

Florida State University, School of Information

Social Services in Public Libraries

Florida State University seeks **\$239,446** in **National Leadership Grant Applied Research Grant** funding for a two-year project (Aug. 1, 2023 – Jul. 31, 2025) to explore the experiences and perceptions of library managers, adult librarians, and youth services librarians on the provision of social services information in the public library. This proposal responds to **Goal 2: Strengthen Community Engagement and Objective 2.1: Promote inclusive engagement across diverse audiences** by providing a national data set reflecting the views of professional librarians on the provision of social services information in public libraries, how the profession can move forward in the face of increasing user needs, and will reveal best practices in the provision of social services information services and programs.

Project Justification

The provision of social services information by public librarians is ingrained in the history of the profession (Maack, 1998) and IMLS research has demonstrated that libraries play an important role in promoting the wellbeing of our communities (Norton et al., 2021). There has also been an ongoing tension in the profession about where professional boundaries lie and the appropriateness of librarians to provide these services. The emergence of the library as an important resource in disaster recovery and in response to social issues such as homelessness, drug abuse, food insecurity, and more has necessitated that librarians provide services that in many cases they were not trained for and did not anticipate being part of the professional scope of practice. In response, new approaches to library services such as learning to talk to people in crisis (Westbrook, 2015), understanding the effects of trauma (Tolley, 2022), and whole-person librarianship (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019) have been introduced in the literature. There has also emerged a growing interest in placing social workers in libraries to help alleviate the burden on librarians who not only lack training, but also the time to assist these users. This is not a one size fits all solution as not all libraries have access to community agencies or institutions of higher education that can provide personnel or interns and funding for social work positions is generally not easily come by (Gross & Latham, 2021). The **focus** of this project, which **requires the collection of empirical data**, is to understand the increasing necessity for social service information provision in libraries from the point of view of managers, adult services librarians, and youth librarians. Their perspectives toward developments in the delivery of social services information have not been fully explored and social service information provision from the point of view of youth librarians, in particular, has largely been ignored. We do not know what librarians see as the best way to handle social services information in libraries based on their experiences and knowledge of their communities.

Intended Impacts

A comprehensive picture of the experiences and opinions of public library managers and adult and youth services librarians at the national level will enlarge our understanding of what members of the profession are doing and want to do in the face of increasing social service information needs brought to the library. This will inform our knowledge of what best practices may look like, what the profession needs to move forward in providing these kinds of programs and services, and new models for how to best promote **inclusive engagement of communities** seeking social services information assistance. These outcomes will translate into improved services that promote community wellbeing, including for youth; **the improved ability of libraries to provide broad access to information** and more informed service provision in the event of a disaster.

Methods

Employing a mixed-method sequential model, online focus groups will precede the development of three national surveys tailored to three groups, public library managers, adult services librarians, and youth services librarians. These measures are employed to address the following **research questions**

1. What are the experiences and perspectives of professional librarians (managers as well as adult and youth services librarians) regarding the provision of social services information in public libraries?
2. How are social service information needs transacted in libraries including how related services and programs are developed and assessed?
3. What is the willingness of librarians to respond to social services information needs in their daily work?
4. If librarians could have exactly the help they need to respond to their community's social service needs, what would that look like?

As in a typical qual/QUAN sequential study, findings from the focus groups, along with data from interviews with managers and librarians collected in two preliminary studies (Gross & Latham, 2021; Baum et al., in press; Crabtree, et al., submitted), will be used to develop survey questions for three separate surveys. Focus group questions, survey questions, and data analysis will be guided by Dervin's (Dervin & Dewdney, 1986) **sense-making theory** by focusing on how managers and adult and youth librarians see their situation in providing social services information in libraries, what

gaps they experience when confronted with this in their work, and what “helps” they believe they need to close the social services information gap for their users. Focus group data will be analyzed using the constant comparative method employing NVIVO software (<https://www.qsrinternational.com/>). Surveys will be developed using Qualtrics (<https://www.qualtrics.com/>) or similar survey software and data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. These methods are standard and replicable by others. A four-member advisory board will provide input into recruiting participants, developing data collection instruments, and interpretation of findings.

Project Work Plan

Month, Year	Research Activities
August 1—December 31, 2023	Seek Human Subjects approval. Hire graduate assistants. Develop and pre-test focus group questions. Begin recruiting participants for online focus groups. Build project website and social media presence.
January 1 – April 30, 2024	Continue recruiting focus group participants. Conduct online focus groups (two with managers, two with adult services librarians, two with youth services librarians). Transcribe focus group recordings. Begin coding focus group transcripts and analyzing data.
May—August, 2024	Complete analysis of focus group data and write up findings. Develop survey instruments (one for managers, one for adult services librarians, one for youth services librarians) based on focus groups and previous research findings. Pretest survey instruments.
September —December 2024	Deploy surveys using professional association (PLA, ALSC, YALSA) and state library listservs and publications, as well as project website and social media. To maximize participation, surveys will be open for three months and invitations sent over multiple venues will be repeated several times depending on response rates.
January – April 2025	Analyze data for each survey. Write up findings from each survey.
May - July 31, 2025	Triangulate data from all surveys. Write up comprehensive findings.
August 1, 2023—ongoing	Disseminate findings via online media, professional conferences, and peer-reviewed journals. Utilize professional association and state library listservs and publications to advertise the project and findings.

Diversity Plan

Participants (public librarians and library managers) for the focus groups will be recruited nationally and will likely reflect the demographics of the profession. At least one member of the advisory board will have an EDI focus/expertise and, along with the other board members, will provide guidance on recruiting a diverse pool of participants.

Project Results

The project will result in the following deliverables: (1) data collection instruments; (2) anonymized raw data from focus groups and surveys available in the FSU Data Repository; (3) dissemination of focus group findings and survey results through publications, presentations, project website, and social media; (4) summary of library managers’ and public librarians’ perceptions of and experiences with the provision of social services information in public libraries; (5) documentation of best practices related to the provision of social services information in public libraries; (6) final project report—made broadly available on project website, IMLS website, and professional association and state libraries’ listservs.

Budget Summary

Total funds requested: **\$239,446**. This includes faculty salaries & fringe (\$70,666); One GA salary & fringe (\$46,517); One GA student tuition (\$18,598); stipends for four advisory board members (\$4,000); travel for dissemination, ALA (\$13,150) - PI & Co-PI (one trip per year), and GA (Year 2 only); Focus Group Incentives (6 groups x 8 participants per group x \$50 = \$2,400), Focus Group Leader (consultant = \$6,000); focus group transcription services (\$675); and indirect costs (\$77,440). No cost share is required for an NLG Research Grant.