Project Overview Document

Building a Trauma-Informed Workplace to Support Library Staff

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Cindy Aden: Sponsor
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Capstone Project

Our Team

Our team consists of co-project leaders Ruby Vail and Vivian Edwards. Our passion for this project stems from our professional experiences working in the public library setting. Across libraries, we have experienced and witnessed first-hand the need for better support systems in public library organizational structures to foster greater employee wellbeing and resilience, centering the experiences of those employees most likely to experience trauma in the public library workplace.

Our Sponsor

Our project sponsor is Professor Cindy Aiden. Professor Aiden currently teaches leadership classes for the University of Washington iSchool program and is the MLIS Program Chair. In addition to her academic experience, Cindy has held positions of leadership within the library profession such as the title of Washington State Librarian. Using her expertise in library leadership, Cindy has guided our team throughout the capstone journey.

Information Problem Context

Recent studies like the Urban Librarians Unite "Urban Library Trauma Study" and Professor Karen Fisher's Trauma in the Library: Symptoms of PTSD Among Staff and Methods for Ensuring Trauma-Informed Care," have highlighted the rising amount of stress and trauma library workers are exposed to and experience themselves while at work. The studies describe the negative impact current library managerial practices have on staff members' own stress and trauma, leading to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and the choice to leave public librarianship. This new recognition of employee trauma and stress demonstrates a need to incorporate trauma-informed practices to internal library frameworks.

Project Objectives

The purpose of our capstone is to:
- Provide resources to define trauma and trauma-informed care
- Offer an overview of the existing literature describing staff library trauma
- Propose recommendations to address existing gaps in library workplace support practices using a trauma-informed approach
- Foster an online environment for public library workers to learn about trauma-informed care to support library staff as well as contribute their own lived experiences

To complete these project objectives, our project deliverables consist of a paper and

website to host the paper as well as provide additional resources and room for feedback.

Key Project Insights

Our initial project was to create a trauma-informed communication toolkit for public library administration and management to employ after an incident within the library. However, in conducting research for the literature review portion of this toolkit, we realized the need for an encompassing overview of the current state of trauma-informed care applications to library staff support systems. Application of these principles to public library work is an emerging field, with the landmark studies we discuss in our project only being published since 2021 and there is little cross analysis of their findings. Our project deliverables are able to juxtapose these findings to find common themes within the experiences of public library workers. Our hope is that in viewing these resources all together, key stakeholders such as those on public library boards or in management positions will gain new insight into the experiences of public-facing public library staff.

Furthermore, the recognition of trauma is only one step on the journey to employ a trauma-informed approach in an effort to improve the wellbeing of staff. Within our project deliverables, we include a call to action to create new and employ other trauma-informed models from different fields to the public library work environment. In research, we found little documentation describing the practical application of trauma-informed principles in support of public-library employees. To move this work from theoretical to material, we provided resources such as trauma-informed toolkits that describe how trauma-informed principles are incorporated into regular work. Additionally, we took this project as an opportunity to give our own example by creating a diagnostic survey that examines the experiences of library staff to understand the extent of organizational trauma embedded throughout an organization.

Our Approach

To put this new recognition and understanding of library staff trauma to use, our team felt it was necessary to create a resource which compiles these recent findings and draws connections and contextualizes them with other library-specific and non-library specific publications. From our experience in the field, public library workers are strapped for time and easily accessible and digestible information is preferred. To encourage engagement with our discussion and the resources we discuss, our team decided to host our paper on a website so that the paper is freely available to public library staff. Since this application of trauma-informed care is quickly advancing, we wanted to create a "living" resource, one that can be easily updated in the future to reflect new approaches and strategies. Additionally, a website critically allows us to solicit comments from library workers

themselves, so that discussion about this topic can be wide-reaching and ongoing.

Evaluation of Our Project Experience

Our project experience was exciting and also daunting. As full-time library workers living on opposite coasts, it was sometimes hard to find the time to connect. Furthermore, while our research felt very motivating and personal in terms of bettering our own experiences of and understanding of trauma experienced by public library staff, there were also times when this work was more emotional, in combination with on-the-ground traumas we experienced at work. We tried to approach this element of our work with the same methods which we recommend for public library teams – with compassion and centering trauma.

Next Steps

Our capstone project is a continuous work in progress. We have received feedback from a few professionals in the field of librarianship, but more is needed. Next steps include sharing our website so that people can read the documentation and share feedback. Furthermore, a next step in our project is to test and measure the effectiveness of trauma-informed strategies in bolstering employee wellbeing within the workplace by partnering with diverse types of public libraries and library systems.