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**APPLETON PUBLIC LIBRARY**  
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**TO: Members of the Community and Economic Development Committee**

**FROM: Colleen Rortvedt, Library Director**

**DATE: October 7, 2020**

**RE: Library Needs Assessment – Social Worker**

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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.

With the exception of our current restrictive service model that has been caused by the pandemic, during normal times a public library serves 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. Over the past decade, libraries of all sizes across the country have been increasingly adding social workers or various types of community resource specialists to the library as a method to respond to the patrons needs that they are experiencing in the library.

In 2019-2020 the Appleton Public Library (APL) worked with Dr. Beth Wahler from the Indiana University on a needs assessment evaluating the potential for adding a social worker in the library. Dr. Wahler is one of the leading researchers in this area in the country and has done this work for other libraries. In addition, she has a Ph D. student making this the focus of her dissertation and Indiana University is the first university that will offer a dual degree Master's in Social Work (MSW)/Master's in Library Science.

Our needs assessment had several components and included a patron survey. This survey was sent to library patrons or offered in-house where an MSW student in social work from UW Oshkosh encouraged and helped individuals complete the survey. We asked patrons to identify their housing status and were able to separate responses based on housing status. One of the questions we asked patrons were about their top unmet needs.

Those who reported being in situations with no stable housing reported the following top needs:

- 1) mental health (46.2%)

- 2) financial (42.9%)
- 3) housing (40.8%)
- 4) employment (34.7%)
- 5) social connections (32.7%)
- 6) a place to keep warm or cool (28.6%)

We began a MSW student field placement this winter but needed to suspend this placement when the pandemic required us to temporarily close the library. We continue to keep in touch with the UW Oshkosh School of Social Work and plan to return to this conversation when we are able to return to providing more services inside the library facility.

I have included the full needs assessment and am happy to discuss this with anyone interested.