



# Social Workers in Florida Public Libraries

**Don Latham and Melissa Gross**

FSU School of Information

**Karen Randolph**

FSU College of Social Work

# Overview

- Issues communities are facing
- Social workers and social services information in public libraries in Florida
- Benefits—librarian and branch manager views
- Challenges—librarian and branch manager views
- Educational needs—librarian and branch manager views
- Conclusions

# Issues communities face

- Housing insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Drug abuse
- Mental health needs
- Lack of or limited access to the internet
- Unemployment
- Immigration concerns
- Health care
- Domestic violence
- Poverty
- Child endangerment
- Discrimination/Racism
- Trauma
- Disaster recovery

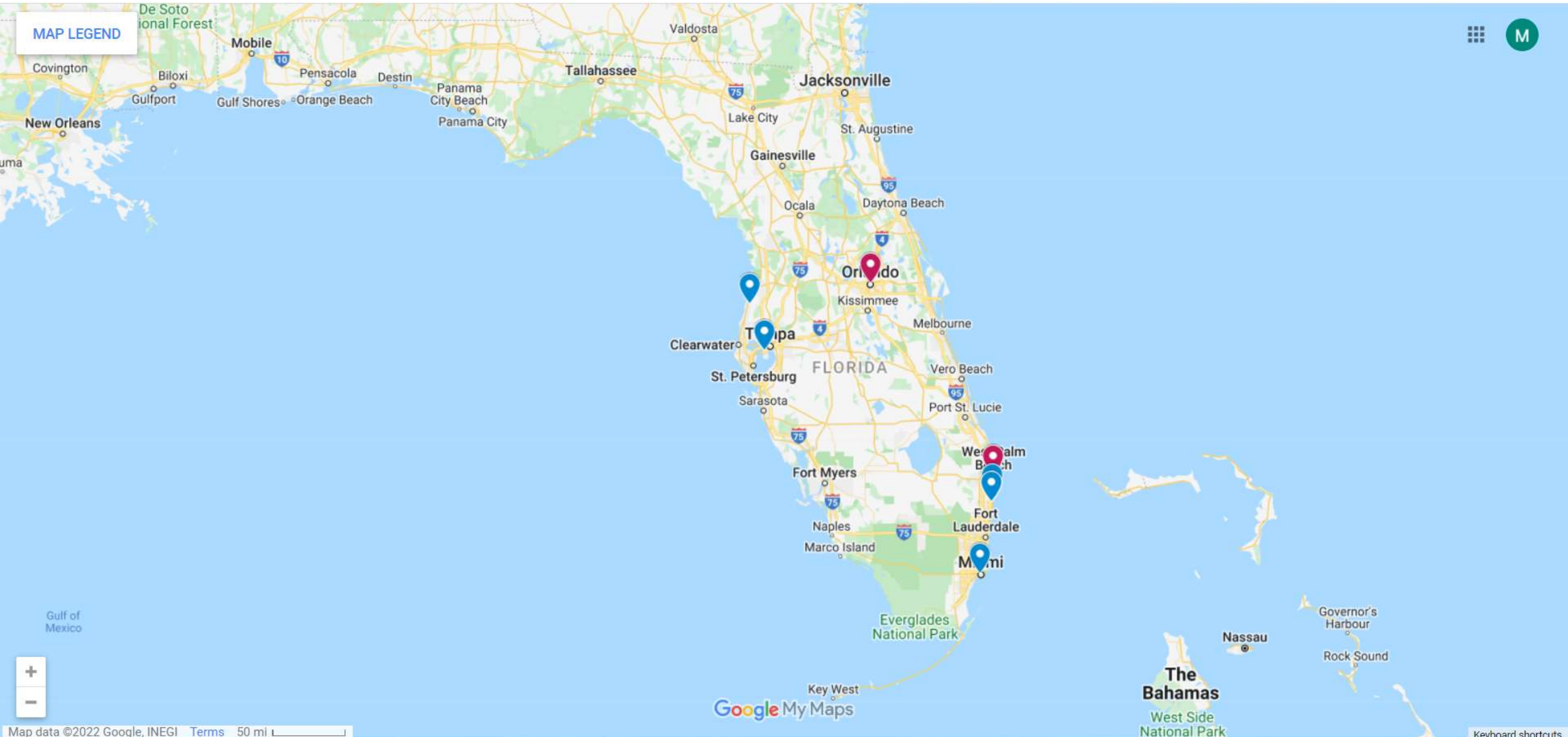
How many of you feel that providing social services information should be part of a public library's responsibility?

# Things we have been wondering about

- Research questions
  - RQ1: How is social services information currently being provided in public libraries in Florida?
  - RQ2: What are the benefits and issues related to the provision of social services information in public libraries?
  - RQ3: What are the educational needs of librarians, branch managers and social workers to be best prepared to support the social services of patrons in libraries?

# Fast facts

- Social work and librarianship are very similar professions. The blurry line between them has been a topic in librarianship for a long time.
- Librarians have always responded to social issues such as literacy, immigration, homelessness.
- The idea of including social workers in public libraries has been discussed at least since the early 1980s (Levinson, 1988).
- In 2009, San Francisco Public Library was the first public library to hire a social worker (Knight, 2010).
- Across the country (as of 4/25/22) there are 56 fulltime social workers in libraries, 6 part-time social workers, and 135 social work student interns (wholepersonlibrarianship.com).
- In Florida (as of 4/25/22) there are 3 full-time social workers, and 4 to 6 student interns (wholepersonlibrarianship.com).



# Our research

- Reading articles in information and social work journals and magazines
- Survey of library administrators in Florida (Gross & Latham, 2021)
- Interviews with branch managers in Florida (n=13)
  - 6 who have worked with social workers
  - 7 who have not worked with social workers
- Interviews with Florida librarians (n=15)
  - 3 who have worked with social workers
  - 12 who have not worked with social workers



# What do social workers do? (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021)

- Bachelors in social work (BSW)
  - Hold caseworker and mental health assistant positions.
  - Assess needs and make referrals to community agencies.
  - Provide information about resources.
  - Advocate for community resources.
- Masters in social work (MSW)
  - Often work for a social service agency.
  - Can provide therapeutic interventions.
  - Sometimes specialize in areas such as child and family, healthcare, mental health and substance abuse.
- Licensed clinical social worker (LCSW)
  - Rules vary by state, but may work independently in private practice.

# What social workers do in libraries (what the literature says).

- **Provide resource and treatment referrals** (Garner et al., 2021; Norton et al. 2021; Provence, 2020)
- **Fill out applications for benefits** (Gross & Latham, 2021)
- **Staff coaching and training** (Garner et al., 2021; Gross & Latham, 2021; Norton et al. 2021; Provence, 2020)
- **Offer consultation** (Garner et al., 2021)
- **Legal aid** (Norton et al. 2021)
- **Educational opportunities** (Gross & Latham, 2021)
- **Emergency services** (Gross & Latham, 2021)
- **Employment services** (Gross & Latham, 2021; Norton et al. 2021)
- **Outreach/community building** (Gross & Latham, 2021; Norton et al. 2021)
- **Immigration** (Gross & Latham, 2021; Norton et al. 2021)
- **Affordable housing** (Gross & Latham, 2021; Norton et al. 2021)
- **Therapy/counseling** (Gross & Latham, 2021)

Do any of you have a social  
worker in your library  
(or libraries) now?

# Why I want a social worker

## **Librarians with social workers**

- Positive impact on library services—supplements & complements what librarians do.
- Positive impact on other library staff.
- Enhances public perception of library.
- Brings more patrons into the library.

## **Librarians without a social worker**

- Helps “put libraries back in the community”—library as community center.
- Changes public perception of the library – library as platform for community engagement.
- Offers services to the homeless, marginalized, economically disadvantaged – the “have nots.”

# Librarians say

*Names in this presentation have been replaced by pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality.*

*I've seen staff go from thinking of social services and social work as maybe mission creep, and not necessarily what libraries are here to do, to really integrating it into everything that they do. – Blair*

*If the folks that are in need of assistance really start to feel that [the library] is a place that they can actually get some questions answered, get some assistance, and get themselves going in the right direction, then not only does the library then tend to be looked at as a source of information, but it also starts to look like a lighthouse. – Parker*

# Why I want a social worker

## **Managers with a social worker**

- Patrons suffering from mental health concerns/substance abuse
- Homelessness
- Underserved area/lack of social services

## **Managers without a social worker**

- Patrons suffering from mental health concerns/substance abuse
- Homelessness

# Branch managers say

*They're more connected, as far as somebody needs help with their electricity bill and I'd be like, "Oh, okay, I'm sorry. Let me do a quick Google search, and if I can't find anything, then sorry." But they'll have resources and information and programs that I won't know existed, and they can sit there and spend time with the patron that I cannot.*

– Christina

*If we're going to remain vital in our communities then we have to provide more than new books and new movies and stuff; we have to really provide serious assistance to those people who are falling through the cracks. – Eileen*

# Librarian opinions (SW services)

## **Librarians with a social worker**

- Assistance with needs of homeless people
- Crisis intervention
- Guidance & referrals for mental health issues
- Guidance & referrals for COVID-19-related issues
- Employment assistance
- Assistance applying for unemployment benefits, food stamps, Social Security, Medicaid

## **Librarians without a social worker**

- Employment assistance
- Food insecurity
- Health care needs
- Substance misuse issues
- Mental health needs
- Housing
- Immigration and VISA
- Referrals for legal aid
- Social Security, disability benefits



# Branch manager opinions (SW services)

## **Managers with a social worker**

- Healthcare
- Housing
- Employment
- Food stamps
- Mental health referrals
- Career training
- Immigration
- Basic counseling

## **Managers without a social worker**

- Housing
- Food stamps
- Mental health referrals
- Basic counseling
- Outreach
- Child & family services programming

# Benefits of having social workers in libraries (the literature says)

- More people are helped (Hill & Tamminen, 2020)
- Increased staff knowledge and skills (Garner et al., 2021; Hill & Tamminen, 2020)
- Creative partnerships (Hill & Tamminen, 2020)
- Increased awareness (Hill & Tamminen, 2020)
- Lowered staff anxiety (Garner et al., 2021; Provence, 2020)
- Fewer calls to the police (Provence, 2020)

# Librarian opinions (benefits)

## **Librarians with social workers**

- SW can provide assistance outside of librarians' expertise.
- SW can help patrons navigate the complicated network of various social service organizations.
- SW can handle crisis situations.
- Helps prevent librarian burnout.
- Has positive effect on library staff & library services.

## **Librarians without a social worker**

- SW can offer appointments to patrons.
- SW can follow up with patrons.
- SW can provide guidance outside of librarians' expertise.
- Allows librarians to focus on questions/needs within their domain.
- SW can develop a more personal relationship with patrons.
- SW can handle crisis situations.

# Branch manager opinions (benefits)

## **Managers with a social worker**

- Improved patron assistance (general)
- Improved patron assistance (resource referrals)
- Improved public perception of library services
- Increased library traffic
- Lowered evictions/aggressive behavior from patrons
- De-escalation /SW approach training from SW

## **Managers without a social worker**

- Improved patron assistance (general)
- Improved patron assistance (mental health referrals)
- Staffing support
- Improved public perception of library services
- Improved outreach
- Increased library traffic
- De-escalation /SW approach training from SW
- Homeless services

# Issues related to having social workers in libraries

- How do you pay for a social worker?
- Who supervises them and how?
- Does this increase the potential for liability for the library?
- What does having a social worker do to public perceptions of the library?
- Demand for services may be more than one social worker can manage.
- What happens when the social worker isn't there?

# Librarian opinions (challenges)

## **Librarians with a social worker**

- Consistent, reliable scheduling.
- What happens when the SW's appointment calendar is full?
- SW is not full time.
- Making sure other agencies know the library isn't encroaching on their territory.
- Making sure other departments in the library know the SW isn't encroaching on their territory.

## **Librarians without a social worker**

- Blurring of boundaries between SW & librarians in the eyes of patrons.
- Change in public perception of library from information center to community center.
- Consistent schedule for SW.
- Concerns about patron privacy (i.e., concerns about patrons using the SW's services).
- Lack of adequate space for the SW.
- Time management issues (e.g., one SW with several branches, lengthy wait times).
- Liability & insurance.

# Librarians say

*I also need to assure people that when we have someone here, their job is not to replace the work that other departments are doing, but to support those programs, and also augment them as best we can in the library system. – Blair*

*"Is the library a place for social services?" I think a lot of people already think it is. But that sort of brings up the questions if we have a social worker here, do we then become the entry point for social services, when there may be a better county agency, or some other agency, to take on that task? – Jessie*

# Branch managers' opinions (challenges)

## **Managers with a social workers**

- Stigma towards social work in libraries
- Space
- Supervision/assessment
- Liability
  - Interacting with unsupervised minors
  - Drug overdoses
  - Violent patrons
  - Storing homeless patrons' ID cards

## **Managers without a social worker**

- Stigma towards social work in libraries
- Space
- Lack of interest/need
- Safety
- Supervision/assessment
- Liability



# Branch manager says

*The hardest part is when we say there's a social worker in the library, that when they come in and [they aren't] there, that is probably the most difficult part, because there's a person coming in asking you for help to get food or to feed their children and so, they're really wanting this social worker and, after I say, "Okay. Well, they're not here right now so your options are that we can schedule an appointment with you, or you can go to the location they currently are at, or I can try to help you," they were kind of let down, 'cause they wanted it where they were now. – Theresa*

# What should be taught in library school? (What the research says)

- De-escalation (Provence, 2020)
- Collaboration with social workers (Provence, 2020)
- Understanding
  - Trauma (Provence, 2020)
  - Homelessness (Provence, 2020)
  - Mental health (Provence, 2020)
  - Substance abuse (Provence, 2020)
- Social service training (Cathcart, 2008)

# Librarian opinions (what should be taught)

## **Librarians with a social worker**

- Research skills and using computers to find information.
- Experiences outside of library school have been most helpful (e.g., working in a hurricane shelter, having a degree nursing).
- Hillary said: “I remember I suggested that libraries should have a social worker to one professor, and he said, no, he did not see the need for that, those were two completely different things.”

## **Librarians without a social worker**

- Social services.
- Customer service.
- Patrons’ mental health needs.
- More focus on practice as opposed to theory.
- Training in conducting reference interviews and doing research has been helpful.
- Most said they learned about about providing social services through on-the-job experience, professional development opportunities and previous experience (e.g., as a nurse, as a journalist).

# Librarians say

*Through the years, when you do so much research for – it doesn't matter which kind of topic, but when you do a lot of research, you know how to maneuver the computers or any other kind of literature. That actually helps you, I think helps you prepare how to help patrons that need social worker's assistance. – Jennifer*

*We had little to no formal education on this topic within MLS studies. We learned how to create programs, story times for underserved populations and demographics. However, we never spent time learning how to cope with the very many mental health issues that arise daily with our patrons. – Terry*

# Branch manager opinions (what should be taught)

- Dual degree track for MLS/MSW
- Introductory courses on social services in the library
- Social service resource training
- How to collaborate with social workers in a library setting
- Courses that combine knowledge from psychology, communications and mental health education
- Mental health first aid training
- Courses focusing on social work approaches to user interviews (helping people in crisis, de-escalation)
- Courses demonstrating how to tailor social services provision to different community settings
- Making social services librarianship a specialty like youth services
- Training in mindfulness, meditation, and sensory awareness techniques to promote greater empathy towards patrons
- Specified need for tailored training depending on community served (urban, rural, suburban)

# Branch managers' contrary opinions

- Training on supervising social workers isn't needed.
- Social service training isn't needed in every library context.
- Some want to disassociate the library from social service agencies.

# Branch managers say

*How do you handle an unruly patron or someone who's in crisis? What are the things that we can do and where do you draw those lines? I think that would be helpful for anyone going into a public library. It exists everywhere. – Ashley*

*I am so supportive of that initiative to give librarians some training in social work. I just think that's going to make them so much more prepared for what they're going to run into when they leave library school. – Eileen*

What do you wish your librarians had been taught in school about providing social service information? What would you like them to learn now?



Conclusions

# Where are we?

- Currently, there are very few social workers in public libraries in Florida.
- Librarians and branch managers generally support having a social worker in public libraries.
- But a significant challenge is how to pay for social workers. Few people are willing to give up librarian positions.

# Where are we going?

- More research is needed on the efficacy of having social workers in libraries.
  - How effective are they?
  - How many patrons can one social worker reasonably serve? What should social worker staffing look like?
  - What are the best models of librarian/social worker collaboration?
  - What are the appropriate boundaries between librarianship and social work?
  - What are the drawbacks of having a social worker in the library?
- More research is needed on how best to educate librarians to serve people in crisis, increase their knowledge of social services information, to collaborate with social workers in libraries, and how to supervise and assess social workers in libraries.
- Creative funding models need to be developed.
  - Partnerships with other community agencies
  - Grants
  - Internships

# Select publications from this project

- Baum, B., Gross, M., Latham, D., Crabtree, L., & Randolph, K. (2022). Bridging the service gap: Branch managers talk about social workers in public libraries. *Public Library Quarterly, 37*.
- Crabtree, L., Latham, D., Gross, M., Baum, B., & Randolph, K. (under review). Social workers in the stacks: Public librarians' perceptions and experiences.
- Gross, M., & Latham, D. (2021). Social work in public libraries: A survey of heads of public library administrative units. *Journal of Library Administration, 61* (7): 758-775.
- Gross, M., Latham, D., Baum, B., Crabtree, L., & Randolph, K. (under review). "I didn't know it would be like this:" Professional preparation for social service information work in public libraries.

# References

- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. (2021, September 8). Social workers. Occupational outlook handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/community-and-social-service/social-workers.htm>
- Cathcart, R. 2008. Librarian or social worker: Time to look at the blurring line? *The Reference Librarian* 49 (1): 87-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02763870802103845>
- Garner, M., L., K. Bell, A. Lockwood, and S. Wardle. 2021. Social work in Australian public libraries: An interdisciplinary approach to social justice. *Public Library Quarterly* 40 (6): 504–520. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2020.1825917>
- Gross, M., and D. Latham. 2021. Social work in public libraries: A survey of heads of public library administrative units. *Journal of Library Administration* 61 (7): 758-775. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2021.1972727>
- Hill, T., and K. A. Tamminen. 2020. Examining the library as a site for intervention: A mixed-methods case study evaluation of the “innovative solutions to homelessness” project. *Journal of Library Administration* 60 (5): 470–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1729626>
- Knight, H. 2010. Library adds social worker to assist homeless. *San Francisco Chronicle* January 11. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/Libraary-adds-social-worker-to-assisthomeless-3275950.php>
- Levinson, R. W. 1988. New I & R teams in library-based services: librarians, social workers, and older volunteers. *The Reference Librarian* 9 (21): 121–134. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v09n21\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1300/J120v09n21_11)
- Norton, M. H., M. J. Stern, J. Meyers, and E. DeYoung. 2021. *Understanding the social wellbeing of the nation’s libraries and museums*. The Institute of Museum and Library Services. Accessed May 9, 2022. <https://www.ims.gov/research-tools/data-collection/social-wellbeing-report>
- Provence, M. A. 2020. Encouraging the humanization of patrons experiencing homelessness: A case study of the role of the US public library social worker. *The Library Quarterly* 90 (4): 431–446. <https://doi.org/10.1086/710258>

# Acknowledgments

This research was made possible in part by a grant from the FSU Council on Research and Creativity. We also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the State Library as well as that of our research assistants, Brittany Baum, Lauren Crabtree and Brianna Paulin.

Has anyone changed their mind about wanting or not wanting a social worker in their library?

What else do you want to know  
about social workers in libraries?





**Thank you!**  
Questions? Comments?

Don Latham

[dlatham@fsu.edu](mailto:dlatham@fsu.edu)