

The [State Library of Iowa](#) (SLI) is seeking \$249,661 in IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant funds to support a 3-year **implementation** project, *Building Library Capacity for Serving High-Needs Patrons*, in partnership with [Dr. Beth Wahler](#) from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC), a [consultant with public libraries](#) on serving patrons with psychosocial needs.

Project Justification: Nationally, awareness has been growing of [high numbers of patrons with psychosocial needs](#) visiting public libraries daily as well as growing numbers of library staff experiencing [trauma](#) and [burnout](#) as a result of these patron needs. A [2022 needs assessment of Iowa public libraries](#) by the SLI and UNCC team found similar needs in this state, while also exploring library staff and administration's ideas of potential interventions and desired support. Staff and administration indicated that they needed two primary supports to improve their capacity to do their work, 1) **training and information** and 2) **support for their own mental health, wellbeing, and resilience in the face of work-related stress**. Specific training needs included information about how to work with patrons in crisis and how to increase opportunities for building local or regional partnerships to assist them with this work. Thus, the proposed project incorporates both of these interventions by a) creating an endorsement/certification program for library staff and administrators, b) making [Mental Health First Aid](#) (MHFA) training available to the workforce, and c) offering support groups for library staff facilitated by a social worker. Additionally, this project will result in replicable and scalable interventions disseminated to other states for adaptation across the U.S. These are timely and relevant issues to address with national significance given U.S. library trends in both patron needs and library staff trauma, stress, and burnout. This project aligns well with the IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program goals to train, develop, and retain a diverse library workforce and to enhance the professional development of the library workforce to meet community needs.

Project Work Plan: The SLI will collaborate with Dr. Wahler to carry out the following work plan:

Phase One ("Build"- 8/1/23-7/31/24)- In the Build phase:

- a. A replicable online endorsement/certification program will be designed and created to include modules on trauma-informed librarianship, working with patrons in crisis, de-escalation, and self-care/resilience. An additional module will be added for library administrators focused on trauma-informed leadership principles and how to best support staff with serving high-needs patrons. Embedded in these modules will be additional resources aimed at supporting libraries with developing social service collaborations in their local areas, such as talking points for libraries wishing to "sell" their local city/county administrators or boards on the benefits of or rationale behind social service/library collaborations and templates for developing collaborative agreements with local service providers.
- b. The State Library will increase its collection of mental health and related resources, primarily e-books, available for public libraries across the state through the license consortium.
- c. A licensed social worker will be hired to facilitate the support groups (implemented in Phase Two), and this person will be trained so they are knowledgeable about the challenges facing contemporary public libraries. We will specifically hire a social worker since that profession is trained to address a wide variety of issues related to mental health and wellbeing, including how an individual's environment impacts their mental health and personal functioning, and it is this lens that is preferred since library staff mental health concerns are often directly related to their work environment and the patron needs they address in their jobs. A licensed social worker is also preferred because they can assess and intervene with more severe crises or mental health concerns in case something is disclosed in a support group that needs further follow-up or intervention.
- d. This social worker will also be trained as a facilitator of both adult and youth MHFA to later provide these trainings across the state. Currently, there are very few providers of MHFA offering training in the state of Iowa despite this being an evidence-based method for training non-mental health professionals to identify, understand, and respond to mental health and substance use-related crises, so it is unlikely that we could hire an existing trainer. MHFA has been [demonstrated](#) to be an effective way of training people in many different disciplines to work effectively with individuals experiencing symptoms of a mental health problem and to prevent worsening of a mental health crisis.
- e. A minimum of six technology kits will be purchased to facilitate online meeting participation for staff in libraries that do not have adequate technology for virtual meeting participation. For rural libraries, in particular, these will be necessary to ensure their ability to participate in the interventions provided by this project.

Phase Two (“Implement” - 8/1/24-1/31/26)- During the Implement phase:

- a. The training modules will be offered to Iowa staff and administrators via an online Learning Management System (LMS) through the SLI. They will be made freely available to all library staff and administrators.
- b. Six support groups of approximately 15-20 staff (three for rural staff and three for urban or suburban staff) will begin meeting virtually (through zoom) every two weeks. Participation is voluntary, and participants will be recruited by emails sent via the state library listservs. Group participation will be offered to staff on a first-come/first serve basis until groups are full. A waiting list will be created so vacancies can be filled if someone leaves a group. All group participants will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement indicating the importance of maintaining privacy of the other members and not disclosing topics discussed in the groups to any outside individuals.
- c. MHFA training will be made available to library staff across the state. At least 9 training dates will be offered during this phase, and training will be offered virtually to avoid travel and reduce time needed for participation. There is no limit to the number of library staff trained.
- d. A formative evaluation will be conducted throughout the Implement phase to obtain staff feedback and make revisions to the modules and support groups as needed. For the training modules, Dr. Wahler will embed a survey at the end of the modules inquiring about staff understanding of the content, relevance and helpfulness of the modules, and whether there are missing pieces that staff would like to see included. In addition, we will also measure potential changes in knowledge and work-related efficacy for staff completing the training modules. For the support groups, Dr. Wahler will conduct focus groups of participants (with in-depth follow-up individual interviews as needed) to gain information about staff perspectives of support group benefits and challenges, and use a pre/post survey of support group participants at six month increments to measure potential changes in burnout, resilience, work-related efficacy, and stress. Dr. Wahler will also meet individually with the social worker/facilitator to gain their perspective of the group facilitation process and discuss their recommendations for future groups.

Phase Three (“Disseminate” - 2/1/26-7/31/26)- In the Disseminate phase, we will actively distribute a “toolkit,” including the training modules, a document detailing guidance for facilitating staff support groups, and a document providing an overview of our project to a wide, national library audience. We will make the toolkit available through our professional networks, social media accounts, and sharing with relevant groups such as the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA), the Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL), and others.

Diversity Plan: Much of the nation includes rural areas as well as urban areas, yet much of the research on patrons’ psychosocial needs, staff trauma and wellbeing, etc. has been conducted in urban areas. In addition, much existing knowledge about public library and social work collaborations comes from large cities on both U.S. coasts. This project will intentionally include many rural public library staff as well as suburban and urban library staff, with findings that will have relevance to many states in the Midwestern US as well as in similar states across the country.

Project Results: Locally in Iowa, this project is expected to result in added mental health support and professional development for the library workforce across the state which will subsequently improve library services to vulnerable or at-risk individuals and communities. Pending positive evaluation data, the SLI plans to include the training modules and support groups in their ongoing budget, seeking additional funding sources and partnerships with other Iowa state agencies as needed to support the sustainability of the interventions. Nationally, this project will result in the dissemination of replicable and scalable interventions that can be used across the U.S. to help improve library staff capacity for serving high-needs patrons.

Budget Summary: The requested grant amount of \$249,661 includes: salaries/wages/fringe- \$149,876; MHFA facilitator training costs- \$4,200; SLI technology kits- \$15,000; SLI collection of e-books and mental health-related materials- \$20,000; learning management system costs-\$10,000; indirect costs- \$50,585.