# Library Patrons' Psychosocial Needs: How Social Work Collaborations Could Help in Kentucky's Public Libraries

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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
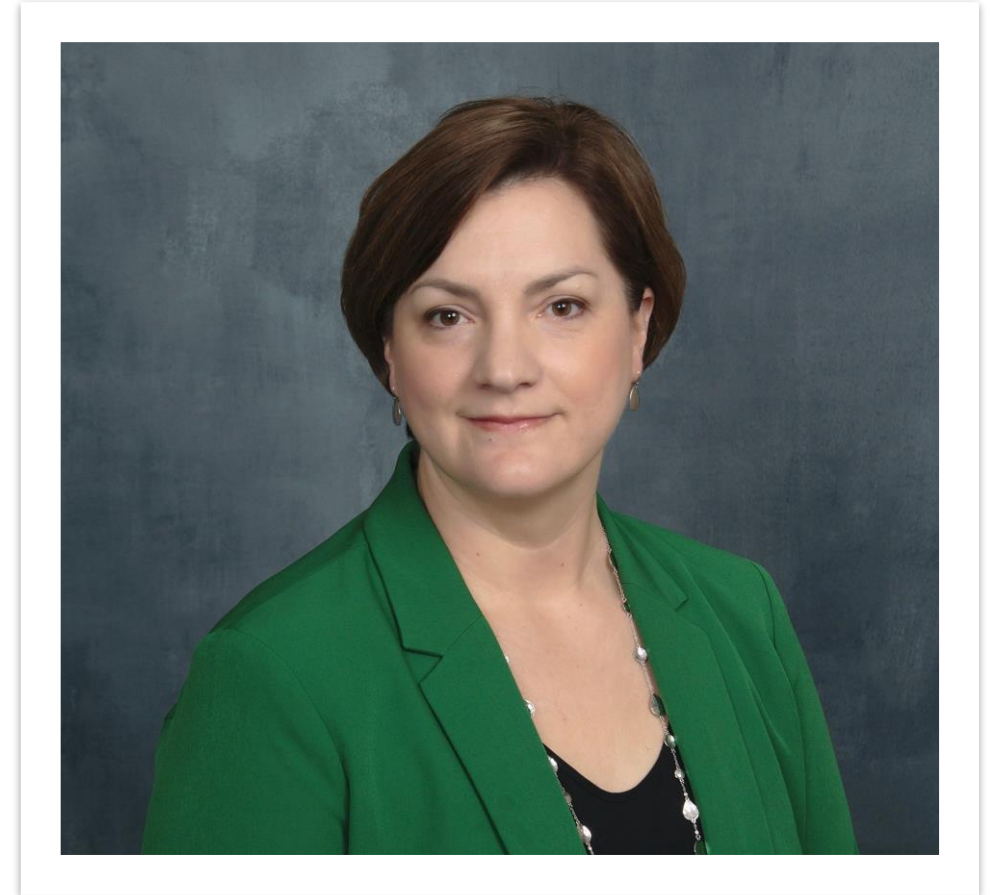
Psychosocial Needs- Definition

- 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

Objectives

In this presentation, I will cover:

- Recent research on how public libraries' roles have changed due to the growing psychosocial needs of patrons

- Common psychosocial needs of library patrons

- How social work partnerships are used to complement public library services and address the psychosocial needs of patrons
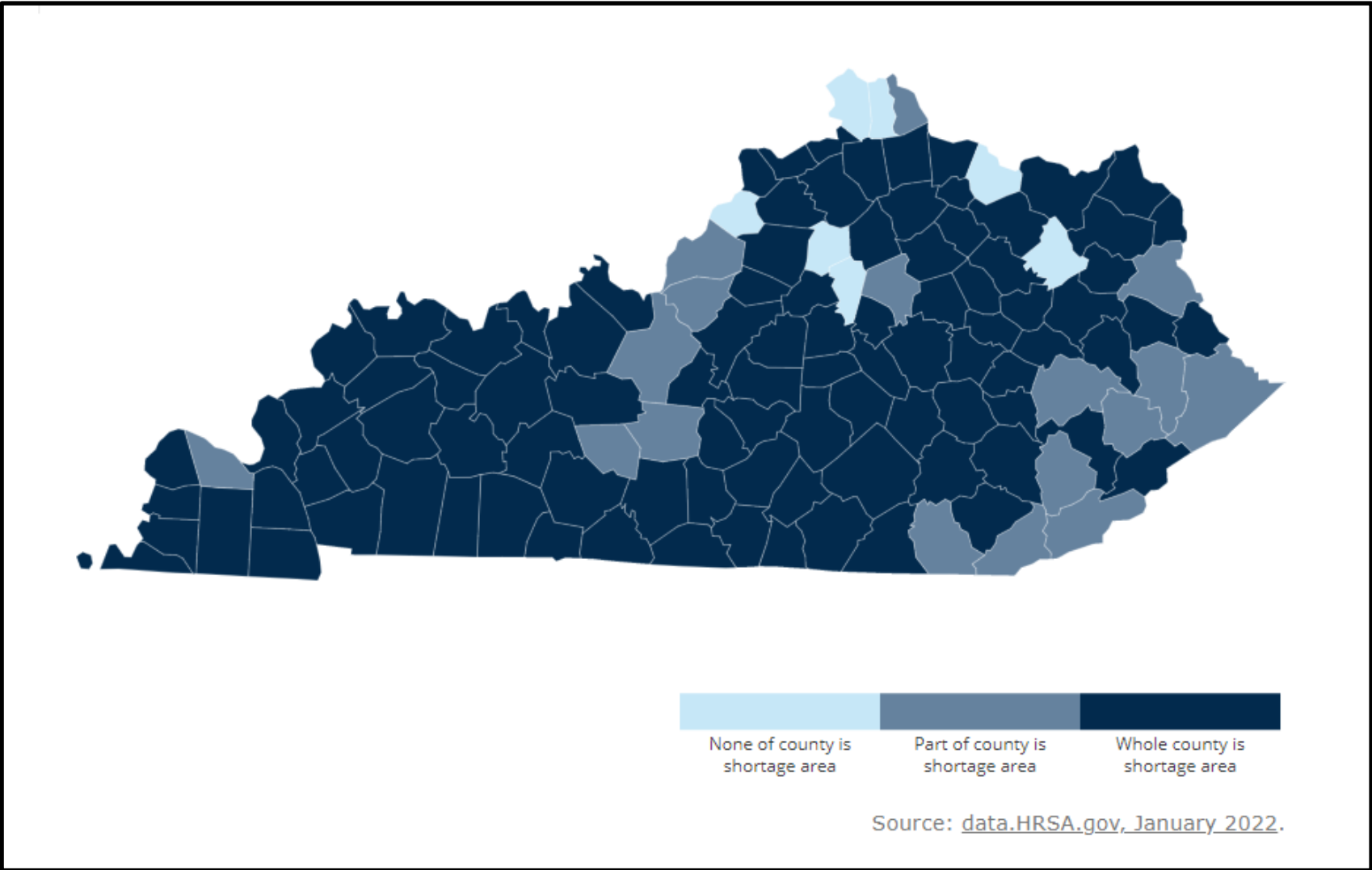
Historical Changes Impacting Libraries

- Historical changes affecting public libraries:
  - Deinstitutionalization in the 1960's brought increases in people experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness (Cart, 1992; Torrey, Esposito, & Geller, 2009).
  - The Great Recession and mortgage crisis in 2007-2009 brought an increase in people experiencing challenges related to poverty (Jaeger et al., 2014).
  - Shortage of emergency shelter beds (Henry et al., 2018)
  - Increasing costs with stagnant wages
    - Minimum wage has been $7.25/hour since 2009
    - Estimated current living wage for Kentucky for a single adult with 0 children = $15.46/ 1 child = $30.32/ 2 children = $38.31 (MIT Living Wage Calculator, 2022)
  - Increasing municipal statutes that criminalize homelessness (National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, 2019)
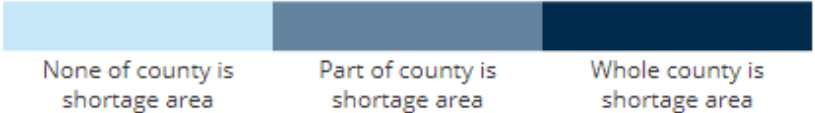 - The COVID pandemic

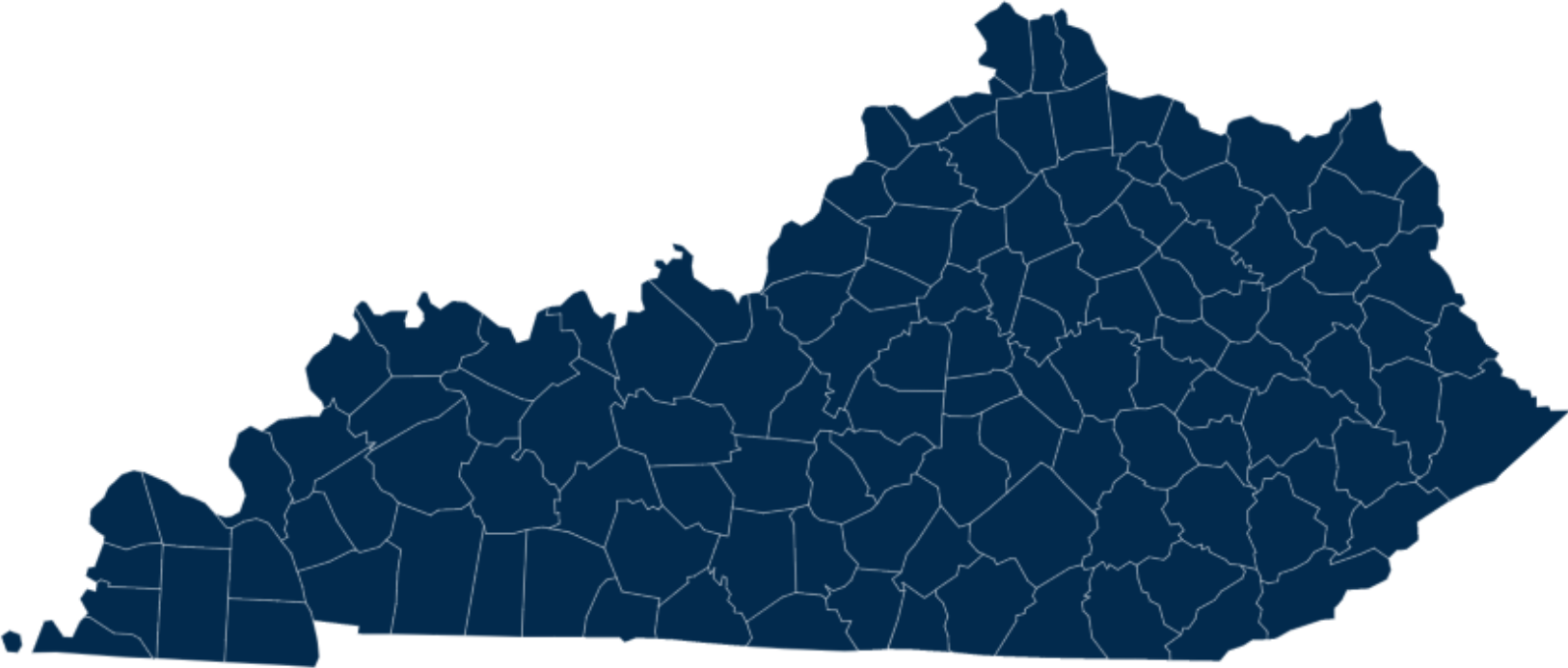# Current Factors in KY Impacting Libraries:

- Difficulty accessing healthcare
- Lack of access to mental health care
- Housing insecurity and homelessness
- Poverty

Current Factors Impacting Libraries in KY: Healthcare

None of county is shortage area | Part of county is shortage area | Whole county is shortage area

Source: data.HRSA.gov, January 2022.

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Current Factors Impacting Libraries in KY: Mental Health

None of county is shortage area | Part of county is shortage area | Whole county is shortage area

Source: data.HRSA.gov, January 2022.

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Current Factors Impacting Libraries in KY: Housing

- Annual point-in-time estimate from 2020 found an estimated 4,011 individuals homeless on any given day in Kentucky (US Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2022)

- Nearly 19K children in Kentucky public schools experienced homeless during the 2020-2021 school year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2022)

- There's a shortage of rental homes across the state available for low income households at or below the poverty guideline or 30% of the area median income (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022). KY needs nearly 80K more affordable rental homes to keep up with the need.

- Of Kentucky residents with housing, 30% of renter households (170,779 households) in the state are considered extremely low income (making less than 26,200 for a family of 4), and 63% of extremely low income renters pay more than half of their income on housing (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022)

Current Factors Impacting Libraries in KY: Poverty

Statewide % of people living in poverty (Census.gov)- 14.9%

Federal poverty rate in 2021 (HHS.gov): Family of 4 making $26,500 or less

Persons in poverty, percent

3% - 9.3%   9.4% - 11.7%   11.7% - 14.4%   14.4% - 18.3%   18.3% - 66.2%   NA
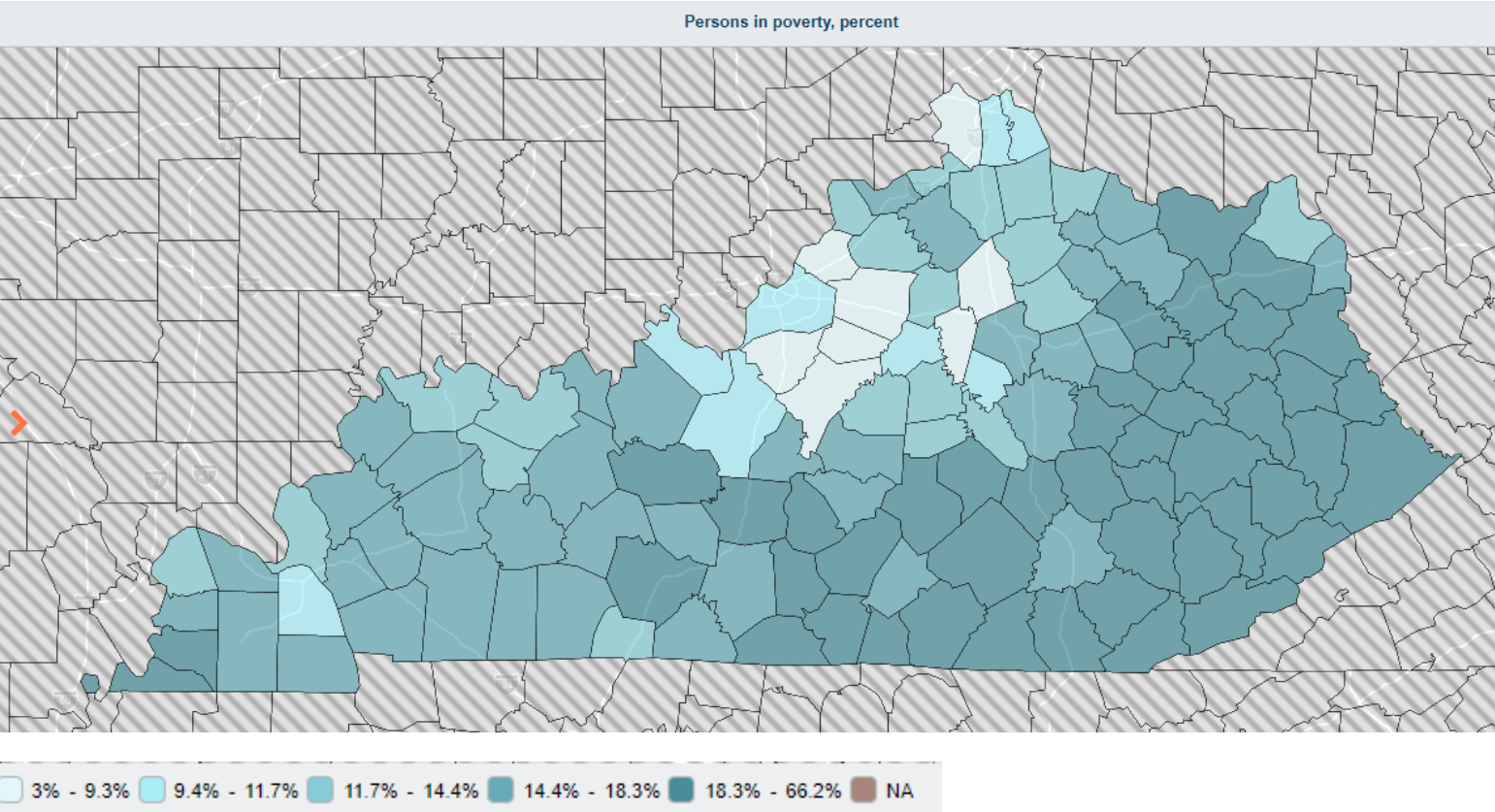
Psychosocial Needs of Patrons

- 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.

Needs Assessment Methods- Library Patrons

- Secondary data from multiple needs assessments of patron self-identified needs
- Convenience samples of patrons who participated in needs assessments at 3 libraries from 2 midwestern states
- Original methods:
  - Surveys on library computers
  - Paper surveys in library space
  - Emailed surveys to patron listservs (2 of the 3 participating libraries)

Patron Unmet Needs

Area of Unmet Need	N = 1294 Metro 1	N = 3237 Metro 2	N = 655 Metro 3
Financial	23%	4%	10%
Mental Health	9%	4%	10%
Housing	11%	1%	4%
Substance Abuse	3%	1%	1%
Medical/Physical Health	13%	4%	7%
Employment	23%	3%	7%
Education/Literacy	11%	3%	7%
Food	11%	1%	3%
Transportation	15%	2%	6%
Immigration/ESL	1%	1%	0%
Clothing	12%	1%	4%
Social Connections	9%	10%	14%

*Uses Current USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

Metro 1 = Counties in metro areas of 1 million or more

Metro 2 = Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million

Metro 3 = Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000

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Needs Assessment Methods- Library Staff

- Secondary data from multiple needs assessments of library staff about their perceptions of patron needs
  - 7 libraries in 4 different states
  - 3 midwestern and 1 eastern US
  - Varying community sizes, from large metropolitan areas to nonmetropolitan

- Original methods:
  - Electronic surveys of staff sent by library administrators

Needs Assessment Results- Library Staff

Area of Unmet Need	N = 191 Metro 1	N = 70 Metro 1	N = 248 Metro 2	N = 58 Metro 3	N = 58 Metro 3	N = 28 Metro 3	N = 39 Nonmetro 5
Financial	54%	64%	46%	46%	45%	39%	31%
Mental Health	50%	76%	54%	89%	62%	57%	54%
Housing	44%	76%	32%	62%	33%	57%	26%
Substance Abuse	31%	61%	34%	69%	40%	50%	0%
Medical/Physical Health	24%	40%	27%	40%	40%	25%	10%
Employment	19%	51%	40%	55%	43%	39%	54%
Education/Literacy	8%	33%	20%	20%	19%	18%	26%
Food	7%	49%	17%	20%	12%	25%	18%
Transportation	3%	47%	19%	22%	26%	18%	15%
Immigration/ESL	2%	23%	14%	15%	7%	7%	3%
Clothing	2%	11%	4%	6%	5%	7%	0%
Social Connections	2%	41%	24%	27%	41%	18%	54%
Relationship Issues	1%	24%	19%	29%	21%	21%	21%

Metro 1 = Counties in metro areas of 1 million or more

Metro 2 = Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million

Metro 3 = Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000

Nonmetro 5 = Area of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area

*Uses Current USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes

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)
  - Some staff fear for their safety or the safety of other patrons due to patron behaviors (Anderson, 2018; Clark, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009)
  - 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

(from research of Fisher, 2022)
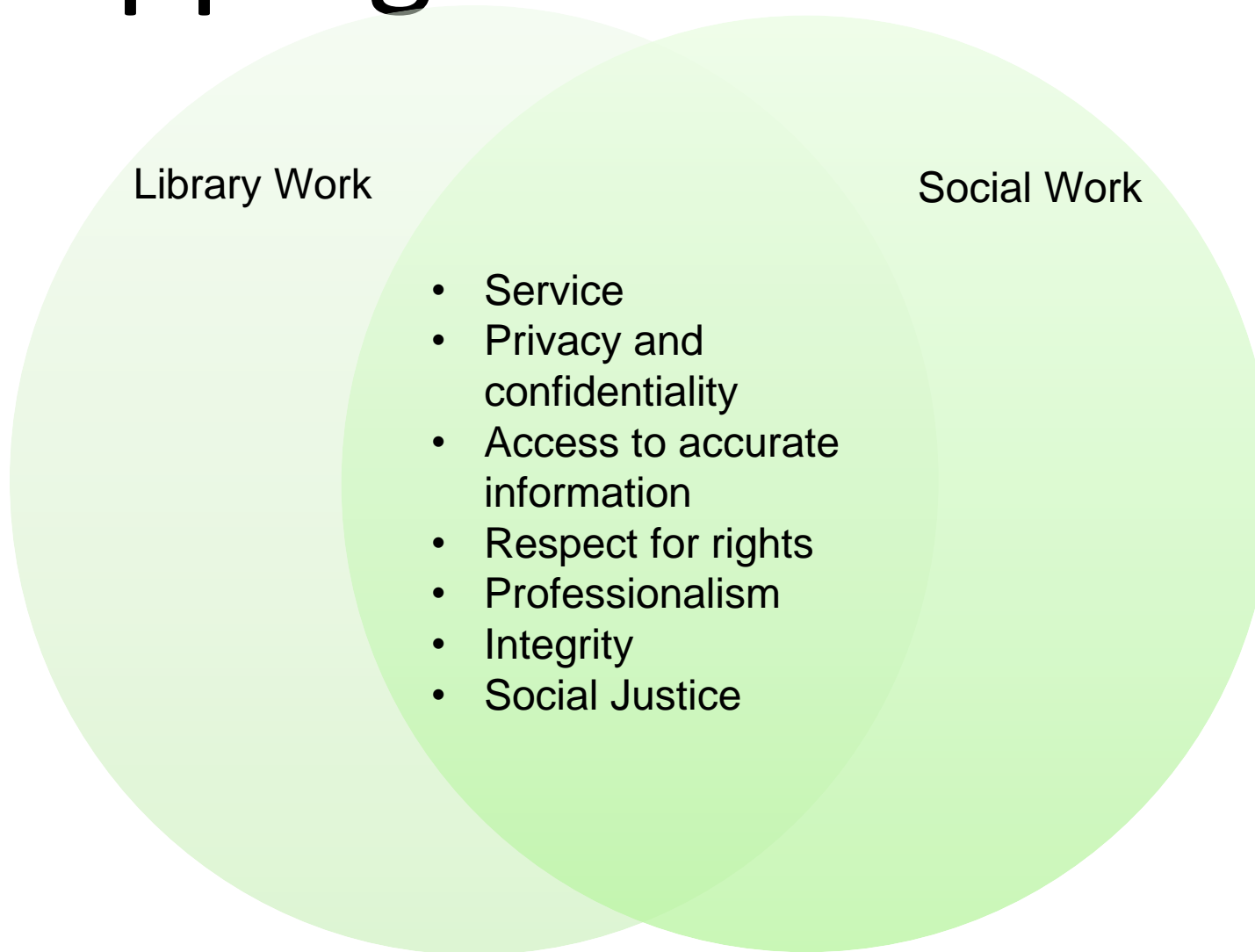
Covid-Related Changes

- 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
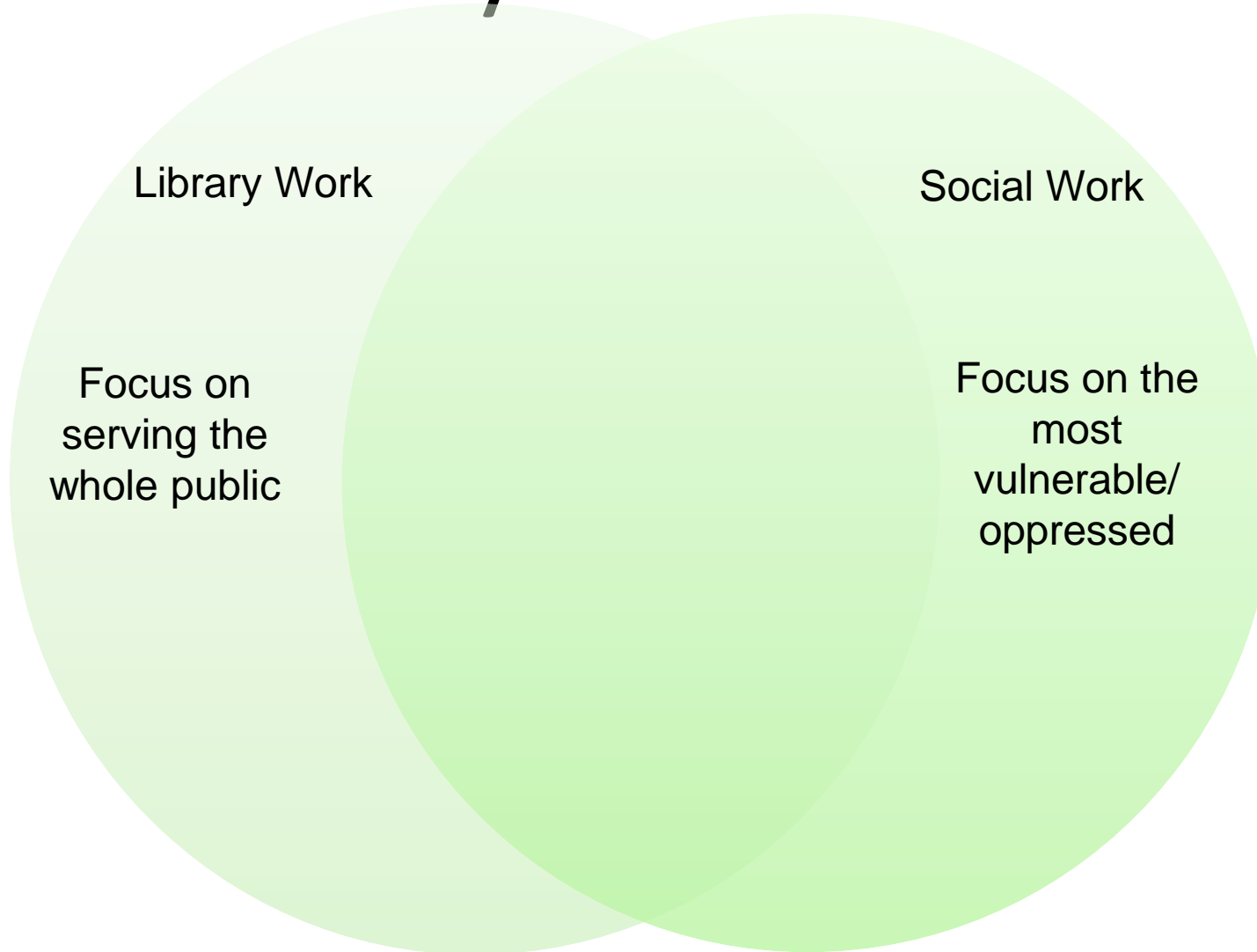
(from Wahler et al., 2022)

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)

- Many different models

- This is NOT to say that public libraries are to become social service organizations!

- Focuses instead on a different type of information needs, and "relationships as the new reference collection" (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019)

Overlapping Professional Values

Library Work

Social Work

- Service
- Privacy and confidentiality
- Access to accurate information
- Respect for rights
- Professionalism
- Integrity
- Social Justice

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Complementary Professional Values

Library Work

Social Work

Focus on serving the whole public

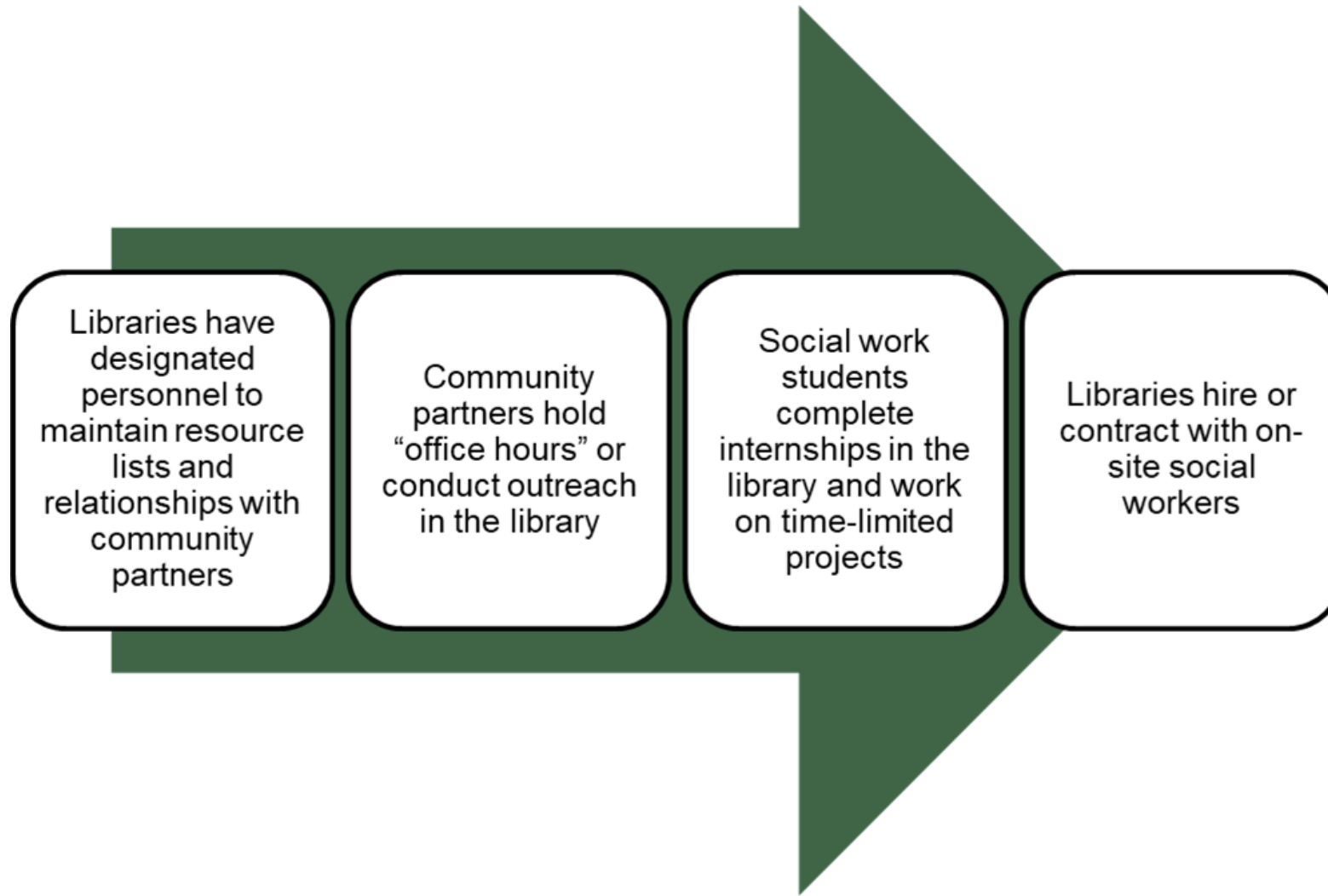Focus on the most vulnerable/ oppressed

Social Work in the Library

- Why a social worker and not a trained librarian?

  - Social workers are trained to:
    - Work across the micro-to-macro continuum of services and in "generalist" environments
    - Look for and attempt to address the *root cause* of a problem
    - Foster independence and be wary of things that might create dependence
    - Use clinical skills, even if not working in clinical environment
      - Assessment
      - Stages of Change
      - Motivational Interviewing
      - Brief interventions

Social Work in the Library

- Sample of activities from the micro-to-macro continuum of social work services:

    - Micro- Work with individual patrons, such as assisting with information and referral, assessment, crisis intervention, case management, or individual-level advocacy

    - Mezzo- Work with groups of people, such as facilitating programming/workshops for patrons, non-clinical/mutual aid support groups, book groups on psychosocial needs, or staff training sessions

    - Macro- Work at the organizational or community level, such as identifying gaps in services in the community, participating in advisory groups or task forces to address community-level needs, advocating for issues on the community level that impact individuals in the local area, creating mechanisms for increasing the capacity of the library to support patrons with psychosocial needs, or analyzing policies which disproportionately impact specific groups of people

Existing Models of Library-Based Social Services

Libraries have designated personnel to maintain resource lists and relationships with community partners

Community partners hold "office hours" or conduct outreach in the library

Social work students complete internships in the library and work on time-limited projects

Libraries hire or contract with on-site social workers

Existing Social Work/Library Collaborations

FT SW

Office Hours

PT SW

SW Students

Source: www.wholepersonlibrarianship.com

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Social Work in the Library- Potential Benefits

- Increased support for staff wellness
- Reduction in security interactions/calls to police
- Reduction in patrons barred from the library
- Increase in patron access to community services for their needs (prevention of community members "falling through the cracks")
- Development of programming to meet specific psychosocial needs of the local patron group
- Increased collaboration between the library and community social service organizations

Social Work in the Library- Barriers/Challenges

- Funding
  - Grant funding
  - Contracted with a partnering social service organization
  - Funded through library general funding/existing resources
- Liability insurance
  - Must be included in the budget if current library policy isn't sufficient
- Record-keeping
- Every library is different
  - Program has to be created "from scratch"
- Supervision and connections to others
- Staff Readiness/Culture Shift

Social Work in the Library- Examples

- Some of the most well-known library social work positions are in large, urban areas:
  - San Francisco Public Library (California)- Led by a marriage and family therapist, this was the first social services position hired for a public library. The program now consists of the lead "social worker" and six outreach workers with lived experience with homelessness.
  - Denver Public Library (Colorado)- Full time "community resource manager" (social worker), three other full-time social workers and a team of six peer navigators with lived experience with homelessness.
  - Washington, DC- Full-time "health and human services manager" (social worker)

  All of these programs consist of working with individual patrons as needed, partnering with human services organizations in the communities, creating new library programming for patrons with psychosocial needs, engaging in citywide initiatives to address homelessness, educating the community by participating in open forums on homelessness, and providing training and resources to help library staff effectively serve high-need patrons.

Social Work in the Library- Examples

- Burbank Public Library (California)- Population of 103K
  - Shared social work position added last summer, jointly funded by the Library and the City's Parks and Recreation Dept and shared with three libraries and two senior centers. The SW rotates between libraries and senior centers and conducts outreach to make people comfortable requesting services for their needs. Meets with individuals and families as needed for assessment and referrals, and also focused on expanding the Library's partnerships with other organizations.
- Georgetown Public Library (Texas)- Population of 71K
  - Grant funded full-time social worker, provided assessment and referrals to individual patrons, identified local resource gaps and worked with city-wide groups to advocate for expansion of social service capacity, served as a liaison between city staff and local nonprofit organizations. Funding ended last year, but this social worker was hired by the State Library Commission (first social worker at this level).
- Rochester Public Library (Minnesota)- Population of 115K
  - New partnership with a local nonprofit org for a social worker to be placed in the library 25 hours/week, who works out of the Library's "Wellness Corner" and focuses on support and referrals for people who need housing, food, and other social services. Able to do long-term ongoing case management as needed.

Social Work in the Library- Examples

- Niles Public Library (Michigan)- rural area, population of under 12K
  - First known rural library to add social work services, hired a full-time social services manager (social worker) who supervises social work interns, part of a grant-funded project called Social Workers in Rural and Small Libraries. Focused on providing information, referrals, and resources to patrons as well as developing collaborative relationships with local service providers and establishing what library social services looks like in their rural area. Funding recently ended.
- Union County (South Carolina)- rural area, population of under 8K
  - Full-time social worker employed as the library's assistant director, partners with the library director to perform all administrative responsibilities in the library including supervising staff and volunteers and establishing library policy and practices. She also maintains a caseload of patrons for individual assessment, referral, and case management, organizes and maintains a food pantry in the library, and collaborates with other area organizations to identify community gaps and look for solutions.

Social Work in the Library- Social Work Students

- Frequently a first step for a library considering social services (if a school of social work is nearby)
- Benefits
  - Inexpensive
  - Students can focus on many of the micro-to-macro social work activities mentioned earlier
- Challenges
  - Frequent turnover
  - Gaps between student placements
  - Students cannot operate independently
  - Social work supervisor is needed
  - Some social work programs have specializations that are not a good fit for library settings
  - Many libraries aren't close to a social work program

Social Work in the Library- Social Work Students

- Allegheny County, Pennsylvania- Partnership between the University of Pittsburgh's School of Social Work and the Allegheny County Library Association to fund paid internships shared between the 46 public libraries/70 locations in the ACLA. The ACLA consists of independent libraries with their own board of directors, but they are a consortium that shares resources to expand what they could provide or accomplish individually.

To Know More:

- Contact me at UNC Charlotte or Beth Wahler Consulting

- Whole Person Librarianship

- Social Work Students & Public Libraries

Questions?

For more info, please contact me at:
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