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# Libraries and Mental Health Initiatives: A literature review

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**Author's Note**

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**Abstract**

The coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic has increased the mental health needs of communities across America. Public libraries have responded by utilizing the existing resources they developed such as training staff in Mental Health First Aid and employing social workers and nurses. In addition, libraries have created new targeted programs to address mental health during the covid-19 pandemic. This literature review discusses how these various factors relate and further directions for research.

*Keywords*: Libraries, mental health, covid-19, pandemic, coronavirus, social work, nursing, anxiety

**Introduction**

In the wake of the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic, mental health needs throughout America have skyrocketed. The shortage of mental health providers along with the stigma associated with reaching for help has left a gap in communities between people who need assistance and resources available to serve them. Libraries as community hubs are in a strong position to make a difference in supporting the mental health of the patrons they serve. Librarians are in the top three highest trusted professionals (Portland Research Group et al., 2016). This trust can be leveraged to provide services to patrons who might be hesitant seeking assistance elsewhere or may not know what resources they qualify for or how to be connected to them. The scope of this literature review will cover four major areas, the current state of mental health in communities, Mental Health First Aid staff training, social workers and nurses in libraries, and mental health supportive programming.

**Mental Health in Communities**

What is the state of mental health in America today, and how did we get to the present state of affairs? It is helpful first to understand what mental illness is. According to the U.S. surgeon general, (1999) "mental disorders are health conditions that are characterized by alterations in thinking, mood,

or behavior (or some combination thereof) associated with distress and/or impaired functioning." These can include but are not limited to anxiety disorders, mood disorders, eating disorders, and substance use disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Historically, mental health was not always a community concern. A swell of need was created by the deinstitutionalization movement in the mid to late 20th century. Instead of institutions separating mentally ill individuals from society at large, the intention was to integrate the mentally ill into communities by using community-based channels to support those with mental health needs. Adequate funding, however, was not provided to match the need which left a large population of vulnerable individuals disenfranchised (Petrin, 2020).

At present, America is experiencing a substantial shortage of mental health care providers. The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (2015) projected that there will be a 45,000 to 250,000 shortage in mental health professionals by 2025. As the covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on individuals' sense of stability and security, demand for service has increased dramatically with 52% of behavioral health organizations reporting an increased demand and 65% of organizations have had to cancel, reschedule, or turn away patients (Malessi, 2020). The amount of U.S. adults reporting symptoms of anxiety or depression has skyrocketed from 11% in January-June 2019 to 42% in December 2020 (Abbot, 2021). Adults experiencing household job loss during the pandemic report high rates of anxiety/depressive symptoms compared to those not experiencing job loss at a rate of 53% to 32% (Panchal et al., 2021). While suicides as a whole decreased by 5% from 2019-2020, they have risen among people of color. Suicide rates tend to decrease during natural disasters as such circumstances can trigger a survival instinct. Rabin (2021) reported that the racial disparity of data may partially be explained by the fact that, "two in five Black and Hispanic Americans have lost a close friend or family member to the virus, compared with one in four white adults."

The effect of the pandemic is not limited to adults. Psychiatrist Jenna Lee stated that, "Children will be challenged primarily by a lack of structure associated with the closing of schools," which can eat

away at a child's sense of safety and control (Gramigna, 2020). Professor Sarah Lipson reflected similar

concerns for college students, stating that "campus closings have 'fundamentally shifted' how college

students may think about their sense of belonging," which can negatively impact mental health

(Gramigna, 2020).

In addition, the mental health crisis may not end once the covid-19 pandemic ends. Even after

vaccines have greatly increased the amount of protection people have from the virus, among the

vaccinated, individuals are still experiencing overwhelming fear. Kit Breshears, 44, of Buffalo, Minnesota

described the fear that she is experiencing with reopening, "I don't want to be sitting in a movie theater

with 'patient zero' of a variant that bucks the vaccine," (Chuck, 2021). Clinical psychologist and senior

director of health care innovation at the American Psychological Association, Vaile Wright, said that in

the aftermath of other pandemics like SARS and Ebola, there was a subsequent increase in agoraphobia,

commonly known as the fear of being in open spaces, the public, or anywhere outside the home.

(Chuck, 2021). It is likely that we might see a similar increase after the covid-19 pandemic.

What role can libraries play in response to the current circumstances? Libraries as community

hubs are in a strong position to respond to the increased demand for mental health services. Though

librarians may not be able to diagnose, provide psychotherapy, or prescribe medicine, there are still

numerous opportunities to address mental health needs in ways that make a significant positive impact

on the lives of their patrons. The first that is addressed here is Mental Health First Aid Training for staff.

**Mental Health First Aid Training**

Mental Health First Aid Training (MHFA) is a training program "which outlines ways to help a

person who may be experiencing a mental health-related crisis such as anxiety, depression, psychosis,

and addictions, included strategies for recognizing signs, how to assess the risk of self-harm, how to best

reach out, how to de-escalate a situation, and how to connect a person with appropriate resources,"

(Peet, 2019). MHFA was developed by the National Council on Behavioral Health in 2001 and takes eight

hours to complete (National Council for Behavioral Health, 2021). At present, over 1,450 libraries have

held MHFA training and 36,000 participants have been trained in libraries (Chapman, 2021).

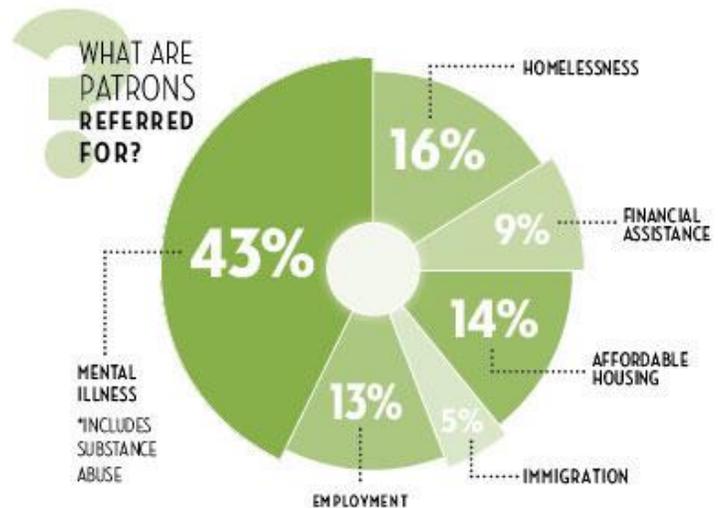| Top 5 States | Number of Libraries with MHFA Trained Staff |
|---|---|
| California | 170 |
| New York | 99 |
| Ohio | 84 |
| Illinois | 69 |
| Texas | 73 |

*Note*: Table from Chapman, Ann. (2021, April 13) *Mental Health First Aid*. National Council for Behavioral Health. https://www.webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/2021-04/slides-mhfa-and-trauma-informed-approaches.pdf

Library staff have expressed positive reactions to the training. Joseph Meisner, access services

librarian at the San Diego Public Library, (both a recipient of MHFA training and a certified instructor)

stated that training is meant "to raise awareness and break down stigmas and make mental health first

aid as common as physical first aid," (Throgmorton, 2017). Charlotte Darynai, staff member at the

Cranford Public Library in New Jersey said, "This training has opened my eyes about how lives can

actually be saved and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel," (Givelber, 2018). Jackson-Madison's

Adult Services Librarian Jenci Spradlin said that the training has taken away fear, "Now we don't feel

helpless in [mental health] situations, and we have some tools." (Throgmorton, 2017). If you are

interested in learning more about how to find a MHFA course or instructor in your area, please visit

www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org, click on "Find a Course," and the website will allow you to search by

location.  While MHFA training can help librarians approach patrons with sensitivity and help connect

them to resources, some libraries are doing even more to address mental health needs by hiring

specialists.

**Social Workers and Nurses**

The San Francisco Public Library broke new ground in hiring America's first library social worker

in 2009, Leah Esguerra (Peet, 2019). New York City's first lady Chirlane McCray helped lead an initiative

promoting the hiring of social workers in libraries. McCray said, "Most people feel very comfortable

walking into a library to get information," as
opposed to a clinic (Fernandez, 2019).
Robert Simmons was the first social worker
hired at the Oak Park Library in Chicago,
Illinois. Simmons said, "Around the nation,
public libraries have become de facto
community health centers for people who
don't have access to other resources" (Oak
Park Public Library, 2021). How great is this
need? While I could find no source detailing the
aggregate amount of patrons served across
America, (an avenue for further research), to



*Note*: Chart of Social Services and Public Safety Team referrals from Oak Park Library. (2017, August 16). *Stronger together*. Retrieved April 24, 2021, from https://www.oppl.org/news-events/impact/stronger-together/

provide one example, the San Francisco Public Library sees about 1,000 homeless visitors each day

(Fernandez, 2019).

Social workers can help answer the following questions that require more expertise than a

librarian alone can provide:

- How can I get health insurance?

- Why did I receive this letter that my benefits are being canceled?

- Where can I apply for food stamps?

*Note*: From Schofield, A. (2018, December 28). Social workers and librarians- a case for why we are BFFs. Retrieved March 12, 2021, from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity/odlos-blog/social-workers

 In addition, social workers can even treat overdoses. At the Long Branch Free Public Library in New Jersey, they stock two doses of the anti-overdose drug Narcan behind their circulation counter. They are not alone. Thousands of public libraries across America keep Narcan as a response to the opioid epidemic (Dwyer, 2019).

Some libraries have also hired nurses to help manage cases. At the Pima Country Public Library in Tuscon, Arizona, manager Kate DeMeester said, "From a privacy standpoint, if [library staff] make a referral, when that person comes back and sees us in a week or two, we're not going to say, 'Hey, did you go talk to so-and-so?' We don't want them to feel like they're being monitored by us or that their requests are being tracked. But nursing is a different kind of profession and that kind of follow up is expected," (Peet, 2019). Library nurses provide services like, nursing assessments, case management, blood pressure screenings, nutrition guidance and health education (Johnson & Johnson, 2020). Mary Frances Bruckmeier, RN, BSN, of the Pima Country Public Library has worked with library patrons like one man (name withheld) who identified himself as an HIV positive, functioning alcoholic. Bruckmeier was able to discuss treatment options and resources he might benefit from (Johnson & Johnson, 2020).

**Library Program Offerings**

It is well known that not every library will have the funding to hire a social worker or a nurse. In such situations, libraries still have ample opportunity to address the mental health needs of their members through program offerings.  During the covid-19 pandemic, the Rowan Public Library in North

Carolina created a free virtual session to help their patrons with strategies of how to cope with mental

health related issues (Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2020). A similar series of workshops

were held by the Watertown Free Public Library in Massachusetts. They partnered with the Wayside

Youth and Family Services and the Watertown Police Department to offer the "Stress, Isolation, Coping,

and More" workshop along with an all-day MHFA training workshop (Watertown Free Public Library,

2021).

The New York Public Library joined the "Spaces to Thrive" program in 2015, a partnership with

the Mayor's Office of ThriveNYC to provide free mental health programming to New Yorkers. Thirteen

branches of the New York Public Library are part of the Spaces to Thrive initiative. While the physical

branches were not open during lockdown, the NYPL website continued to provide resources to their

patrons including MHFA training and a link to NYCWell, a 24/7 confidential hotline which connects the

user with trained counselors to assist in mental health and substance abuse needs. Counselors are

available through calls, text, and chat (New York Public Library, 2021).

Some libraries are turning to art as an outlet for stress during the pandemic while

simultaneously raising awareness for mental health, and not all programs are for patrons alone. In

Milwaukee, former librarian and professor of information science, Dr. Abigail Phillips, has been

organizing other librarians to publish writing and visual art in an online magazine *Reserve and Renew*. All

profits from the purchase of this zine go towards Mental Health First Aid (Institute of Museum and

Library Services, 2020). The Hartford Library in Connecticut recently piloted a program called ARTLink.

ARTLink is a series of four workshops with the mission of increasing mental health awareness. The topics

are podcasting, pottery, musical, and visual arts all taught by local artists (Institute of Museum and

Library Services, 2020).

The Dover Public Library in New Hampshire will be holding a virtual program in May featuring

mental health advocates Lynda Cutrell and Suzanne Weete (DeNuzzio, 2021). Cutrell is the creator of the

*99 Faces Project*, an exhibit featuring 99 portrait photographs. "All 99 faces are unidentified. There are

33 individuals on the schizophrenia spectrum, 33 on the bipolar spectrum, 33 who love them. But… you

can't determine who has each experience," (Cutrell, 2019). Cutrell seeks to challenge the stigma of

those living with mental illness and support those on their journey to recovery along with their families.

Suzanne Weete is a founding member of the Dover Mental Health Alliance (DMHA), which is comprised

of community members who seek to educate their community in ways that create a more responsive

and aware society surrounding mental health issues. DMHA also awards "Place" designations to

companies who provide a safe, judgement-free environment. To earn a "Place" designation, an entity

must possess resources to help someone in a mental health crisis, provide space for anyone seeking

refuge, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and MHFA training. The Dover Public Library was the

first organization to earn a "Place" designation from DMHA, (DeNuzzio, 2021).

Programming can take time to organize and advertise. Still, if libraries are looking for a quick

way to get involved in promoting mental health awareness, the State of Rhode Island Office of Library

and Information Services designed a Mental Health Resources bookmark (Matthews, n.d.). The

bookmark has the phone numbers for the Suicide Prevention Hotline, National Domestic Violence

Hotline, and several websites including nami.org, hosted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and

ok2talk.org, a selection of Tumblr posts by real teens experiencing mental illness. Providing an

informational bookmark is both a low cost of entry to help and creates an opportunity that supports

library patrons' anonymity. The free bookmark also serves as a signal to patrons that should they seek

more detailed information, the library staff would be informed and supportive of such inquiry without

judgement.

### Conclusion

Mental health community initiatives had begun in public libraries before the covid-19 pandemic;

however, it appears that since the beginning of the pandemic, libraries are recognizing the mental

health needs of the communities they serve more than ever. With the well documented evidence of increased mental illness since 2020 and the projected increase in needs due to the mental health professional shortage, it appears that mental health will continue to be a strong community need for the foreseeable future. As stated above, it is likely that there will be an increase in agoraphobia post-pandemic. What remains unclear is whether or not mental health initiatives in public libraries will continue to be as prevalent after the covid-19 pandemic is no longer the forefront threat on the hearts and minds of individuals.

As of the publication of this paper, scientists are still measuring the length of time that vaccines remain a strong source of protection. There is no exact timeline for when life will "return to normal," or to what extent it will. Future research might analyze how many library programs about mental health are offered during the pandemic versus post-pandemic. Given that such research would be difficult to conduct with articles and advertisements alone, a random sample survey of public librarians reporting the amount of mental health programming they have provided might be an effective way to gather this data.

Public libraries have continuously updated their services to be more inclusive, whether that was being accessible to the physically disabled, having more resources to support people of color, supporting the LGBTQ+ community, and much more. Mental health support is a community need. If public libraries are aimed at serving the needs of their patrons, it is vital that the mental health knowledge and experience gained during the covid-19 pandemic not be forgotten. Libraries have the opportunity to build on the strong foundations they have created to support those with mental illness. The implementation of these initiatives can benefit individuals in ways we have only just begun to understand, though this much is clear: By supporting the mental health of the community, libraries can decrease stigma, increase their members' well-being, and even save lives. It is a worthy cause of any public servant.

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