

SPEAKER: If you're a regular at a public library, you've probably noticed public libraries are used for a lot more than checking out books these days. Libraries have a mission to serve the public. But a lot of librarians have not been trained to do all that's asked of them.

So a number of public libraries have chosen to hire social workers. Allison Carpenter is a social worker at the Rochester Public Library. She talked with our producer Ellen Finn about her role there.

ELLEN FINN: So you're a social worker at a library. Did it seem weird that you were getting a job at a library?

ALLISON CARPENTER: Yes and no. When this was kind of a new concept to me, I thought, why would a library need a social worker? But as I learned a little bit more, it made sense. It's a centrally located welcoming place. You can be at the library at no cost. You can stay however long you want. It's warm in the winter, and it's cool in the summer. As I kind of got my feet under me, it made so much sense.

ELLEN FINN: What's the most common service you provide?

ALLISON CARPENTER: When I look at my demographics and who came to my office, overwhelmingly the biggest piece of the pie is those experiencing homelessness and simply wanting safe shelter. What I hear from people who are experiencing homelessness, when people get so frustrated and they're saying that it's so hard to get into housing because of maybe past mistakes they've made, it could be as much as 20, 30 years ago and landlords won't rent to them, employers won't hire them because of mistakes that they've already, literally, paid their time for, and it's like a punishment that just won't go away, all they want is a place that they can get away from all the stress and chaos of the world and just have some peace and quiet at the end of the day.

But instead they have to go to the warming shelter or go stay in their tent and hope that the police don't ask them to leave. And I think seeing the relationship really strengthened when people are open to say that to me and know that I won't meet them with judgment for that, but I will be like, gosh, I can absolutely see if I were in your shoes, I might consider the very same thing. I think it makes people realize that it's just two human beings sitting in a room talking about being human and how hard that can be.

ELLEN FINN: What was being asked of librarians before social workers like you came along?

ALLISON CARPENTER: I can remember asking people, like, OK, so you have a librarian degree, you went to school to be a librarian, is this also what you went to school for? Is this what you thought you were getting yourself into connecting people with resources for a hot meal on a cold day or people saying my electricity is going to be shut off, what can I do?

Or sometimes there's people who are absolutely having a meltdown over the smallest thing and come to find out it's because they were just evicted, and they got bad news at the doctor. It's the library staff who, a lot of times, are catching the brunt of people on a bad day. And so a lot was being asked of them that looked a lot like what social workers do. And so by extension, they were acting as social workers without the training or intention to become social workers.

ELLEN FINN: Tell me about a situation that came up that was totally unexpected for you. How did you handle it?

ALLISON So this is one that I think will probably always stand out in my memory for as long as I live. It was January, and it was really, really cold. And obviously, there was snow on the ground. And a young woman came into the library, and she was not wearing any shoes. She was just wearing socks.

Me and one other staff started to try to have a conversation with her, and it became really apparent that she was either under the influence of some sort of drugs or maybe having a mental health crisis or maybe both. But she was having conversations with people that I could not see and saying things that didn't make sense to me. It seemed to make a lot of sense to her but not to me.

And so the simple task of trying to ask somebody where are your shoes and do you have shoes and can I get you some shoes or where should we find you some shoes became, like, a 30 to 45 minute ordeal of asking questions and not getting answers back that made a lot of sense. But the library staff who was tag teaming with me went back to some staff and just said, hey, does anybody have shoes that they would be willing to spare? And she came back with three pairs of-- sorry-- it was boots. She came back with three pairs of boots.

And it was people who had walked in surely in boots but changed into their shoes. And they were willing to give her their boots. And so this library staff came back with not one choice, but three choices of warm boots for this person.

And she took her pick and off she went. I would have really loved to have been able to connect her with some mental health support or if it was more of a chemical dependency thing. But in that moment, she wasn't interested in that help. I had really frankly never seen anything quite like that before.

ELLEN FINN: Speaking of that, you mentioned that a number of folks might be struggling with mental health or chemical dependency issues. I've heard some people complain about being disrupted or disturbed by those who struggle with those things. How do you address those people?

ALLISON Yeah, that is such a tough balance because it is a space for everybody, and we want it to be welcoming for everybody. But by way of welcoming everybody, I guess sometimes maybe gets a little bit-- gets to be a little bit tight quarters. We have gotten comments from other patrons saying things like people can't be allowed to behave like that, this or that, in a public space. Why don't you do something about it? Why don't you kick them out?

And I think the angle that we can take on that is just building a lot of empathy and letting the patron know that, yes, we care about their experience, but this looks like a really hard day for that person. And aren't we-- aren't we lucky that today isn't that hard for us, like we're not experiencing that hard day? But we can be kind, caring, energy around this person who is struggling and just try to gently remind people that life is really hard for people sometimes, and it's better just to err on the side of kindness, if possible.

ELLEN FINN: What has surprised you about this work?

ALLISON One unique aspect of social work within a library is there's so much less stigma to it than, say, asking for help at a county office. And a wonderful thing-- there's so many wonderful things about library social work, but one big one is that that stigma is really removed for people. I think people find it much more-- much less daunting, I should say, to go ask a social worker housed at a library as opposed to another agency.

And so sometimes that can mean the difference between accessing the help that you deserve, are eligible for, are worthy of that would be life-changing and not accessing that. So I will send that message home that library social work is really very, very important and should be supported wherever possible.

ELLEN FINN: Thank you for what you do. And thank you so much for this conversation, Allison.

ALLISON Yeah, not a problem.

CARPENTER:

SPEAKER: That was Rochester Public Library social worker Allison Carpenter. She spoke with our producer Ellen Finn.