



Date: May 2, 2024
To: Carnegie-Stout Public Library
From: Project Team
Cc: City of Dubuque
Re: Rethinking Policies for Inclusive Library Services
Appendix:

SUMMARY

Libraries welcome everyone. They are one of the last places where an individual can simply exist without the obligation of purchasing something, and most services are free, however, the objective to serve everyone also has its challenges. The Carnegie-Stout Public Library in Dubuque, Iowa is seeing an increase in high needs patrons becoming using the library improperly and/or becoming disruptive. The library does not have policies in place to remediate this challenge, so staff feels unprepared to intervene.

BACKGROUND

There has been an increase in homeless patrons in public libraries, while staff are not trained as social workers, the needs of patrons in crisis go unmet. While the increase in patron's unmet needs falls largely to individuals who are unhoused, many individuals are also facing mental health challenges, substance abuse issues, abusive relationships, and more. The Carnegie- Stout Public Library is seen as a safe space for homeless individuals where they can receive basic needs without cost such as Wi-Fi, access to services, and support. While libraries are seeking to maintain their position as one of the last free spaces for all to receive basic services, they must also address safety concerns, hygiene issues, as well as disruptions from other library services. Librarians are having to play multiple roles, as providers of public information, as well as social workers—many who do not have adequate training and resources to handle complex social issues.

From the staff survey, a set of questions regarding how many times a week staff encounter patrons with brain health challenges, substance abuse issues, limited or no access to necessities, or domestic violence situations—and their overall level of comfort in navigating situations where patrons require social assistance outside the library scope allows insight into the severity of the issue. Staff were able to write in answers, which ranged from less than 1 to 13 disruptions per week. More than half the staff feel they encounter situations with high needs patrons daily, and most notably, 23% report 1-3 incidents per week, 14% report 8-12 incidents per week. Another key takeaway from the staff survey was when measured if staff feel they are able to navigate these situations when the assistance required is beyond library services with responses ranging from “definitely not” to “definitely yes”, 11 responded neutrally stating that maybe they could effectively assist high needs patrons, 3 stating “definitely not” and others somewhere in the middle.

Responses from the survey indicate that staff at the Carnegie-Stout Public library would greatly benefit from education and training around their changing role as librarians, acknowledging the increase of high-needs patrons as part of their daily routine. Without proper training, disturbances from patrons in need may further endanger library staff and other patrons. Along with staff training, community resource events will better serve patrons in need providing them with avenues for acquiring social services including low-income housing, connecting them with mental health help, or applying for benefits such as Medicare, Medicaid, or SNAP. Connecting high needs individuals with social services will allow them to become participating members of society increasing overall productivity within Dubuque.

STAKEHOLDERS

- Carnegie-Stout Library Staff
 - The Carnegie-Stout Library staff on the front lines of this challenge, includes both public-facing staff and behind-the-scenes staff.
- Carnegie-Stout Library Patrons
 - Any individual who utilizes or could utilize the physical library space in the future, including both high needs patrons and non.
- Law Enforcement
 - Police officers are called there daily to assist with this challenge

BEST PRACTICES

- **Des Moines Public Library-** Ashlan Lippert, Licensed Social Worker and Community Resource Specialist at the DMPL is new to the position created within the library. Because of the hard work advocating for the need of a social worker in the library to the city council for several years, the position was created to alleviate stress from library staff and to adequately address the changing needs of patrons. The librarians responsible for hiring Ashlan conducted research on already existing social workers in libraries, as well as created consensus with library staff as to what the role of the social worker would entail. Ashlan has been at the DMPL for six months and has met with over 350 new patrons seeking assistance with social services. Within those six months, she helped in finding permanent housing for 28 individuals. Like Dubuque, Des Moines has a waiting list for individuals seeking permanent housing through HUD. This does not include Section 8 which both cities have closed to apply for. As every day brings something different, she outlines the importance of taking every meeting with every social service organization in the area to best connect individuals to where they need to go.
- **Des Moines Public Library Community Connections-** The Des Moines Public Library serves as an example of how community organizations can partner with public libraries to reach individuals experiencing crises. From our interview with Community Resource Specialist Ashlan Lipert at DMPL, she provided details about the twice a week community outreach event at the library. She noted that individuals attending the event were 90% unhoused Des Moines residents. The number one need from patrons coming into the library and seeking help will always be housing. On average, 71 people are at this event twice a week. On the busiest day, the event saw over 223 individuals. Although the city of Des Moines has a population nearly four times larger than that of Dubuque, the continually large turnout from one location is promising that the event would find success in other communities such as Dubuque. The outreach event was formerly planned and

implemented by one of the library staff members, but since the hiring of the community resource specialist, they have taken over the organization and execution of the event.

- **Iowa City Public Library best policies and practices-** the Iowa City Public Library provides useful guidelines for staff use regarding patron behavior. The structure of the guidelines guides staff to note the occurrence of a disturbance, along with the immediate response, and then the authorized respondent to the disturbance. Different types of common policy infractions are listed, based on the patron behavior policy for the public. If a more severe disturbance occurs, authorized respondents become more senior library staff members, and punishment requires a longer library suspension. They also provide an appeal process for patrons who have caused a disturbance. It is important to note that each time an infraction occurs, even at the lowest level, it is documented so library staff have .

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Adopt policies and procedures:** Carnegie-Stout Public Library should adopt new internal policies and procedures (listed within the final report) regarding patron behavior policies. A tracking system must be used for the tiered disturbances provided, to know when repeat offenders are entering the library, and how to act accordingly. New policies and procedures have been created informed by already-existing procedures from the Iowa City Public Library and the Des Moines Public Library. Both libraries document disturbances to effectively handle violations to behavior guidelines. Documentation can be implemented by a shared excel document with all library staff.
- **Implement mandatory staff training:** As the role of librarians is changing with the increase in high-needs patrons, it becomes imperative to be equipped with the skills to manage difficult situations. Currently, Carnegie-Stout Public Library does not have frequent staff training, relying on newsletters from Ryan Dowd and his *Librarians Guide to Homelessness*. When library staff feel unequipped to serve patrons in need, it can lead to dangerous situations for not only library staff but also other patrons within the library—such as knowing when someone is having a psychotic episode versus when they are under the influence of drugs. The American Library Association offers a wide range of staff training and seminars from Programs and Services to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, as well as Administration and Leadership. The ALA (American Library Association) provides both free and paid resources which anyone can access. If the library chooses to become a member of the association, more resources will be available to them whenever needed. Beth Wahler will also be releasing free training resources for library staff in the upcoming months.
- **Establish a regular community outreach event:** Carnegie-Stout Public Library can implement a community outreach event modeled after the successful program at the Des Moines Public Library (DMPL). From the interview with DMPL's Community Resource Specialist, Ashlan Lippert, the outreach event could initially occur once a month or every six months to gauge community response and resource availability. Formerly organized by library staff, the event's management has transitioned to the community resource specialist, highlighting the potential benefits of dedicated personnel in orchestrating such initiatives. To adapt this approach, Carnegie-Stout Public Library can designate one or

more staff members to oversee the organization and execution of the outreach event. This event serves as an important platform for high-needs patrons to access social services, ranging from assistance in obtaining a valid driver's license to participating in public transportation literacy programs, facilitating access to a free bus pass for one month. By establishing and maintaining partnerships with community organizations, libraries can better serve patrons in need while alleviating the strain on library staff who may otherwise find themselves in roles resembling social workers rather than librarians. This strategic shift enables staff to focus on their core responsibilities while enhancing the library's ability to meet the diverse needs of its community.

- **Explore opportunities to use a social worker:** The decision to hire a social worker at the library will stem from the realization that traditional library resources alone are not enough to meet patrons' needs. The integration process of hiring a social worker will consist of collaboration with city officials, advocating for resources and support to mitigate issues of homelessness and substance abuse within the library. Other libraries such as the Des Moines Public library advocated for a social worker through city council for several years, created to alleviate stress from library staff and to adequately address the changing need of patrons. Before a social worker is hired, the above policy recommendations must be completed for the education of library staff, so they can address the needs of patrons without a social worker first.

NEXT STEPS

- Implement new patron behavior policies to include beginning a documentation process to track disturbances within the library.
- Organize mandatory monthly staff training event provided by ALA or free material from Beth Wahler (beginning late 2024).
- Cultivate a network of social services organizations and host a regular community outreach event with these connections.
- Explore avenues necessary to hire or contract with a social worker including but not limited to researching budgetary constraints, physical space and supply needs, training