

Public Library Social Work—Overview of Trauma-Informed Care



Created by the Public Library Association Social Work Task Force

As library social workers, we've seen firsthand the power of providing thoughtful, trauma-informed care and the positive impact it has on our libraries, customers, library staff, and communities. Library social workers use trauma-informed care as the basis for our interaction with customers. Our social worker background(s) puts us in a unique position to discuss the effectiveness of this approach. We'd like to share some highlights of trauma-informed care strategies:

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma, including childhood trauma, is often the underlying factor in homelessness and other life challenges. In fact, many people who have and continue to experience trauma (abuse, poverty, discrimination, natural disaster) also experience mental health and substance use issues. We approach people with an understanding that they've experienced trauma, and we do not want to further traumatize them. This builds trust in us as library staffers and also trust in our libraries.

BEST PRACTICES FOR TRAUMA-INFORMED SERVICE

People-First Language

Library social workers pay close attention to language and labels when working with customers experiencing life challenges. Specifically, we use terms such as "people experiencing homelessness" or "having an experience of being homeless" rather than a blanket statement of "homeless." The same applies with other conditions such as substance use. These experiences do not define people; people define their experiences.

Strengths-Based Perspective

This viewpoint emphasizes an individual's strengths as a starting point in addressing any challenges. The underlying premise is that every person has strengths that can be leveraged to achieve change and make progress toward goals. Library social workers work extensively with library staffers to help them better understand this perspective when interacting with customers. We also help staff members understand their own strengths and how they can utilize their own experiences to better serve customers.

Compassion

Social workers and librarians view homelessness (and other life challenges) as a system issue versus an individual issue.

That means we don't make judgments against customers on the cause or causes of homelessness or their housing situation; rather, we use a compassionate approach to treat customers regardless of housing circumstance. We train and educate library staffers on being part of the solution to homelessness. We explain how policy work, advocacy, and compassion must be used together to systematically address homelessness and the effects it has on individuals, families, and communities.

A Focus on Behavior

We've learned through our efforts that the best approach to serving these populations is to address behavior that occurs in our facilities. Behaviors can be challenging, but we don't view individuals as being challenging. That might sound like splitting hairs, but it really makes a difference in how staff members view customers and how customers ultimately feel safer in the library. When everyone feels like they own the space, there are fewer behavior issues.

Creating Welcoming Spaces

Our approaches are made even more effective when we create welcoming spaces for customers experiencing life challenges. Our spaces and our resources are available to all—regardless of economic status, housing status, health condition, race, creed, sexual orientation, gender orientation, and more. Our commitment to the public means that we welcome everyone but address behavior separately so that everyone is free to benefit from our work. We feel this approach reflects the values of librarianship: providing free and equal access to anyone who can benefit.

Social-work informed library service is producing measurable results. Adapting these research-based approaches reduces barriers to library access, makes the library a better, more welcoming place for all and positions libraries as being actively part of the solution for many of these issues. We encourage you to explore these ideas and implement them at your library.

For more information, please visit the Public Library Association website at www.pla.org or email us at pla@ala.org.