Addressing Mental Health in Public Libraries

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Introduction

Public libraries are free, open to all, and highly trusted community spaces. Some patrons visiting the library may be vulnerable and socially isolated, and look towards public librarians for support. The purpose of this study was to understand how public librarians perceive and support patrons who display mental health challenges.

Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with 97 staff at 32 randomly selected public libraries on Long Island, NY. A research team coded transcribed interviews. Multiple coders and coding congruence checks increased analytic rigor. Data coded as "mental health" underwent a 6-step thematic analysis protocol.

Results

Librarians interact with two types of patrons with mental health issues:

Patron Type 1: Those without outward symptoms of mental illness who come to the library seeking information about particular diagnoses. Librarians help them by providing: general information and resources on wellness topics; names of providers; information on mental disorders and symptomatology; and contact information for organizations providing mental health services. Librarians expressed being uncomfortable answering specific questions about mental health diagnoses because they are not healthcare providers and don't want to provide incorrect information.

Patron type 2: Those with outward symptomatology, many of whom are unhoused and use the library as a safe place to get respite. Librarians help these patrons by providing a quiet space and/or telephone access. Many described these patrons as having severe mental issues that are intertwined with other health and social needs. Many of these patrons have problems with hygiene, which causes discomfort for others in the library. According to the librarians, some of these patrons do not want help. Staff felt empathy for these patrons' need for shelter while also nervous and unprepared to deal with their unpredictable behavior: some of these patrons were seen as "harmless" while others were "scary."

Stigma around mental health issues:

Librarians described Type 1 patrons as exhibiting <u>internalized stigma</u>: while they may ask librarians for help finding information on mental health topics or a provider, they do not want people to know they are struggling. <u>Public stigma</u> exists for Type 2 patrons: some community members may not want them in the library because of their behavior or hygiene. They reported that there tends to be a lack of compassion for those with severe mental health issues who also

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may be experiencing homelessness and other intersecting issues; however, there are some patrons who express concern over their wellbeing.

"There's a lot of stigma against mental health. Nobody wants to talk about it. They talk about it for one month and that's awareness, but we need to break down the barriers that stop people from going for help. I mean that's [a] tall order, but, hey, we're here. We have to reinvent ourselves and do a lot more introspection. Sounds like a lot of hype or marketing, but it's not. It's the kind of thing that I've thought about here is how much can we enable our community because it's getting to be an older community, but it's also – you can tell from the younger people, the children. That's how you have people living viable to answer their needs. And I think that we start off with that and we can build from that point on."

"Some of those people have a level of mental instability. Right now, we've been approached a couple of times. We do have one woman who appears to be – I'm a librarian. I have a BS in Psychology, which means nothing in the grand scheme of things. But she's dealing with some sort of serious – whether it schizophrenia or a multiple personality. But we do have patrons who approach us concerned about her. It's getting cold. Do we have a place for her?"

Librarians assist patrons with mental health issues in all ages:

Librarians described assisting patrons of all ages with mental health issues. For teens, the main mental health concerns are anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide; they do not know where else to go to seek help. Parents tend to go to the library seeking mental health information on postpartum depression and how to parent children with mental health concerns. Older adults go to the library for mental health information related to aging, such as decline in cognition, independence, and mobility. Librarians also described that people of all ages with developmental disabilities, specifically autism spectrum disorder, come and visit the library for programs and services, including preparing for independence.

"I did have a teen girl who comes in a lot. She talks to me a lot. She expressed that she may be going through depression, and that she was having some suicidal thoughts. And she said that she spoke with her school guidance counselor and that her mother was informed, and her mother knew and her mother wasn't taking it seriously. So from there I wasn't sure what she really wanted. If she just wanted to talk, or if she wanted resources. And I told her that I would sit down with her and we would go look through, try to find a way for her to get some mental health help, if her mom wasn't willing to take her. Like some other way she might be able to go about it. And then she told me she was okay, that she was not – she is like no, I just want to talk. So I just let her talk for a little while and told her that if she needed anything else, like she knew where I was. To come back and we would go more in depth with it. But that's scary, you know, because I know her mother knew already, but I didn't know if now, because we're not mandated reporters, but if I should go to her mother, if I should not go to her, you know. Her mother did come in after and tell me that she is aware of everything, and that she is getting the help that she needs now, so I feel better about that."

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Mixed perception of social workers:

Many librarians wanted a social worker to help address patron's needs; however, there wa a perception among some very traditional librarians that social work services are not useful and should not be in the library. They also mentioned funding as a barrier to having social workers in the library.

"I feel like the new push for social workers in libraries is still kind of – some people view it as – I don't know. Potentially – I don't know how to really word it. The just don't see that it would really make a huge difference. I think a lot of people think of social work or therapy as something that only a few people need, and they'll go there if they need it. At least a lot of the people here may think that way. They think a security guard would just kinda solve their problems."

Politics and Resources:

Many librarians also brought up politics when talking about mental health. These librarians believed that the increase in patrons seeking out mental health resources for anxiety, stress, and depression (Type 1 patrons), was due to the polarized political environment and economic uncertainty, such as the cost of living on Long Island, Additionally, some librarians opined that the state was not doing enough to assist those with complex mental health issues, many of whom are homeless (Type 2 patrons). A few librarians mentioned that a psychiatric center nearby had closed down which had led to an influx of patrons with complex mental health needs going to the library because they had nowhere else to go. They described feeling let down by the system.

"There was a facility that was near, but they closed it. And they just let everybody out. They didn't put them into any other facilities or anything like that, so they got some people are just roaming the streets. And I guess that's how you become homeless, too – and you have a little disability. But that's how I feel like maybe – they have to come into the library because it's a public building. You can't do anything about that. It's just that they just have to be respectful to our regular patrons and the people that work here. That's all. So I mean, yeah, I think that's a big issue, the mental illness, because there's not enough places to help these people that need the help. And they just turn to the streets, and that's not really a thing for them. So if they come in here and can sit down and maybe thumb through a book, like even if they don't read, look at pictures. There's things to do. Go on the computer, learn how to use a computer. There's people here willing to help. This is a good place for people helping all the time."

Implications

Supporting unhoused mentally ill patrons in libraries is needed and requires a particular skill set. A promising approach to providing this support is to incorporate more mental health counseling and social workers into the everyday functioning of public libraries.

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