

MOTION BY SUPERVISOR HOLLY J. MITCHELL

September 24, 2024

Enabling County Libraries to Better Serve Their Unhoused Patrons

Los Angeles County (County) libraries have become a de-facto day shelter for thousands of unhoused individuals seeking respite from extreme weather conditions and unsafe street encampments. Many unhoused library patrons experience severe mental health problems. According to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, there are 75,518 unhoused men, women, and families living on our streets - of whom approximately 53,000 are unsheltered, 12,173 suffer from serious mental illness and 17,487 suffer from substance use disorders¹.

County libraries, as designated Emergency Cooling/Heating Centers, have offered a safe and inviting space for our unhoused neighbors for decades. Libraries provide warmth during cold winter days and relief from the heat during the summer. They are also spaces where staff provide kindness and support while often performing multiple duties to maintain the safety and comfort of all library patrons. As the number of unhoused patrons who suffer from serious mental illness increases in County libraries, the burden on library staff to become housing navigators, mental health supporters, and social workers for unhoused patrons escalates. From December 2021 to May 2024, over 15,000

¹ <https://www.lahsa.org/documents?id=7671-la-continuum-of-care-hc2023-data-summary>

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security incidents were reported and nearly 6,000 of those incidents involved people experiencing homelessness and/or mental health issues. The incidents were tracked through the County Library's internal security reports that also collect data on which libraries have the highest need for services.

Libraries face mounting pressures and strain related to serving a growing number of underserved, unhoused patrons. According to The Whole Person Librarianship Initiative², for more than a decade, public libraries across the United States have begun to embed social workers or clinicians within their facilities to provide services and resources that are beyond what library workers are trained to offer. Currently, the Department of Mental Health (DMH) has a program with community health workers -- also known as promotoras -- who visit libraries to promote materials and referrals to mental health services in a culturally sensitive way. However, neither the community health workers nor library staff are trained mental health professionals capable of assisting unhoused patrons in a mental health crisis. In modernized models of service, library workers rely on the social workers or clinicians to assist with more challenging-to-serve patrons.

Social workers have the clinical training and education that allows them to provide mental health services, including diagnosis, needs assessment, suicide assessment, and housing program referrals. They are also trained to lead support groups for patrons. Social workers can provide clinical consultation and training to staff (i.e., signs and symptoms of mental health disorders and how to engage with patrons who are experiencing trauma). These social workers also work closely with outside organizations to establish partnerships and a network of resources to help serve the needs of library patrons. Social workers can connect unhoused patrons to a myriad of services including assistance with completing forms, accessing counseling services, securing hygiene supplies, food, and linkage to a shelter/housing. Often, these programs focus on relationship and trust building.

In May 2018, the County Library piloted a unique approach and partnered with DMH to provide mental health services in libraries. Eight full-time equivalent (FTE)

² <https://wholepersonlibrarianship.com/>

licensed social workers were embedded in selected high-need libraries across the County. These clinicians also rotated to other library locations to reach more patrons in need of services. During the pilot program, they provided services at 43 libraries. (Addendum 1). Services provided by clinicians included support, triage, linkage to resources for housing, food, mental health needs, consultations, and more. The total cost for the eight FTEs for this pilot was \$1.55 million.

Data and feedback show that this pilot program was successful. During the last 6 months of the program alone, clinicians reported 3,704 contacts with unhoused library patrons in need of services. During the pilot program, social workers also led approximately 450 programs for patrons and staff, including outreach tables, resource events, support groups, and wellness trainings for staff. Unfortunately, this pilot program was cut short at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and ended in March 2020 when DMH needed to shift its limited social worker resources to meet other COVID-19 priorities in the County. As County Libraries reopened their doors after the initial pandemic-related closures, the subsequent increase in the number of unhoused patrons has made the need for direct clinician services in libraries even more critical.

This motion seeks to restore the previous pilot with modifications based upon the lessons learned and other efforts by public libraries in areas with high volumes of unhoused patrons with serious mental illness. Restoring the pilot is needed now more than ever as the number of mentally ill unhoused patrons has risen since the pilot was discontinued. Further, increasingly adverse weather conditions are driving more unhoused persons to seek shelter inside the libraries.

There are currently 85 County-operated libraries. Each of our County libraries strives to be a civic and cultural center, a hub for public information and services, and an institution of literacy, innovation, and lifelong learning. The County should better equip its public libraries to meet their core mission for all residents by offering supportive services to unhoused and mentally ill library patrons.

I THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Direct the Los Angeles County Librarian, in consultation with the Director of the Department of Mental Health (DMH), the Executive Director of the Chief Executive Office (CEO) Anti-Racism, Diversity & Inclusion Initiative, and the

- Executive Director of the CEO-Homeless Initiative to report back to the Board in writing within 90 days and identify up to ten high-need libraries in the County based on the estimated number of unhoused patrons with mental health needs who currently visit and are expected to visit those libraries each season, and any other needs-based factors that DMH and CEO deem relevant. This report should also include the full definition of “high need” that the departments use and the number of incidents (over a 3-month period) in which library staff attempted to de-escalate a library patron.
2. Direct the Director of DMH, in coordination with the Los Angeles County Librarian, the Director of the Department of Public Health-Substance Abuse Prevention and Control, and the CEO, to explore the feasibility of restoring the pilot program that assigns clinicians and/or licensed social workers to support high need libraries, and report back to the Board in writing in 120 days. The report shall include an-implementation plan that identifies the required number of staff and classifications, scope of services to be provided, data to be collected on efficacy, proposed assignment schedules, implementation timelines, and funding sources (such as realignment dollars, Behavioral Health Service Act funds and other funds).

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Addendum 1:

Libraries with highest need by SPA (2018-2020)

LA County Library locations that received clinician services during the pilot program by Service Planning Area (SPA), 2018-2020.

- SPA 1: Lake Los Angeles, Lancaster, Littlerock, Quartz Hill
- SPA 2: Agoura Hills, Castaic, La Crescenta, San Fernando, Stevenson Ranch, Topanga, Westlake Village
- SPA 3: Baldwin Park, Claremont Helen Renwick, Duarte, El Monte, Hacienda Heights, La Puente, Norwood, San Gabriel, Sunkist, West Covina
- SPA 5: Malibu, Lloyd Taber-Marina del Rey
- SPA 6: A C Bilbrew, Compton, East Rancho Dominguez, View Park Bebe Moore Campbell, Willowbrook
- SPA 7: Anthony Quinn, Clifton M. Brakensiek, East Los Angeles, Montebello, Norwalk
- SPA 8: Carson, Hawthorne, Hermosa Beach, Lawndale, Lennox, Lomita, Manhattan Beach, Wiseburn, Woodcrest

Libraries with highest need by District (2018-2020)

LA County Library locations with highest community need or greatest number of reports of unhoused customers or incidents related to mental health issues.

- SD1- Anthony Quinn, East Los Angeles, El Monte, La Puente, Norwood, San Gabriel, Sunkist, West Covina
- SD2- A C Bilbrew, Carson, Compton, Culver City Julian Dixon, East Rancho Dominguez, Florence, Gardena Mayme Dear, Graham, Hawthorne, Hermosa Beach, Lawndale, Lennox, Lloyd Taber-Marina del Rey, Masao W. Satow, View Park Bebe Moore Campbell, Willowbrook, Woodcrest
- SD3- Malibu, San Fernando, West Hollywood
- SD4- Alondra, Angelo M. Iacoboni, Artesia, Bell, Bell Gardens, Hawaiian Gardens, Hollydale, Huntington Park, La Mirada, Los Nietos, Maywood Cesar Chavez, Norwalk, Pico Rivera, South Whittier
- SD5- Claremont Helen Renwick, Duarte, Lake Los Angeles, Lancaster, Live Oak, Temple City