



APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY
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TO: APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY BOARD OF TRUSTEES
FROM: COLLEEN RORTVEDT, DIRECTOR – APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY
DATE: SEPTEMBER 11, 2019
RE: SOCIAL WORKER IN THE LIBRARY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A public library serves as an essential component of the civic and educational foundation of a community. For some a library is a place to simply get books, attend programs or access the internet. For others it is a lifeline, serving as a place where people turn for help during life transitions and where people in need of resources come for assistance.

As a welcoming public space with computers, free internet access, shelter, restrooms and other resources, public libraries across the country have found themselves front and center in the service of patrons experiencing poverty, homelessness, chronic physical and mental health problems, trafficking and addiction. Many of our most vulnerable patrons are impacted by a combination of limitations including cultural and language barriers, illiteracy, illness, social isolation, hunger, other financial limitations, discrimination, homelessness or housing instability.

These needs are often beyond the training, education and scope of what the library has traditionally offered. Some of these needs cause safety issues for staff and other patrons and must be handled skillfully. For the past decade, libraries of all sizes across the country have been increasingly adding social workers or various community resource specialists to the library as a method to respond to the patrons needs that they are experiencing in the library. In Wisconsin, Eau Claire and Racine currently employ a social worker and several others have done pilots or are considering it.

This fall we will begin working with Dr. Beth Wahler from the Indiana University School of Social Work on a needs assessment. Dr. Wahler is one of the leading researchers in this area in the country and has done this work for Indianapolis Public Library. In addition, she has a Ph D. student making this the focus of her dissertation and Indiana University is evaluating offering a dual degree Master's in Social Work (MSW)/Master's in Library Science. This needs assessment will be funded by a grant from The Friends of the Appleton Public Library in an amount not to exceed \$7,000.

In this study we will be getting input from staff as well as patrons which Dr. Wahler will use to develop a professional recommendation on how to move forward. Simultaneously, we are in discussion with UW Oshkosh about the potential of carrying out recommendations from the needs assessment in a pilot starting in February. The needs assessment survey would overlap with the pilot to allow us to work with the MSW student(s) as we gather additional information from our community about their needs.

Until we get further along in the process, I can't tell you exactly what it will look like but I can tell you that should we move forward with a permanent social worker, that position's role will be to work closely with the

local organizations that are engaged in this work, providing information and referral throughout the community. The position would also provide training and support for staff and be a liaison for the library with agencies relevant to their role. This position would not duplicate any existing services in the community but serve as a warm hand-off to the numerous agencies that are experts in these areas.

Below is the proposed timeline for the needs assessment. This timeline allows us to have preliminary recommendations from the staff survey and create a more informed approach to the public facing survey in conjunction with the MSW students.

1. Finalize survey instrument and data collection plan for staff survey	10-6-19
2. Complete staff survey data collection	11-15-19
3. Submit report of staff survey results and preliminary recommendations	12-20-19
4. Finalize survey instrument and data collection plan for patron survey	1-10-20
5. Complete patron survey data collection	3-15-20
6. Submit final needs assessment report, including results of the patron survey and comprehensive recommendations using results of both surveys	5-15-20

Please let me know if you have any questions. I will keep you informed as we move forward on evaluating this potential initiative.