to assist with these levels of need (Anderson et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2018)
  - Staff sometimes feel conflicted about their role with these needs (Wahler et al., 2019)
  - Patrons with these needs often take more time for staff, stretching them too thin or causing difficulty in meeting needs of all patrons (Soska & Navarro, 2020; Torrey et al., 2009; Wilkins Jordan, 2014)
  - Violence occurs in many libraries, and some staff fear for their safety or the safety of other patrons due to patron behaviors (Anderson, 2018; Clark, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009, Urban Librarians Unite, 2022)
  - Some libraries have to frequently call police or for emergency assistance

Library Worker Trauma

- Front-line library workers from all types of libraries (urban, suburban, and rural) report high rates of trauma from workplace incidents
  - Verbal abuse
  - Physical aggression and attacks
  - Threats of violence

- These incidents have increased since the COVID pandemic began
- Some library staff experience symptoms of PTSD or experience worsening of a pre-existing mental health condition

(Fisher, 2022, Urban Librarians Unite, 2022)

Covid-Related Changes

- Less patron interaction overall
- More focused on enforcing COVID-related restrictions
- Addressing more patron mental health problems, poverty-related needs, and other psychosocial needs
- Handling more patron-related behavioral issues
- Increased emphasis on curbside services or creating virtual/remote programming

(Wahler et al., 2022)

Social Work in the Library

- There's a growing movement to partner social work services with public libraries across the US and Canada (see Anderson et al., 2012; Aykanian et al. 2020; Johnson, 2019; Johnson, 2021; Soska & Navarro, 2020; Williams, 2016; Wray, 2009; Zettervall & Nienow, 2019)

- Social workers work on the "macro," "mezzo," and "micro" level with libraries

- Library/social work collaborations can:
  - Help with staff support and wellness
  - Reduce security interactions/calls to police
  - Reduce the number of patrons being barred from the library
  - Increase patron access to community services for their needs
  - Help the library offer programming for patrons' psychosocial needs
  - Increase collaborations between the library and other organizations

- Hearing your concerns locally and knowing some of the national library trends, the State Library of Iowa wanted to learn how they could help.

- They wanted to:
  - Gather data about statewide challenges with serving patrons with psychosocial needs, specifically exploring differences between rural and urban libraries
  - Assess interest in or readiness for various models of social service/library collaborations
  - Understand training needs or other resources that could help
  - Make data-informed decisions about next steps to better support the state's library workforce

STATE LIBRARY OF IOWA

2022 Needs Assessment Iowa Public Libraries

- Funded through American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds
- Designed to focus on staff perceptions of patron psychosocial needs, assess gaps in the ability to meet those needs, consider rural vs. urban differences, and result in recommendations for ways the State Library could support Iowa public libraries with these needs
- Advisory Team from the State Library:
  - Michael Scott, Brenda Hall, Angela Forret (Marie Harms was part of the group until her retirement in March 2022)
- Three phases:
  - Survey of library staff (n = 368) from across Iowa (February/March)
  - Visits to a sample of libraries (n= 13), some rural and some urban, in all six library districts (May)
  - Focus groups (11 groups) with 41 library directors, separated by library district (June)
- Final report and recommendations provided to the State Library in September 2022

Phase One- Survey of Staff

Staff Survey Results- Participant Demographics

Demographic Category	Frequency/Percentage
Public Facing	
Yes	357 (97%)
No	11 (3%)
Community Classification	
Rural	230 (62.8%)
Suburban	57 (15.6%)
Urban	79 (21.6%)
Iowa Library District	
Central	85 (23.3%)
North Central	55 (15.1%)
Northeast	71 (19.5%)
Northwest	60 (16.4%)
Southeast	55 (15.1%)
Southwest	38 (10.4%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Unmet Patron Needs

Identified Need	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Financial needs	253 (68.9%)	70 (88.6%)	35 (61.4%)	148 (64.3%)
Mental health	247 (67.3%)	73 (92.4%)	32 (56.1%)	142 (61.7%)
Technology (access to or education about)	196 (53.4%)	54 (68.4%)	4 (59.6%)	108 (47.0%)
Affordable/stable housing	194 (52.9%)	63 (79.7%)	29 (50.9%)	102 (44.3%)
Employment	186 (50.7%)	55 (69.6%)	30 (52.6%)	101 (43.9%)
Substance use	172 (46.9%)	65 (82.3%)	23 (40.4%)	84 (36.5%)
Behavior problems or correction (manners)	172 (46.9%)	53 (67.1%)	22 (38.6%)	97 (42.2%)
Food/nutrition	165 (45.0%)	54 (68.4%)	27 (47.4%)	84 (36.5%)
Childcare assistance	161 (43.9%)	46 (58.2%)	24 (42.1%)	91 (39.6%)
Medical or health-related	159 (43.3%)	48 (60.1%)	23 (40.4%)	88 (38.3%)
Transportation	152 (41.4%)	51 (64.6%)	29 (50.9%)	72 (31.3%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Unmet Patron Needs

Identified Need	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Safe activities for children	150 (40.9%)	35 (44.3%)	23 (40.4%)	92 (40.0%)
Hygiene	148 (40.3%)	59 (74.7%)	21 (36.8%)	68 (29.6%)
Social connection/isolation	148 (40.3%)	38 (48.1%)	23 (40.4%)	87 (37.8%)
Entertainment	132 (36.0%)	29 (36.7%)	20 (35.1%)	83 (36.1%)
Parenting assistance	123 (33.6%)	38 (48.1%)	26 (45.6%)	59 (25.7%)
Education or literacy-related	104 (28.3%)	38 (48.1%)	18 (31.6%)	48 (20.9%)
Anger management/conflict resolution	100 (27.2%)	44 (55.7%)	17 (29.8%)	39 (17.0%)
Immigration or ESL-related	98 (26.7%)	46 (58.2%)	20 (35.1%)	32 (13.9%)
Physical needs (related to a disability or physical ability)	94 (25.6%)	38 (48.1%)	15 (26.3%)	41 (17.8%)
Relationship issues	81 (22.1%)	31 (39.2%)	6 (10.5%)	44 (19.1%)
Clothing	78 (21.3%)	39 (49.4%)	8 (14.0%)	31 (13.5%)
Intimate partner violence	64 (17.4%)	32 (40.5%)	8 (14.0%)	24 (10.4%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Patron Needs Causing Stress

Identified Need	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Mental health	186 (50.7%)	59 (74.7%)	25 (43.9%)	102 (44.3%)
Behavior problems or correction (manners)	142 (38.7%)	40 (50.6%)	18(31.6%)	84 (36.5%)
Substance abuse	105(28.6%)	48 (60.8%)	13 (22.8%)	44 (19.1%)
Technology (access to or education about)	93 (25.3%)	13 (16.5%)	14 (24.6%)	66 (28.7%)
Hygiene (supplies, place to clean up, etc.)	68 (18.5%)	22 (27.8%)	7 (12.3%)	39 (17.0%)
Anger management/conflict resolution	66 (18.0%)	31 (39.2%)	13 (22.8%)	22 (9.6%)
Financial problems	61 (16.6%)	13 (16.5%)	7 (12.3%)	41 (17.8%)
Affordable/stable housing	56 (15.3%)	26 (32.9%)	8 (14.0%)	22 (9.6%)
Safe activities for children	53 (14.4%)	4 (5.1%)	8 (14.0%)	41 (17.8%)
Social connection/isolation	51 (13.9%)	10 (12.7%)	9 (15.8%)	32 (13.9%)
Childcare assistance	49 (13.4%)	12 (15.2%)	7 (12.3%)	30 (13.0%)
Employment	39 (10.6%)	10 (12.7%)	9 (15.8%)	20 (8.7%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Violence

Staff Experiences of Violence at the Library

	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Yes	136 (48.4%)	50 (63.3%)	25 (43.9%)	61 (26.5%)
No	145 (51.6%)	13 (16.5%)	16 (28.1%)	116 (50.4%)

Staff Fear of Violence at the Library

	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Very fearful	11 (3.9%)	7 (8.9%)	2 (3.5%)	2 (0.1%)
Somewhat fearful	145 (51.6%)	40 (50.1%)	25 (43.9%)	80 (34.8%)
Not fearful at all	125 (44.5%)	7 (8.9%)	14 (24.6%)	95 (41.3%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Responsibility of the Library to Provide Information

Question: In your opinion, how much responsibility do public libraries have to provide the following types of information:	Average 1=None at all 2= A little 3 = A moderate amount 4 = A lot 5 = A great deal	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Information about poverty-related community agencies	3.83	4.42	4.07	3.57
Information about common mental health problems	3.49	3.89	3.56	3.34
Information about substance abuse problems	3.40	3.85	3.51	3.21
Information about common medical problems	3.32	3.61	3.38	3.20

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Responsibility of the Library to Offer Services

Question: In your opinion, how much responsibility do public libraries have to offer the following types of services:	Average 1=None at all 2= A little 3 = A moderate amount 4 = A lot 5 = A great deal	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Referrals to community resources (such as those for mental health, substance abuse, or health problems)	3.74	4.06	4.00	3.56
Assistance applying for public benefits (food stamps, health insurance, or social security)	2.92	3.29	3.19	2.73
Hygiene items for people who are experiencing homelessness or poverty	2.14	2.26	2.31	2.05
Winter items for people who are experiencing homelessness or poverty (coats, gloves, hats, etc.)	2.13	2.23	2.29	2.07
Free food for people who are experiencing homelessness or poverty	2.13	2.11	2.21	2.13

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Responsibility of the Library to Provide Programming

Question: In your opinion, how much responsibility do public libraries have to provide the following types of programming:	Average 1=None at all 2= A little 3 = A moderate amount 4 = A lot 5 = A great deal	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Workshops on community resources	3.30	3.52	3.52	3.17
Workshops on how to access public benefits	3.09	3.32	3.21	2.98
Workshops on budgeting or finances	2.88	3.02	3.07	2.78
Workshops on mental health problems	2.69	2.86	2.81	2.59
Workshops on common medical problems	2.56	2.56	2.57	2.56
Workshops on substance abuse problems	2.59	2.76	2.64	2.52
Support groups	2.59	2.64	2.48	2.61

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Responsibility of the Library to Allow Activities

Question: In your opinion, how much responsibility do public libraries have to allow the following types of activities:	Average 1=None at all 2= A little 3 = A moderate amount 4 = A lot 5 = A great deal	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Community agencies to use library facilities for pre-scheduled meetings with their clients	3.67	3.97	3.57	3.59
Poverty or homelessness-related agencies to come in the library for outreach services to their clients	3.56	4.06	3.67	3.35
People who are experiencing homelessness to use the library to stay warm in the winter or cool in the summer	3.51	4.11	3.76	3.24
People who are experiencing homelessness to use the library bathrooms for washing/hygiene	2.65	2.67	2.76	2.62
People who are experiencing homelessness to nap (in a chair) in the library	2.45	2.35	2.57	2.46

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)-
Opinions of Who Should Provide Nontraditional Services

Provider	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Partnerships with external community agencies	255 (69.5%)	63 (79.7%)	39 (68.4%)	153 (66.5%)
Social service professional(s) hired by the library	128 (60.9%)	50 (63.3%)	27 (47.4%)	51 (22.2%)
Trained librarians or other library staff	81 (34.99%)	20 (25.3%)	13 (22.8%)	48 (20.9%)
None of the above – These services or programs should not be provided in or by a public library	23 (6.27%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.5%)	21 (9.1%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)

- Many Iowa libraries are already offering programming/services for some of these patron needs. The most common were:
  - Technology (34.06%)
  - Safe activities for children (31.88%)
  - Employment (18.80%)
  - Education/literacy-related- (17.71%)
  - Food/nutrition (14.17%)
  - Financial needs (11.99%)
  - Immigration or ESL-related (10.35%)

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Barriers

- Lack of funding
- Lack of space
- Staffing challenges/difficulty covering current services and programming
- Lack of expertise in these areas
- Stigma in your community about these issues
- Fear that services to address psychosocial needs will attract more high-needs patrons
- Lack of support from city leaders or from library administration/board
- Concern about duplicating services with existing community orgs
- Lack of community partners with which to partner
- Limited library hours
- Don't have many patrons with these needs
- Perception that these services are not part of the library's mission

Staff Survey Results (N = 368)- Willingness to Attend Training

Training Topic	Frequency/ Percentage	Urban (79)	Suburban (57)	Rural (230)
Community resources	223 (60.8%)	43 (54.4%)	34 (59.6%)	146 (63.5%)
De-escalation training	201 (54.8%)	51 (64.6%)	31 (54.4%)	119 (51.7%)
Mental health issues	196 (53.4%)	45 (57.0%)	25 (43.9%)	126 (54.8%)
Substance abuse	145 (39.5%)	39 (49.4%)	19 (33.3%)	87 (37.8%)
Violence prevention	135 (36.8%)	34 (43.0%)	24 (42.1%)	77 (33.5%)
Poverty	131 (35.7 %)	31 (39.2%)	18 (31.6%)	82 (35.7%)
Homelessness	110 (30.1%)	35 (44.3%)	18 (31.6%)	57 (24.8%)
Health problems	97 (26.4%)	19 (24.1%)	10 (17.5%)	68 (29.6%)
Intimate partner violence	83 (22.6%)	24 (30.4%)	11 (19.3%)	48 (20.9%)

Phase Two- Visits

Themes from Visits (n = 13)

- Expressed appreciation for the State Library's interest in this issue and desire to help
- Administrators expressed concern with how best to support their staff, retain them, and keep them safe (concerned about physical and psychological safety)
- Staff expressed stress, burnout, and psychological distress from the work and sometimes reported unhealthy coping mechanisms
- Participants reported few available mental health supports ("We are here to help everyone else, but who is here to help us?")
- Many libraries struggled with developing long-term partnerships with community agencies and/or universities to help address patron and staff needs
- Many participants had heard about social work in the library but were unsure how to develop partnerships that would work in their own regions or local areas.

Phase Three- Focus Groups with Directors

Focus Group Results (11 groups/41 directors)

- Half had tried a previous social service collaboration, although many experienced barriers to these.

- Many were interested in having social workers in their library for the following services:
  - Directly serving patrons with psychosocial needs
  - Providing training to staff on crisis de-escalation and how to work with high-needs patrons
  - Being available for consultation as needed

- Many directors were interested in technical support for developing successful collaborations

Focus Group Results (11 groups/41 directors)

- How the State Library could help:
  - Conducting a statewide analysis of resources and creating an easily accessible database
  - Providing training for public library staff on working with patrons who have psychosocial needs (either through contracting with a training or establishing a statewide partnerships with large social services organizations or a university)
  - Developing an endorsement/certification program for library workers and administrators regarding serving high-need patrons
  - Creating talking points or providing information to be used at the local level to develop collaborations with community providers or get buy-in from their boards or local city/county administrators
  - Providing info about various models of social work/library collaborations to inform local decision-making
  - Providing draft language for collaborative agreements or MOU's that could be locally modified
  - Disseminating info about grants and potential funding sources for social service programming/services

Recommendations and Next Steps

Recommendations

1. Training and information for staff and administrators about:
   - Mental health
   - Working with and de-escalating patrons in crisis
   - Accessing community resources
   - Developing effective collaborations and community partnerships

   Administrator training could also include:
   - Examples of successful social service/library collaborations, particularly examples of collaborations that have worked well in small or rural libraries as well as urban and suburban ones
   - Talking points for administrators trying to increase buy-in with local decision-makers about developing partnerships or hiring/contracting with social service providers
   - Templates for agreements with community partners that could be modified for their local areas

Recommendations

2. Support for staff mental health and well-being:
   - Support groups
   - Opportunities to practice reflective practice
   - Assistance processing work-related stress
   - Help increasing connecting with others doing the work

   Groups should be facilitated by a trained mental health provider, if resources allow

Next Steps

- The State Library and I are collaborating on the next steps
- Located a potential funding mechanism (IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program)
- Submitted a preliminary proposal in Fall 2022
- Were recently invited to submit a full proposal (due in March 2023)

Next Steps

- If funded, this 3-year project would allow us to:
  1. Create an online endorsement/certification program for library staff, including modules on trauma-informed librarianship, mental health, working with patrons in crisis, de-escalation, and self-care/resilience
  2. Create a separate online endorsement/certification program for library administrators, including all of the above plus
  3. Offer support groups for library staff, facilitated by a professional social work trained in contemporary public library challenges
  4. Conduct a formative evaluation to get ongoing feedback about how well these strategies are working
  5. Create a "toolkit" to disseminate nationally to other states/regions so these strategies can modified and replicated.
- Pending outcomes of this project, the State Library will explore funding to continue these components after the grant ends. The goal is for these to be sustainable long-term if successful.

Questions?

Thoughts/Concerns about the Plan?

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