Supporting Youth and Families During Crisis: Essential Tasks in Practice

The University of Maryland (UMD), in partnership with the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) and the Association of Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), is requesting $249,999 to iterate, revise, and improve upon an existing *Field Guide* that will guide public library staff to implement essential tasks to support youth and families during crises (such as pandemic, hurricane, water supply, wildfire, etc.) and/or through the consequences of such crisis (gaps in fundamental literacy, limited access to information, disparities in learning opportunities, etc.). This proposed 2-year *Implementation* project directly addresses Goal 4 of NLG for Libraries, with a focus on meeting Objective 4.2 within this goal.

This proposal leverages prior unfunded participatory design (PD) work that focused on public library practices and a set of tasks deemed essential to serve systemically non-dominant youth and families before, during and after crises (hereafter "crisis times"). This work led to the publication of *Library Staff as Public Servants: A Field Guide for Preparing to Support Communities in Crisis* ("*Field Guide*"; Subramaniam et al., 2021). The *Field Guide* defines four non-sequential and iterative essential tasks that public library staff must implement during crisis times: (1) learn about the community, (2) co-create solutions with the community, (3) iterate and assess with the community, and (4) design structures for the community. These essential tasks highlight the need for all library staff to embrace a community-centered equity mindset, flexibility in library operations and decision-making, openness to change, and commitment to risk-taking. The *Field Guide* gives guidance and examples for how library staff can execute these tasks and adopt a Doing it With Others (DIWO) mindset. Since its publication in Winter 2021, the *Field Guide* has been accessed more than 19,000 times.

While the *Field Guide* serves as an all-in-one guide for preparing public library staff to serve communities during crises, we learned that staff need support to execute the essential tasks. In addition to overall guidance, library staff nationwide need examples, illustrating implementation in analogous communities, that they can use to customize approaches for their respective communities. This proposed project has the following goals: Goal 1 - To *support the implementation of the essential tasks* in diverse communities in which youth and families are facing one or more crises or the consequences of a crisis, Goal 2 - To *build a repository of examples* for each of the *Field Guide'*s essential tasks in practice, and Goal 3 - To *build a community of practice (CoP)* of library staff working with youth and families. This CoP will engage in PD to enhance their skills in support of serving local communities in crisis times.

Project Justification. In the summer of 2020, through a series of virtual PD sessions, a UMD-based team worked with 137 library staff serving youth and families nationwide and learned how they supported their communities during the crises of 2020 (which included the COVID-19 pandemic and civic unrest). Our work made it apparent that public library staff aspired to support their communities but did not know how to do so. Staff rushed to design ways to serve their communities without assessing needs and prioritizing community assets (Subramaniam & Braun, 2020). Our comprehensive examination of relevant academic and practitioner literature (Subramaniam & Braun, 2021a, 2021b) validated and broadened what we learned through our PD work. Libraries responded to the crises in multiple ways, from common responses such as virtualizing pre-existing services (e.g., story times) to offering specific services focused on community needs and finding alternative space for services (e.g., parking lot vaccination and testing) (Braun & Subramaniam, 2020; Negron, 2020; Wilcox, 2020). While staff motives were valid, lack of deep community understanding hindered success.

In summer of 2021, to learn more about libraries' response to crises, we conducted a *survey* with 20 state library agency (SLA) staff. We confirmed that services in crisis times were primarily planned without learning about community needs and assets, and designed and implemented by library staff *for* youth and families, instead of *with* youth and families. In the winter/spring of 2022, we facilitated a trial of the *Field Guide* implementation with library staff in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The survey and trial implementation highlighted that though public library staff found the *Field Guide* useful, they struggled to execute the essential tasks and did not know where to start. This is a result of lack of skills, knowledge, and support for executing the essential tasks *with* local systemically non-dominant youth and families. In instances when staff are ready to co-create and iterate their crisis-related services with the community, existing library structures (position description, staffing models, administrative decision-making process, etc.) limit their ability to connect with communities directly and to execute these essential tasks. While the *Field Guide* serves as a good first step for preparing library staff to serve communities in crisis times, we learned that more support and resources are needed.

This project fulfills four immediate needs: (1) Build public library staff's understanding of the needs and assets of local systemically non-dominant youth and families in crisis times so they are prepared to use an equity mindset to leverage community assets and implement the essential tasks (addressed by Goal 1), (2) Develop the unique skill sets (such as asset-driven approaches) necessary to execute the essential tasks for working *with* local systemically non-dominant youth and families in crisis times and not focused on what is available *at* the library building (addressed by Goal 1), (3) Develop localized examples of how public libraries serve communities of systemically non-dominant youth and families in crisis times so library staff nationwide can adapt and customize their services with their communities (addressed by Goal 2), (4) Launch a CoP that serves as a support system for library staff to learn from each other. This project's goals respond to

these needs by bringing together a community for library staff to co-learn the needed skills for designing and implementing solutions derived from the essential tasks through PD (DiSalvo et al., 2017; Druin, 2002) (addressed by Goal 3).

Project Work Plan. The project PI is Dr. Mega Subramaniam, the lead author of the *Field Guide*, who has successfully led the design of multiple professional development resources and training, including *ConnectedLib, Safe Data Safe Families, HackHealth, Youth Experience, and IMPACT.* The project co-PI is Nitzan Koren, a doctoral candidate at UMD. She is an instructional and document designer by training and is the lead doctoral student working with *UMD KidsTeam* (an intergenerational PD team that designs technologies and programs for and with youth and families). Both PIs will lead the planning and implementation of the PD sessions, build examples of essential tasks, and revise the *Field Guide*. Linda W. Braun (learning consultant at LEO) and Dr. Sandra Hughes-Hassell (Professor, UNC at Chapel Hill) will serve as consultants. Braun has extensive experience in designing and facilitating learning experiences for and with library staff such as the *T3 Project.* A co-author of the *Field Guide*, she will lead the development and implementation of the CoP. Hughes-Hassell was the lead PI for *Project READY* and has extensive expertise in incorporating DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) elements in library services. She will support the development of the *Essentials tasks in practice* repository, incorporating DEI elements. We have commitments from both partners – COSLA and ARSL. They will assist in recruitment and dissemination activities throughout the project. We have commitments from the following individuals to serve as advisory board (AB) members. Each brings expertise in building community-centered services: Jack Martin, CEO, Providence Public Library; Beth Yoke, Chief Strategy Officer, Cincinnati Public Library; Carla Hegwood, Coordinator of the Office of the Young Child, Pasadena Public Library; and a member from COSLA and ARSL (TBD), respectively. The AB members will regularly provide feedback on the project activities and the products being developed.

Implementation Pilot - Year 1: August 1, 2023-July 31, 2024: The project team will put out a call for applications to SLA chief officers and their youth services staff to apply to participate in the *Field Guide* implementation initiative. Applicants will be asked about their understanding of the *Field Guide* essential tasks, their response to community needs during recent crises, and their agency's capacity to participate. They will also be asked to identify a front-line staff member at one of the state's libraries who will execute the essential tasks. Five states will be selected to participate, paying attention to different facets of crises their communities have experienced, centering on the populations most disenfranchised during crises. Using PD, those selected will work with the project team to plan and implement the essential tasks and contribute to creating examples for the repository. We will also revise the *Field Guide* as warranted by our findings.

Implementation at Scale and Dissemination - Year 2: August 1, 2024 - July 31, 2025: With the materials co-designed in year 1 in hand, the project team will disseminate an application to add 15 SLAs and front-line library staff who will be coached by year 1 participants, and the project team, on implementing the essential tasks in the revised *Field Guide* using PD approaches. This will further enrich the repository and integrate more DEI elements, with a projected outcome of at least 7-8 examples per essential task. The project team will engage with the participants via the CoP to discover how skills and knowledge gained from the PD sessions translates into equitable services during crises. At the end of year 2, the project team and participants will conduct four webinars highlighting the examples, challenges, and successes from each essential task and submit articles to PLA journal, YALS, and American Libraries. All work will be conducted virtually. We have developed a summary of our project *sub-goals, activities, and data sources* used to measure outcomes.

Results and Impact. This project will support a national and immediate need to build the capacity of public library staff to serve systemically non-dominant youth and their families during crises times, with a commitment to equitable and asset-based approaches. Project outcomes include: (1) a repository of new illustrative examples that will be appended to the *Field Guide* website; (2) final versions of PD session plans that detail how to engage and guide library staff in the learning and execution of each of the essential tasks, which can be adapted by staff to execute the essential tasks with their communities; (3) a CoP that will uncover approaches to provide equitable practices and services during crises and will yield publications and presentations on this topic; (4) a group of trained mentors that can lead, coach, and help implement essential tasks to prepare public libraries to support communities in crisis in their respective states long after the IMLS project ends and, (5) a revised and improved *Field Guide*. Library preparation programs can also integrate all these deliverables into their curricula.

Budget. Funds are requested for: (1) salary and fringe benefits for the PI during the summer ($26,727); (2) support for a graduate student (co-PI), including tuition, stipend, benefits, and fees ($51,981); (3) contractual fees ($19,000); (4) supplies ($4,045) and (5) stipend for project partners, AB members, and librarian participants ($59,000). In total, the cost will be $249,999 for the project, inclusive of indirect cost of $89,246. There will be no cost sharing or sub-awards.