

*The Florida State University School of Information, Margaret Sullivan Zimmerman, PhD*

**Summary:** In response to the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program Goal 3, objective 3.2, Dr. Margaret S. Zimmerman, an assistant professor with Florida State University's (FSU) School of Information (SOI) and principal investigator (PI), requests a two-year, \$374,507 Early Career Development grant, with no cost sharing, to investigate library outreach services and the opioid epidemic. Despite the severity of the crisis, especially since the introduction of fentanyl into the heroin supply, there has been limited research into the best practices and efficacy of the response of public libraries within their communities. Also, the voices of people who use opioids have been largely silent in existing studies, except for those conducted by the PI. This project is meant to answer the questions, (RQ1) *What relationships exist between library services and opioid-related harm reduction services in US communities hard-hit by the opioid crisis?* and (RQ2) *What impact have library services had on the local opioid use population (OUP)?* The proposed project will extend the PI's current research agenda into the health information needs and services provided to the OUP and (1) create an evidence-based framework of how public libraries responded to the opioid crisis within their communities; (2) with the help of an advisory board, provide evidence-based recommendations for library professionals to meet the needs of the OUP in their communities; and (3) bring social work and public health practices into LIS research and teaching.

**Project Justification:** The United States is in the midst of an opioid crisis. Provisional data from CDC's National Center for Health Statistics indicate there were an estimated 107,622 drug overdose deaths in the United States during 2021, an increase of nearly 15% from the 93,655 deaths estimated in 2020 ([CDCa, 2022](#)). In 2020 the rate of overdose deaths rose 30% from 2019 to 2020, numbers that represent an escalation theorized to have been brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly disappointing, as the year before death rates had decreased for the first time in a decade. Seventy-five percent of these deaths involved opioids, and 82.3 percent of those involved synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl ([CDCb, 2022](#)). Opioid addiction has correlative relationships with other health and societal ills. There is a statistically significant relationship between people who experience homelessness and having a higher likelihood of experiencing opioid use disorder (OUD) and opioid overdose ([Yamamoto et al., 2019](#)). Research suggests a direct relationship between increased acute HCV infections and increased injection drug use with opioids ([Zibbell et al., 2018](#)). People who inject drugs (PWIDs) are disproportionately burdened by the HIV epidemic. At the end of 2018, 15.5% of all HIV infections in the United States were attributed to injection drug use ([CDC, 2020](#)). One study found that in 2017 alone, the national cost of opioid disorder was \$1,021 billion ([Luo et al., 2021](#)).

While the opioid crisis has exploded since the introduction of fentanyl, people who use these narcotics have traditionally been medically underserved due to the stigma and illegality of their substance issues. Success has been demonstrated when community organizations, such as libraries, implement health information outreach targeting the underserved ([Barr-Walker, 2016](#); [Luo, 2018](#); [Mi, Stefaniak, & Afonso, 2014](#)). However, despite the understanding that the US is in crisis and libraries, given their unique, ubiquitous reach as trusted community stakeholders could potentially assist, research into how libraries work as partners fighting the opioid epidemic is limited to case studies and small research projects. Exploration into the perspective of the OUP into how library outreach has or may best help them is non-existent.

This project will enable library professionals to better address the crisis in their communities by investigating current library practices and harm reduction efforts in communities with high drug overdose death rates around the US. This will involve talking to library professionals, public health and social workers, and people experiencing opioid use disorder (OUD) who use public library services. The research conducted here will be transferred to practical recommendations for professionals. To do this, the PI will convene an evaluator and an advisory board to guide her. This project will ultimately enhance the training and professional development of librarians to meet the needs of their communities in response to the epidemic, thus contributing to community well-being. Fighting the opioid epidemic, which is rooted in poverty and lack of opportunity ([Ghertner and Groves, 2018](#)), affords the chance to positively impact many of the social determinants of health: health care and access, economic stability, neighborhoods, and social factors. All of these directly relate to Laura Bush Program Goal/Objective 3.2, to contribute to the well-being of communities, and align with the IMLS agency-level goals to both strengthen community engagement and promote inclusive engagement across diverse audiences.

**Project Work Plan:** To address the aforementioned gaps, the proposed two year project will have a multi-phase, mixed methods design ([Hanson et al., 2005](#)). Prior to submitting the final grant in Phase II, the PI will reach out to local public librarians and public health and social work stakeholders, many of whom she has an existing relationship with, to request that they join an advisory board and select an evaluator for this project. Then, using Qualtrics, the PI will create a qualitative survey, assisted by Tai Cole, LCSW of FSU's College of Social Work, to generate data on the availability of library programming and outreach regarding OUD and harm reduction services in each community and collaborative efforts between libraries and public health stakeholders. These surveys will be disseminated to library directors in public library systems in the 20 hardest hit regions of the opioid crisis (based on population-level drug overdose rates and to be determined by the submission of the final proposal). Participants will be compensated \$50 for survey completion. While the survey is being disseminated, Ms. Cole, who specializes in substance use disorder, will conduct research into harm reduction resources in the communities that we survey. The PI and a graduate assistant will analyze the results of the

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surveys and the local availability of harm reduction resources to determine the answer to RQ1. Having conducted this analysis, the PI will select six library systems, including three in rural communities and three in urban communities, that have taken an aggressive role in fighting the opioid epidemic to visit and study in greater depth. During these visits her purpose will be two-fold: First, she will conduct semi-structured interviews of library staff inquiring about their experiences working with the OUP and local harm reduction stakeholders (compensated \$50 per person). Second, using Chatmon's Information Poverty as her theoretical basis, she will survey members of the local OUP to determine their perceptions regarding the public library's efforts with their community, what health information and harm reduction resources they would like to have available to them, and what their perceived barriers are to engaging with librarians when they need health information (compensated \$50 gift cards per person). Using Qualtrics, the PI will evaluate the qualitative and quantitative data to answer RQ2 and to develop the framework. Her data analysis will be based upon Creswell's (2007) process of analyzing qualitative data by fragmenting and grouping like-responses into thematic codes and exploring the data for general topics that give explanation to the research questions- along with generating descriptive quantitative statistics to support the qualitative data. Throughout the project, a graduate assistant will assist with data collection and processing, scheduling interviews of library staff, obtaining informed consent, and data analysis. Guided by the evaluator, the advisory board, and Ms. Cole, who is also a doctoral student in education, the PI will come up with a series of practical recommendations for librarians and publish them in a practitioner's journal.

The PI has experience that is significant to this work. Her research area is in exploring the health information needs of marginalized groups. She has been awarded two previous grants to create public library programming to assist librarians in helping the OUP in their communities in the southeastern US. She also is a co-PI of a grant with FSU's College of Social Work in which she will train rural librarians around a seven-state region on implementing the OCLC's Call to Action Toolkit. The PI has experience walking around communities, such as the Kensington community in Philadelphia, and interviewing people who suffer from OUD, and has three articles under review or forthcoming related to their health information needs and behaviors. The proposed project will further her long-term research agenda and her personal goal to conduct research that benefits underserved, stigmatized, small-world communities.

**Timeline:** *Prior to the grant-* Assemble advisory board, evaluator, and library systems to be surveyed. *Year 1-* Hire GA, create survey, send out to 20 pre-determined library systems, receive and process data, compare responses to harm reduction efforts in the local communities, determine six library systems that have the most active harm reduction efforts, travel to three over the summer of year 1. *Year 2-* Travel to the remaining three library systems, data analysis and development of the framework and recommendations, disseminate the framework through peer reviewed publications in academic and practitioner journals, at the Public Library Association conference and the Medical Library Association conference, and through an online, open-access, printable resource hosted on the PI's institution's website.

**Diversity Plan:** The driving motivation behind this project is to improve the lives of people suffering from OUD in traditionally underserved groups. While the media have focused on the effect of the opioid crisis in white communities, it has hit communities of color hard. The rate of synthetic opioid overdose deaths for Black people has increased 18-fold compared to 9.2-fold for Non-Hispanic Whites ([SAMHSA AHRQ, 2020](#)). Indigenous, Black, and LGBTQ+ youth face great discrimination and stigma, which makes them especially vulnerable to substance use and misuse. ([SAMHSA OBHE, 2020](#)). Hispanic youth have the highest prevalence of prescription opioid misuse ([SAMHSA, 2020](#)). Older and elderly adults have had greatly increasing rates of opioid addiction over the past years ([Yan et al., 2022](#)). Between 2010 and 2017, the rate of babies born with opioid withdrawal symptoms increased 82 percent ([HHS, 2021](#)). This is an epidemic that is affecting every population in the US, and especially those that are traditionally underserved. Confronting the opioid epidemic will benefit diverse groups and provide increased opportunities for equity and inclusion.

**Project Results:** This research will aid public libraries working with harm reduction efforts in their own communities. It will provide a framework of best practices for doing this successfully, informed by an advisory board, other successful models, and the OUP. It will give both librarians and social and public health workers insight into the health information needs of this underserved, stigmatized population as told by members of this group. This project has the potential to truly help those suffering from OUD by providing services and resources that they want through their local library- an organization which they trust. The deliverables of this project will be a minimum of two peer-reviewed journal articles and a practitioner article, two national conference presentations, and an open-access resource guide that provides the developed framework and recommendations for outreach, programming, and working with harm reduction agencies.

**Estimated Budget:** Total funds requested: \$374,507. This includes faculty salary & fringe (\$103,462); Administrative Personnel salary & fringe (\$37,876); One GA salary & fringe (\$57,709); One GA student tuition (\$22,339); GA materials and supplies (\$4,000); travel for dissemination, MLA (domestic conference trips, PI & GA= \$10,620); Data Collection Domestic travel (PI only, 3 trips per year, = \$10,014); Participant Incentives = \$5,000; and indirect costs (\$123,488). No cost share is required for an LB21 Early Career Grant.