Social Workers in the Library: An Innovative Approach to Address Library Patrons’ Social Service Needs

Dr. Peter Allen Lee (School of Social Work) and Dr. Lili Luo (School of Library and Information Science) received a CASA Incentive Grant for the 2011-2012 academic year to conduct research to evaluate the efficacy of the program “Social Workers in the Library” (SWITL). Created in 2007 by local Librarian Deborah Estreicher and Dr. Lee, the primary objective of the SWITL program is to seek ways to increase access to information regarding local social service programs. Modeled after an existing “Lawyers in the Library” program at SJPL, the SWITL program involves professional social workers with the support of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), who volunteer their time to meet face-to-face with library patrons for brief consultations. The consultations occur on-site at the San José Public Library main branch (Dr. Martin Luther King Library, or King Library in short) and focus on providing basic information in response to a patron’s needs, as well as providing referrals to community resources. Twice a month, two to three volunteer professional social workers with membership in NASW including faculty members and students at SJSU spend two hours at the King Library offering one-on-one sessions with those seeking help. Although the objective is not to establish a formal client/social worker relationship, SWITL is instrumental in providing information consultations. Each session is about 20 minutes in length, during which the volunteer social workers offer consultation regarding information sources and referrals to local social services (e.g. relevant program and contact information) in response to patrons’ information needs. They also provide follow-up via opportunities for future appointments if patrons have additional questions. Staff members and volunteers at the King Library coordinate these sessions, scheduling appointments and handling logistics.

SWITL expands access to information regarding social services in a unique collaborative model between social work practitioners and information professionals. To further understand SWITL’s efficacy and explore additional opportunities for improvement/expansion, evaluative research was conducted among the social workers and library staff involved in this project.

To examine how SWITL has helped library patrons with their information needs regarding social services, patron feedback was gathered through survey questionnaires. The use of self-administered anonymous survey allowed respondents privacy and anonymity when offering their input, providing a comfortable venue for patrons to share their perceptions of SWITL. The uniformity of questionnaire items enabled statistical analysis of the responses and thus presented quantitative evidence of SWITL’s impact. Four key variables were investigated in the survey – the helpfulness of SWITL services, the professionalism of the SWITL social worker, needs fulfilled by SWITL, and areas for service growth. Among the 41 validly completed questionnaires, SWITL services were evaluated between “helpful” and “very helpful” according to a 4-point Likert scale (mean = 3.74; SD = 0.59) with 1 being “very unhelpful” and 4 being “very helpful.” Many patrons came seeking referrals for housing, food, health and mental health services, and employment. There were a variety of other needs as well, including grief support, family counseling and legal advice. Patrons rated the professionalism of the SWITL social worker volunteers very high according to a 5-point Likert scale (mean = 4.68; SD = 0.79) with 1 being low and 5 being high.
The main area for growth suggested by patrons was the need for more time for the referral/consultation session. These results indicated that the objective of SWITL was achieved successfully. Patrons’ various social service information needs were fulfilled by the services provided by SWITL.

Although patrons attributed high regards to the SWITL service, it was still necessary to examine the program from the perspectives of all parties involved. Library staff and social workers have worked on different aspects of SWITL’s operation, and their input is as valuable as patrons’ with regards to understanding SWITL’s efficacy and improving the program to best meet the public, particularly the underserved population’s social service information needs. Focus group interviews were conducted among volunteer social workers and library staff (from the entire library, including both City and University Library staff, not just the ones working with SWITL).

There are three elements of SWITL that were considered working well.

- The physical setting (a waiting area and a private room) of the area where social workers meet with library patrons
- Undivided attention to patrons in a private session
- The system of patron screening and appointment scheduling

In the meantime, several areas for service improvement were also identified.

- Promote SWITL to patrons more actively. Promotional efforts may include putting up print and electronic posters, word of mouth advertisement, and making promotional materials that are easily understandable by low-income patrons, such as using audio material, easy language or translations.
- Increase awareness of SWITL among library staff. It is helpful to have individuals involved in SWITL talk about SWITL at meetings of other library departments in order to generate more awareness and better understanding of what the program entails.
- Help patrons self-identify their social service needs. It is important to be specific about what the program is about, what kind of services social workers offer, and what patrons can gain from it.
- Provide more information resources about social services, such as NASW literature, resources and tools that could help librarians help patrons with immediate social service needs, and a FAQ list.
- Expand availability of the program via means like using student interns from School of Social Work and School of Library and Information Science, and offering services remotely via phone or email.
- Create an environment for patrons to both get peer support and benefit from a private session with social workers.
- Justify library staff time spent on SWITL. It is helpful to have concrete evidence (e.g. cost-effectiveness analysis) that could quantify the value of the library staff time.
• Ensure accountability on the part of social workers (e.g. show up at scheduled sessions) when the program expands.

• Work with surrounding communities to utilize their resources and have them inform their community members about SWITL.

SWITL is a unique public service model where volunteer professional social workers provide information consultation/referrals at a public library. Such collaboration between social workers and library staff greatly enhances public access to quality information on social services and reinforces the value of public libraries as a community resource. Based on feedback from library patrons, SWITL has been a professional and helpful program, and much appreciated by patrons who have benefited from it. There are still areas for improvement though, and additional efforts need to be made in response to these suggested improvement and make SWITL a more effective and efficient program.

Results of the study have been published as a journal paper and can be accessed here: