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Connecting Individuals With Social Services: The Library's Role

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Abstract:

As a democratic and democratizing institution, libraries have a mission to connect the public with necessary information, as well as providing free and open access to the library for all citizens. As disadvantaged people become a core user base for libraries, some libraries have begun programs to connect these people with needed social services, which ties in with librarianship's value of promoting social justice. In the United States and Canada this has mostly been through the hiring of social workers or public health workers within public libraries, or through outreach and engagement programs focused on improving employment prospects for communities. While libraries work to become true community centers, can we expect to see more libraries connecting users with social services? And if so, how can they best accomplish this task? This paper will discuss the history of the trend and existing analysis from the perspective of librarianship and social service professionals. It will then explore current activities around the globe, discovered through surveys and interviews conducted by the author. Based on the history, existing analysis and current activities, the author will propose best practices for connecting disadvantaged library users with social services through the library.

Keywords: Libraries, Social Work, Social Services, Social Justice.

As a democratic and democratizing institution, libraries have a mission to connect the public with necessary information, as well as provide free and open access to the library for all citizens. As disadvantaged people such as homeless individuals, economically disadvantaged people, or those suffering from addiction or mental illness become a core user base for libraries, some libraries have begun programs to connect these people with needed social services, which ties in with librarianship's value of promoting social justice. In this paper, the term social services is used to refer to activities and resources usually provided by the

government to promote individual and community welfare, i.e. unemployment funds, food assistance, housing assistance, and the like. In the United States and Canada this has been conducted most actively through the hiring of social workers or public health workers within public libraries, or through outreach and engagement programs focused on improving employment prospects for communities. While libraries work to become true community centers, can we expect to see more libraries connecting their users with social services? And if so, how can they best accomplish this task? This paper will discuss the history of the trend and existing analysis from the perspective of librarianship and social service professionals. It will then explore current activities around the globe, discovered through surveys and interviews conducted by the author. Based on the history, existing analysis and current activities, the author will propose best practices for connecting disadvantaged library users with social services through the library.

Librarianship has begun a transformation from a profession concerned primarily with providing access to, storage of and protection of information resources to a profession with an ultimate goal of promoting libraries as community centers connecting people with needed information. Forward-looking works such as R. David Lankes' *Atlas of New Librarianship* connect library workers with the basics of the profession, such as S. R. Raganathan's Five Laws of Library Science, in a modern world, and offer the prescription for libraries to maintain relevance and further their professional mission by facilitating conversation within their communities (Lankes, 2011). One basic connection for our profession is the concept that libraries are intended to provide equitable and open access to information. This democratizing mission provides libraries with a point of entry into social services, as information about available services and how to procure them is very much in need for many of our users.

According to the American National Association of Social Workers website, their members have a primary mission to “enhance human wellbeing and help meet basic human needs of all people with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2008). The International Federation of Social Work states that the definition of social work, in part, “engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing” (IFSW, 2014). This mission and definition ties in well with the core values of librarianship as enumerated by the American Library Association, especially with regard to the values of social responsibility, diversity, the public good and democracy (ALA, 2006). Moreover, libraries’ mission to provide information and social work’s mission to meet basic human needs also ties in well with Article 19 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights which guarantees the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (United Nations, 1948), and which is one of the core values of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA, 2015).

In the words of one of the librarians I surveyed, “Our two libraries are community hubs—free and open to anyone. People feel comfortable coming into the library to ask for information and our team is welcoming, non-judgmental and informative. Providing access to social services benefits individual community members and the community as a whole.” This is the developing mission of libraries in action—forming connections within the community as a basis of what we do. Another stated, “In my opinion, libraries offer a first place for raising awareness about social services...if libraries offered this awareness-raising to their users about social services from their libraries, they contribute in building a better world.” A third said, “The main goal is to create the social network, to bring people together...”

With the evolution of libraries from warehouses of resources to facilitators of connections to information comes an increased and long overdue openness to libraries' serving individuals regardless of socioeconomic status. For example, once shunned from libraries in the United States and Canada, homeless library patrons are now seen by many libraries as a service group to be reached out toward. News reports and professional literature and presentations from many cities across the U.S. and Canada laud programs such as the ones discussed below as an attempt to address social inequity. As socioeconomic inequity grows more pronounced worldwide (UN-Habitat, 2008), libraries can use their democratizing mission to provide equal access to information to help promote social justice by connecting users with information about and access to social welfare programs.

I note that information about libraries and programs outside the United States and Canada was challenging for this Montana-based author to uncover. I sent out a survey and request for information to a few listservs run by IFLA as well as through my Facebook page and Twitter feed and received sixteen replies. Requests for information from the International Federation of Social Work went unacknowledged. I welcome continuing correspondence from and discussion with library workers worldwide to help better develop resources and best practices for our profession in this area.

As to what I learned from the responses to my survey, those sixteen responses were divided between nine libraries who did provide connections for their users to social services, and seven who did not. Those who did not provide connections felt for the most part that connecting library users to social services can be a part of a library's mission, two saying specifically that they considered the concept as they would any other request for information but did not see a need to do so specifically in their own personal libraries. One mentioned that it may be a relevant use of a library's building space to provide a physical meeting place for individuals to connect through appointments or public displays or presentations although their own particular library did not do so. More description of the offerings of the libraries that did connect users with social services are described below. Survey respondents were from the following nations:

- India
- United States (3)
- South Africa (2)
- Canada
- Spain
- Egypt
- United Kingdom
- Australia (2)
- Palestine
- Slovenia
- Lebanon

One respondent did not identify his or her location.

Current Activities Carried Out By Libraries

Current activities discovered by the author consisted mostly of two active approaches: providing services and outreach by library staff and connecting library users with external assistance from trained professionals. Many libraries also provide a passive approach by offering paper and/or electronic information about available social services; e.g., forms for nutrition benefits or signing up for unemployment. Nearly all my survey respondents that provide connections fit into this more passive group, other than two libraries highlighted below. A rising blend of the two active approaches consists of the library in question hiring professional social work staff.

Many public libraries in the U.S. and Canada actively reach out to disadvantaged populations, most commonly the homeless. Several are outlined on the American Library Association's page describing model programs for homeless outreach (ALA, 2012). Some of the more interesting active approach concepts mentioned include:

- The Denver Public Library technology team visits the area day shelter for homeless and low-income women, where they offer instruction on job interviewing techniques and technology skills. Class participants receive bus tokens to go to the main library for a tour and to get library cards.
- New York's Queens Library provides outreach service to homeless shelters to promote the library's programs, events, and services. The library also highlights family offerings, children's programs, and job search help.

In the course of writing this paper, I heard from a library in Western Australia funded jointly by a government agency and a nonprofit organization with a focus on disability and autism. This library reaches out to affected individuals and their families along with those who work with people with disabilities or people with autism, in order to connect them with library collections as well as resources offered by the government or through other groups. I also heard from a library in Palestine that is funded by a non-profit association to connect children and young adults with services and information about social and cultural awareness in this part of the world, with a strong focus on protecting children and children's rights. Both of these libraries demonstrate approaches to issues outside of homelessness and poverty, but use similar outreach methods to directly connect their users to social services.

Of the second active approach, connecting library users with external assistance from trained professionals, perhaps the best developed and most well-known is the San Jose Public Library's Social Workers in the Library (SWITL) program. Launched in 2009, this program offers library users consultations with professional social workers by appointment, with a focus on delivering basic information to the patron in response to their needs. The program is promoted and facilitated by the library staff, but is not conducted by library staff. Twice a month, two or three social work professionals, which can also consist of students and faculty from nearby San Jose State University's School of Social Work, spend two hours at the library working with clients in 20 minute blocks. The schedule is arranged in advance by appointment. Both library workers and social workers find that this program furthers the social justice and democratizing mission of both professions. A research article evaluating the service's effectiveness showed high user satisfaction as well as appreciation from library staff for the service and a desire to market it more (Luo et. al, 2012).

Many libraries wishing to connect their patrons with resources on social services have come to the realization that professional social workers can best facilitate this connection due to their specialized training, and have begun to hire social workers rather than librarians in this role. Some have devoted library budgetary funds to these positions, but most rely upon grant funding at least initially to demonstrate the value, then must seek funds to continue the programs.

The pioneer in this area, at least in the United States, is the San Francisco Public Library, which in 2009 hired Leah Esguerra as a full time social worker on their staff, in partnership with the city's Department of Public Health. The goal was to reduce complaints about the homeless and/or drug-addicted patrons in the public library in addition to furthering the library and city's social justice mission. Part of Esguerra's program was to create 'health and safety associates'—formerly homeless individuals who undergo a 12-week vocational training provided by the library and are then hired for a 20-hour per week position performing tasks like monitoring the restrooms and offering assistance and advice to those found violating rules about bathing in the restrooms and the like (Knight, 2010). The program has been credited with the spread of social workers in many California libraries (Shafer, 2014).

The Edmonton (Canada) Public Library also has an outreach team headed up by a social worker, based on the San Francisco program, and focusing on supporting and empowering at-risk Edmontonians, targeting "individuals who may not access existing social services but do access libraries because they are safe and welcoming spaces" (EPL, 2015). This outreach team works both within and outside the library to provide connections for their patrons to social services, and credits the program with a drop in disruptive activities within the library as well as supporting the more commonly cited social justice mission (EPL, 2015). The program began in 2011 at the downtown branch but spread in early 2015 to four other branches, has provided over 6000 interactions with at-risk individuals, and is a large part of EPL's winning the Gale/Library Journal Library of the Year title in 2014 (Peet, 2014).

Outside the realm of social workers, the Pima County (Arizona) Library began its Library Nurse Program in 2012. Primarily hired to intervene in behavioral issues and crisis situations, several nurses were hired into a job share across several library branches. They walk the library wearing stethoscopes and offer patrons blood pressure checks as a way to enter into conversation about pressing health issues, including mental health, and refer patrons to outside resources and services as appropriate. In the first year of operation, the nurses tracked over 2000 interactions with patrons, and the libraries saw a 20% decrease in medical emergency services calls due to better awareness on both staff and library user parts on health issues (Johnson, 2014).

As a library director in an academic institution, I was somewhat surprised to see that very few academic libraries have any sort of organized outreach to or information provision for disadvantaged populations. While statistics on homelessness, poverty, and health concerns among university student populations can be harder to find, these conditions exist (Young, 2014). University libraries have been slower than other library types to turn away from the traditional role of libraries as information repository to development of a view of libraries as community center, so this may be part of the reason.

Another potential factor for the decreased outreach and awareness of these issues among libraries in higher education could be because most institutions of higher education already

provide outreach and awareness but through other outlets; i.e. campus health centers or financial aid offices. However, as a librarian at a two-year institution of higher education with a vocational focus, these other outlets can be harder to find at some schools than they are at more prestigious higher education institutions. Furthermore, students at vocational or technical schools may be more in need of connections to these services than those at a four-year university, due to lower socioeconomic status (Young, 2014).

The ability for students to stay enrolled in institutions of higher education is often tied to economic circumstances, particularly in nations where higher education institutions charge tuition to students. Even beyond tuition concerns, the costs of living for university students may be difficult to surmount, or other societal issues such as addiction or mental health may play a role in the ability to stay enrolled or succeed at university. This tie to student retention can demonstrate how important it is for campuses to connect students with needed social services, and for libraries looking to gain relevance on campuses without clear outlets connecting students with social services information, this can provide us with a valuable addition to our campus mission.

Recently published in *C&RL News* was a piece by an academic librarian, speaking to the sometimes invisible economic problems faced by university students. She gave a call for ‘microactivism’ by asking academic libraries to provide connection to community resources on hunger and homelessness as well as other socioeconomic issues, but also by asking library workers to speak up in instruction sessions and various committee meetings about issues of systemic oppression. Most of all, she asked for academic library workers to build support for this microactivism movement (Lockman, 2015).

External Barriers

When discussing libraries connecting users to social services provided by government agencies, it is important to recognize that not all governments provide easy access to social services. The concept of ‘governance’ as opposed to democratization may be an effective conceptual frame when we consider if and how libraries should connect their users with social services. Governance measures the performance of government and the delivery of services to the people by the government within a nation (Rotberg, 2015). A rising way of studying nations and their success, looking to the effectiveness of governance can help determine if and whether it would be in a library’s best interest to attempt to provide connections to social services. One of my survey respondents specifically mentioned the inability to trust equitable access to social services provided by the government as a reason that they choose not to connect their users with these services.

Another important outlet to consider, and one that ended up beyond the scope of this paper, is the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in providing access to social services within a nation or a region. Some respondents to my survey indicated that they connected users with NGO resources but this was not a practice that I initially set out to capture. It would be worth researching further what role libraries could play in connecting their users to resources available from NGOs specifically. One potential drawback of library partnerships with NGOs could be concern about whether the library appears to endorse the NGO and whether that would be appropriate for a library to do so. However, libraries have a professional obligation to providing access to diverse information from a multitude of sources, and the provision of information from an NGO could be seen as a natural extension of that mission.

Of those libraries that worked with NGOs in my survey, one library in Australia provided information about both governmental and nongovernmental organizations' services through a database that was available online and also could be consulted via a telephone call to the library. They saw it as part of their library mission to provide current and comprehensive information about their community and its resources to community residents.

Gleaning Best Practices

The issues faced by patrons who could benefit from connection to social services are diverse and challenging, and it can be daunting for libraries to explore ways to facilitate that connection. However, it can be ultimately rewarding as a reinforcement of our democratizing and social justice mission to provide necessary and useful information to all patrons. In addition, many libraries reaching out to populations to connect them with social services observed a betterment of difficult social situations within the library. Based on what I learned that libraries are currently doing, I offer some actionable steps that any library can take, at a variety of levels of involvement and cost.

First of all, providing brochures, pamphlets, forms and the like is low cost and less time intensive way to provide some connection for our users to social services. Merely having them available on a self-serve rack is an excellent first step. Many agencies providing social services will gladly make them available to you. This is a fairly common offering for most libraries I read about and talked with.

A partnership program with social workers like SWITL from San Jose can offer a higher level of connection for library users with social services but without much cost. Having a trained social worker involved in interactions can provide quality service and also allay any fears that a library worker will need to step outside of her professional training. Connecting with an existing school of social work or local group of practitioners may yield a pool of social work professionals able to commit to a few hours' volunteer work a month. SWITL makes their intake forms and other materials available to those who are interested in starting a similar service in their libraries.

Focusing on an element of social issues can make this large task more doable. Many public libraries in my research and study focused on issues of homelessness, for example, rather than the plethora of issues that are faced in a community. This has the added advantage of social services usually already existing with clear contact and intake methods.

In order to best establish a program like this, especially if you choose to focus on a subset of social issues, you need to know about what your local community or user group is facing and could likely use assistance with. This helps to provide information and services that can be truly valued and well utilized. There are many examples of how to do an environmental scan or assessment of your user group that can help uncover what the needs of the community might be.

As a part of that environmental scan of your library's service group, you will also need to become well-versed in what social services or providers of social services are available which whom to connect library users. As the levels of governance available in your community may vary widely by nation or even within your nation, government-provided social services may not be a reliable or effective method of assisting library users in need. Keep in mind that social services may be available from non-governmental organizations as well, and that

referral to a particular organization may or may not be seen as an endorsement of that organization depending on how the library frames the referral.

The largest barriers for libraries seeking to connect users with social services are the biggest barriers for any program: time and money. The first two practices above can help establish the connection in a low cost, low time-commitment way, and many libraries have found success in seeking grant funding or other partnerships once they have begun researching the steps to take in providing stronger connections with social services in their communities. There is also the barrier that library workers are not social workers, but the changing role of libraries demonstrates our need to help our users facilitate connections within the community, including with needed social service providers, and we can undoubtedly assist social service providers in reaching their clientele. Doing so best supports our joint missions in supporting democracy, open access to information, and social justice.

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