Social Workers in the Library: An Innovative Approach to Address Library Patrons' Social Service Needs

Lili Luo[1], Deborah Estreicher[2], Peter A. Lee[3], Cyndy Thomas[4], Glenn Thomas[5]

[1]School of Library and Information Science, San Jose State University, lili.luo@sjsu.edu (corresponding author)
[2]San José Public Library, deborah.estreicher@sjlibrary.org
[3]School of Social Work, San Jose State University, peter.a.lee@sjsu.edu
[4]National Association of Social Workers, cyndythomas@loveandencourage.com
[5]National Association of Social Workers, glennthomas@loveandencourage.com

Abstract: Social Worker in the Library (SWITL) is a unique program where social workers partner with public librarians to provide information consultation services to the public. The goal of SWITL is to support social justice by expanding access to information regarding local social service programs, especially for the traditionally disadvantaged populations. Evaluation research has been conducted to gather input from both library patrons and library staff in order to determine the efficacy of the program. Findings suggest that SWITL has been a professional and helpful program, while there are still areas for improvement and additional efforts need to be made in response to these suggested improvement and make SWITL a more effective and efficient program in promoting social justice.

Keywords: social service, social work, public library, social worker in the library

1. Introduction

Social justice generally refers to the concept of creating a society that is founded on the principles of social equality and solidarity, that understands, respects and values human rights, and that recognizes the dignity of each human being (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). Libraries support the idea of social justice in that they strive to provide equal access to information for every member of their user population. Library Bill of Rights clearly state that "A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views", and "Libraries that make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use." (ALA, 1996).

Public libraries are vibrant community centers, providing free access to a wealth of information, which can be accessed in-person or online. These respected institutions support a wide range of community needs, serving toddlers through

seniors with family literacy programs, homework help and tutoring, job-seeking support, computer access and technology training, and a range of other programs. Each day, thousands of individuals across the nation visit their local library, explore its online resources, and interact with librarians – experts who help patrons find the information they need (Durrance & Fisher, 2003).

Connecting people with the information they need has always been a core purpose of libraries. Many library patrons need access to information regarding local social services available in their community to meet needs such as homelessness and hunger, domestic violence, substance abuse, health and mental health issues, grief and loss, aging-related challenges, juvenile justice and delinquency, and employment. Public libraries offer a unique venue for developing new approaches to expanding access to social service programs, resources, and information. Creating effective partnerships between social workers and public libraries – a universally recognized neighborhood resource – offers new opportunities to meet community needs (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009).

With those opportunities in mind, faculty from the San Jose State University School of Social Work partnered with the San Jose Public Library (SJPL) and the local chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), conducted a needs assessment in 2007/2008, and then launched the Social Workers in the Library (SWITL) pilot program in October 2009. The primary objective of the SWITL program is to seek ways to increase access to information regarding local social service programs. Modeled after an existing "Lawyers in the Library" program at SJPL, the SWITL program involves professional social workers, who volunteer their time to meet face-to-face with library patrons for brief consultations. The consultations occur on-site at the SJPL main branch (Dr. Martin Luther King Library, or King Library in short) and focus on providing basic information in response to a patron's needs, as well as providing referrals to community resources. To date, SWITL patrons have received assistance with social service issues ranging from adoption and foster care, stress in family relationships, divorce, death, and loss, unemployment, homelessness, and recovery from substance abuse. Services have been provided in English and Spanish, and social workers have access to on-call translation services for non-English-speaking monolingual patrons. Library personnel and volunteers promote the program, facilitate the appointments, and provide supplementary information to patrons.

SWITL expands access to information regarding social services in a unique collaborative model between social work practitioners and information professionals. It manifests the pursuit of social justice as it seeks to provide an opportunity for free, convenient and equal access to social service information for the public, especially the socially and economically disadvantaged. To further understand SWITL's efficacy and explore additional opportunities for improvement/expansion, evaluative research was conducted among the social workers and library staff involved in this project. This paper will present in detail the SWITL model and discuss lessons learned from the evaluative

research. The authors hope that interested libraries/institutions will benefit from SWITL's experience and make more informed decisions when implementing similar programs to fulfill their local patrons' social service needs.

2. Literature Review

For many individuals, basic health, mental health, and everyday living needs can go unaddressed as a result of a lack of resources and information, as well as the limited number of access points to services. For communities particularly at-risk, such as members of certain ethnic groups or individuals from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds, access and utilization of services is even more limited (Chow, 2003; Lopez, Bergren, & Painter, 2008; Snowden, 1998). For example, new immigrants needing help might turn to a family member, spiritual/religious head, or trusted community leader instead of a health professional or social worker.

This is due in part to unfamiliarity with services and the reluctance to seek help because of cultural perceptions regarding health and well-being, and the stigma associated with the feelings of shame attached to needing and asking for assistance. In addition, the location of the social service center can decrease accessibility. In the SWITL program model, the public library serves as an additional social service information and referral center for the community. Libraries are viewed as welcoming public places, with multiple branches positioned strategically in neighborhoods, offering free community resources. Libraries promote lifelong learning and address community needs through literacy programs, access to consumer health information, GED test preparation, and a variety of other campaigns. They respond to identified community needs, offering multicultural staff, providing books, media, and programming in multiple languages, and designing programs to increase accessibility of their collections and services to individuals of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.

Furthermore, libraries naturally attract those seeking information and assistance for a variety of needs, including many who are intimidated by formal social service agency settings. In the United States, 65% of households use public libraries on a regular basis (NCES, 1997). Public libraries serve a wide range of individuals who may benefit from access to local social service programs, including recent immigrants, homeless populations, migrant workers, unemployed individuals, and people with disabilities. Numerous studies have explored how different groups use public library resources, correlating library use with factors such as education level, income level, program/service awareness, economic needs, and social capita (Burke, 2007; D'elia, 1980; Gong, Japzon, & Chen, 2008; McClure & Bertot, 1998; Sin & Kim, 2008; Washington State Library, 2009).

The connection between public libraries, library and information science, and human service professions such as social work is not new (Collins, Howard, & Miraflor, 2009; Durrance & Fisher, 2003; Hendler, 2000; Hughes-Hassell, Hanson-Baldauf, & Burke, 2008; Leisey, 2009; Lempinen, 2005; Snow, 2009).

For example, public libraries are typically among the first locations offering support following a disaster (Featherstone, Lyon, & Ruffin, 2008). New Orleans residents relied on their public library for information and access to government forms and FEMA relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Recognizing that libraries serve as a natural meeting place, the Alachua County Library District created "The Library Partnership–A Neighborhood Resource Center," which offers space for social services ("Florida Library Merges Branch, Social Services", 2009). Recently, San Francisco Public Library hired a social worker to assist homeless patrons (Knight, 2010). Librarians who staff public library reference desks frequently interact with patrons seeking answers to a range of questions related to social service issues, such as legal and health information needs (Cathcart, 2008). While the literature is abundant with studies aimed at enhancing library services to fulfill these needs (Ashmore, 2008; Curry, 2005; Gillaspy, 2005; Harris, Wathen & Chan, 2005; Kouame, Harris & Murray, 2005; Tashbook, 2009), their focus is primarily internal service improvement. Few studies consider how external partnerships, like those with social workers, can expand the service expertise and better address patron needs.

Despite a handful of efforts to unite these two disciplines that have similar missions to advance community well-being and enrich lives, there are few deliberate partnerships between public libraries and the social work profession and limited program models where these types of collaborations result in increased access to social services. More importantly, there is a dearth of scholarship and research regarding collaborative service models that partner these two disciplines to better meet community needs.

3. The SWITL Model

SWITL is hosted at King Library, which is a joint library the serves both the City of San Jose and San Jose State University. It opened in August 1, 2003, and its building has eight floors plus a mezzanine and lower level, and a capacity of 2 million volumes. On average, over 1 million visitors are served per year. The Library is free and open to all – no identification or proof of residency is needed to use or enjoy materials within the Library. NASW, through the efforts of two California NASW Board Members, is the co-sponsor of SWITL. Founded in 1955, NASW is the professional organization which seeks to enhance the effective functioning and well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its work and advocacy.

As mentioned earlier, SWITL is a collaborative effort involving SJPL staff, NASW members and SJSU faculty and students. Once a month (twice a month since October 2011), two to three volunteers from NASW (including faculty members and students at SJSU) spend two hours at King Library offering one-on-one sessions, whose objective is not to establish client/social worker relationship but to provide information consultations. Each session is about 20 minutes in length, during which volunteer social workers offer consultation regarding information sources and referrals to local social services (e.g. relevant program and contact information) in response to patrons' information needs.

They also provide follow-up via opportunities for future appointments if patrons have additional questions. Staff at King Library coordinates these sessions, scheduling appointments and handling logistics.

A break-down of its elements is helpful to further understand how SWITL works,

- SWITL is promoted by various means, such as flyer, Website, and electronic display board.
- A dedicated phone line is used to conduct initial screening of patrons and schedule appointments for them.
- A reception area is provided for patrons awaiting their sessions to browse book displays, affiliated library program announcements, resource guides, and other collections of library materials.
- Volunteer social workers are scheduled to fill session slots.
- Logistics such as meeting room, computer and internet access, refreshments, children's table, liability waiver, and AT&T translation line are handled in preparation for the sessions.
- A collection of resources, such as resource guides, information pamphlets, agency contacts, and resource binders, is available to assist information consultations during the sessions.
- Primary clientele are library patrons with information needs on the following topics:
    - Education
    - Emergency Services - food, clothing, housing and crisis support
    - Employment
    - Adjustment from grief or loss
    - Family Matters - parenting, childcare, elder issues and domestic violence
    - Health Improvement - mental, physical and health insurance
    - Immigration
    - Housing
    - Hunger
    - Literacy
    - Legal Issues (referrals to Lawyers in the Library)
    - Support Groups - men, women and teens
- Feedback from both patrons and social workers is gathered.

Because of the in-depth information consultations offered by SWITL, the public now have expanded access to a wealth of social service knowledge and their information needs can be better fulfilled. This is particularly beneficial to people representing vulnerable populations (low income or education level, over age 65, or minority) as the public library is usually the first place they resort to for social service information such as health information (Zoints, Apter, Kuchta & Greenhouse, 2010). Improved meaningful access to information will in turn lead to more informed decisions about their personal situations and increase their opportunities to succeed in society.

3. Research Methods

Since the inception of Social Workers in the Library, in October 2009 thru December 2011, 27 sessions have been conducted at King Library. A total of 193 individuals were interviewed over the phone, among whom 116 were attended to by members of the NASW, and 13 were served via phone consultation. In addition, ten drop-ins also received consultation. The major issues concerning library patrons were health, family, employment and housing needs. In October 2011 King Library was able to increase services from once a month to twice a month, and another SJPL branch, Biblioteca Latinoamericana Library began monthly services with a Spanish/English bilingual social worker.

To further examine how SWITL has helped library patrons with their information needs regarding social services, patron feedback was gathered through survey questionnaires. The use of self-administered anonymous survey allowed respondents privacy and anonymity when offering their input, providing a comfortable venue for patrons to share their perceptions of SWITL. The uniformity of questionnaire items enabled statistical analysis of the responses and thus presented quantitative evidence of SWITL's impact. Four key variables were investigated in the survey – the helpfulness of SWITL services, the professionalism of the SWITL social worker, needs fulfilled by SWITL, and areas for service growth. Among the 41 validly completed questionnaires, SWITL services were evaluated between "helpful" and "very helpful" according to a 4-point Likert scale (mean = 3.74; SD = 0.59) with 1 being "very unhelpful" and 4 being "very helpful." Many patrons came seeking referrals for housing, food, health and mental health services, and employment. There were a variety of other needs as well, including grief support, family counseling, and legal advice. Patrons rated the professionalism of the SWITL social worker volunteers very high according to a 5-point Likert scale (mean = 4.68; SD = 0.79) with 1 being low and 5 being high. The main area for growth suggested by patrons was the need for more time for the referral/consultation session. These results indicated that the objective of SWITL was achieved successfully. Patrons' various social service information needs were fulfilled by the services provided by SWITL.

Although patrons attributed high regards to the SWITL service, it was still necessary to examine the program from the perspectives of all parties involved. Library staff and social workers have worked on different aspects of SWITL's operation, and their input is as valuable as patrons' with regards to understanding SWITL's efficacy and improving the program to best meet the public, particularly the underserved population's social service information needs. Focus group interviews were conducted among volunteer social workers and library staff (from the entire library, including both City and University Library staff, not just the ones working with SWITL). Focus group interviews were used as the data collection instrument. A focus group generally involves 8 to 12 individuals who discuss a particular topic under the direction of a

moderator who promotes integration and ensures that the discussion remains on the topic of interest (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The basic purpose of the focused interview is to gather qualitative data from individuals about their experience or attitude regarding some particular concrete situation, which serves as the focus of the interview (Merton, 1987). Focus groups are commonly prescribed for research that is either exploratory, clinical, and/or phenomenological (Calder, 1977). In this study, librarians' input on ways to improve SWITL was the "particular concrete situation" that needed to be investigated. It was relatively singular in focus and exploratory in nature. Thus, the focus group interview was determined to be a proper instrument for data collection.

There are three elements of SWITL that were considered working well.

- The physical setting (a waiting area and a private room) of the area where social workers meet with library patrons
- Undivided attention to patrons in a private session
- The system of patron screening and appointment scheduling

In the meantime, several areas for service improvement were also identified.

- Promote SWITL to patrons more actively. Promotional efforts may include putting up print and electronic posters, word of mouth advertisement, and making promotional materials that are easily understandable by low-income patrons, such as using audio material, easy language or translations.
- Increase awareness of SWITL among library staff. It is helpful to have individuals involved in SWITL talk about SWITL at meetings of other library departments in order to generate more awareness and better understanding of what the program entails.
- Help patrons self-identify their social service needs. It is important to be specific about what the program is about, what kind of services social workers offer, and what patrons can gain from it.
- Provide more information resources about social services, such as NASW literature, resources and tools that could help librarians help patrons with immediate social service needs, and a FAQ list.
- Expand availability of the program via means like using student interns from School of Social Work and School of Library and Information Science, and offering services remotely via phone or email.
- Create an environment for patrons to both get peer support and benefit from a private session with social workers.
- Justify library staff time spent on SWITL. It is helpful to have concrete evidence (e.g. cost-effectiveness analysis) that could quantify the value of the library staff time.
- Ensure accountability on the part of social workers (e.g. show up at scheduled sessions) when the program expands.
- Work with surrounding communities to utilize their resources and have them inform their community members about SWITL.

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed in the study to evaluate how effectively SWITL meets patrons' social service information needs and explore how to further improve the SWITL service. Promoting social justice via expanded access to social service information is the driving force behind SWITL, and service evaluation and improvement is a pivotal pathway toward SWITL's constant success in contributing the society's social justice agenda. Results from the mixed-method evaluation study suggest that while patrons who received service from SWITL had positive experience, it is important to more effectively promote the program in the traditionally underserved communities and enable more people from the vulnerable populations to benefit from the program.

4. Conclusions

Nowadays, as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, the need for public libraries to tackle social exclusion and engage in social justice becomes ever more urgent. The development growth of public libraries hinges upon its relevance to the majority of their local communities (Pateman & Vincent, 2010). In order for them to fully grasp the "equity" agenda and transform into needs-based services, innovative approaches are needed to reach out to the communities, meet the needs of the underserved, and succeed in the pursuit of social justice.

SWITL is a unique public service model where volunteer social workers provide information consultation/referrals at a public library. Such collaboration between social workers and library staff greatly enhances public access to quality information on social services and reinforces the value of public libraries as a community resource. Since its inception, SWITL has helped over one hundred library patrons, and its expansion both in terms of service hours and location attests to its success in helping patrons with their social service needs. Based on feedback from library patrons, SWITL has been a professional and helpful program, and much appreciated by patrons who have benefited from it. There are still areas for improvement though, and additional efforts need to be made in response to these suggested improvement and make SWITL a more effective and efficient program. In summary, the authors hope that through sharing the details of the SWITL model, interested libraries will develop a solid understanding of the inner workings of this innovative approach and therefore make more informed decisions when implementing similar programs to fulfill their local patrons' information needs and to support the agenda of social justice.

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