

Social worker to help library defuse crises

Central Library adds position to aid patrons with mental-health needs

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Multnomah County Library is preparing to hire its first full-time social worker to aid library staff in defusing on-premise mental health crises and to better serve patrons in need of social services.

Multnomah County commissioners acting as the Library District Board approved an \$85,000 allocation of library district funding Thursday to pay for the one-year, pilot-project contract.

The crisis worker, who will most likely hold a master's degree in social work, will be based out of Central Library in downtown Portland, where district officials say the need is greatest.

The budget proposal came after a string of incidents where library staff called outside agencies for help with patrons experiencing "severe crises," library spokesperson Shawn Cunningham said.

"When you're faced with a suicidal patron, someone who has literally told you that they have a plan," Central Library Director Dave Ratliff says, "I can't resolve that. I don't really know what to do other than call (Cascadia) Project Respond and connect them with the right people. There's a sense of helplessness and stress and anxiety and 'How am I going to get this human being taken care of fast enough because I don't have somebody on site?' That's scary."

The crisis worker will work with the safety and security manager, another new position, filled late last year, to find ways for the library to cope with what it says are increasingly complex security issues.

"For us, it's the behaviors that are difficult," says Vailey Oehlke, Multnomah County director of libraries. "We have people who come in here drunk, who come in here under the influence of this or that or the



Patrons line up to enter Multnomah County's Central Library.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

other thing. That can create a pretty disruptive environment and a feeling of a lack of safety for others."

She and Ratliff say they've seen an increase in library patrons experiencing mental health issues, although their perceptions are purely anecdotal.

Two years ago, a survey conducted with the Department of County Human Services found that of 834 respondents at the Central Library, 18 percent were homeless.

The survey also found there were nearly as many housed respondents as there were homeless seeking mental health, domestic violence and housing services.

"A lot of times, people equate homelessness with bad behavior, and that's just not true," says Oehlke. "We have lots of folks who use our library who I'm sure are homeless, but we don't know it, and they behave just as well as anybody else."

Out of the survey came a list of recommendations urging Multnomah County to follow in the footsteps of several other urban libraries and incorporate mental health and social service information into

staff training.

San Francisco Public Library hired its first social worker in 2009 and has served as a model for other urban libraries following suit. Today it has a full-time social worker, community awareness and treatment service providers, and health and safety associates — paid positions filled by people who have completed recovery and now walk the halls of the library, offering peer-to-peer information about food, shelter and recovery programs to other patrons.

Barbara Stripling is the immediate past president of American Library Association and current senior assistant dean and assistant professor at top library school Syracuse University. She says that libraries in the U.S. "have a continuing emphasis on serving underserved populations" and that making sure librarians are trained in connecting people with resources is an important part of accredited library science curriculums.

Increasingly, she says, libraries are stepping up social services and access to mental health counselors, as well as

providing a safe space for people to gather during emergencies or unrest in their communities. Libraries served this function in New York after Superstorm Sandy and in Baltimore during riots earlier this year, she says.

The majority of persons-in-charge at Multnomah County Library have undergone eight-hour mental-health training from the county, but the expertise the library needs isn't something that can be taught in one day.

"I have staff who say, 'I didn't go to school to learn how to be a social worker; I went to school to be a librarian,'" says Oehlke, "but if you choose to work in an urban environment like this, you can expect it's an environment that's going to come with those sorts of situations."

Since June 2014, the library has received 15 complaints and three Yelp reviews from patrons taking issue with the homeless presence at the downtown branch. Oehlke and Ratliff say the authors of such complaints often make inaccurate assumptions about their fellow library patrons. Because the library can be a "microcosm of humanity in the community," Oehlke says, it's going to reflect every aspect of Portland's population.

"We are the last truly democratic institution in our society," Oehlke says. "Everybody gets to use (the library), no matter where they come from and who they are. Every now and then, some folks might find it a little uncomfortable, but I really believe, in this community, the vast majority of people really get that."

She says that for people who get kicked out of the mall for the way they look or for loitering or for people who can't go to Starbucks because they can't afford a coffee, the library is always a place where they are welcome and can expect to be treated with dignity.

"Homelessness is not the issue," Oehlke says. "The challenge for us in terms of maintaining a good space is more related to folks who are presenting mental health and addiction issues."

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