

"We're the Town's Help Desk:"

Social Work Creep in America's Last Public Space

by Diana Furukawa, Olivia Scott, and Ben Treat

ABSTRACT

Based on interviews with public library staff from across the state, the authors find that Maine library workers are increasingly serving as frontline responders for people with unmet basic needs and addressing intensifying behavioral issues. This results in "social work creep", in which libraries inadvertently take on roles traditionally filled by social service agencies. Libraries are responding by building partnerships with social services agencies, reassessing library policies and enforcement methods, and seeking training in de-escalation and overdose response, but at a significant cost to staff wellbeing and core library services. The authors recommend that policymakers focus on systemic solutions including housing initiatives and local, direct support for people in crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians in Maine have had a lot of "what just happened?" moments in the past several years. Two of us, Diana and Ben, are directors of public libraries in Penobscot County; since 2020 we have had quite a few "wait-a-moment" realizations about who we are serving and how we are serving them. Moreover, Olivia's position has come into existence as a part of one community's response to those realizations.

What do these moments look like? One moment, library staff are helping a patron to create an email address so they can apply for government benefits or a minimum-wage job; the next, the patron is telling the staff member extremely personal information about their trauma history or the precarity of their housing. It's moments when a staff member stops normal library work and rushes to respond to an opioid overdose, when an older man breaks down because a library staff member was the first to help him with an online application for heating assistance, when a teen admits they don't feel safe going home at closing time, when an unhoused patron is bathing in a library restroom. The moments add up.

This got us thinking. Were other Maine public libraries seeing these changes: more patrons with unmet basic needs and increased volume and variety of patron

behavioral issues? How were these issues affecting other public libraries, and how were these libraries responding? And what might these issues tell us about the state of social services in Maine? We discovered that we are not alone; public libraries in communities of all sizes are responding to patrons with unmet basic needs and intensifying misconduct, jeopardizing libraries' core services and staff retention.

Most people are at least a little surprised to think of library workers doing the work described above, but perhaps we shouldn't be. With precarious housing, adverse economic conditions, and a

deadly opioid crisis, these issues are widespread. Daniel Brennan, director of the Maine State Housing Authority, reported in 2022 that "many lower-income households have been slow to regain their financial footing and continue to face possible eviction or foreclosure" (Brennan 2022: 1). Despite a drop in poverty rates, income in Maine has not kept up with the rising cost of housing, and many renters and homeowners are spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing. The situation is worse for low-income renters; 16 percent of them spend more than 50 percent of their income on housing (Brennan 2022).

Maine has also been affected by the nationwide opioid epidemic, with 40 to 60 fatal overdoses per month for the past several years (Sorg et al. 2024). The Governor's Office of Policy Innovation and the Future released the *Maine Opioid Response 2023–2025 Strategic Action Plan* in 2023, identifying action steps and noting accomplishments. One such accomplishment: the government "purchased and distributed over 300,000 doses of naloxone" (GOPIF 2023: 20), perhaps explaining why overdose deaths have shown a small decline in recent months. Reducing overdoses is a long game, however, and distribution of naloxone does not decrease the number of times library staff respond to an overdose.

Public libraries have always done their best to serve patrons with unmet basic needs and have always responded to some substance use, but the magnitude and impact has increased. Since reopening after the COVID-19 pandemic, public libraries across the state have seen increases in people seeking help with meeting their basic needs. As one of our participants, Beatrice, said, “we just keep sharing our story with public safety and with the town government so that they understand that we are not just a beautiful historic building, full of lovely books and quiet people. I just keep telling everyone that listens.”

A good library goes the extra mile, from helping patrons find their next favorite author to helping them set up Zoom meetings for work or even connecting them to a local food pantry.

Perhaps it's inevitable that libraries have increasingly found themselves helping patrons navigate the complex web of services and resources. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg notes that public spaces are often sites of crisis, but that “these problems are inevitable in a public institution that's dedicated to open access, especially when other institutions...routinely turn away—and often refer to the library—the very people who most need help” (2018: 46). Libraries are highly service focused. A good library goes the extra mile, from helping patrons find their next favorite author to helping them set up Zoom meetings for work or even connecting them to a local food pantry. Librarians aren't social workers, but we know their phone number. When everyone was reading Harry Potter, we had magic-themed story hours and new-book launch parties. In that same spirit, when libraries see increases in patrons with unmet basic needs, we respond in various ways to meet the needs we see. Libraries serve the people who come to the library, which has meant that many libraries have leaned into the work of “resource navigation” in recent years.

In many ways, this article is about a trend—unfunded, unannounced, perhaps mostly unintentional—of social services duties creeping into the work of library staff statewide. This term, *social work creep*, was coined by one of our participants, Renee: “It's that...social work creep that

seems to happen to all of us these days, and some days it's like, it's just too much; you have to find a way to turn it off.” As we explore in this article, the social work creep occurring in Maine's public libraries has profound implications for library operations and staff retention.

METHODS

To explore the questions above, we interviewed Maine public library staff. Limiting participants to people who had worked at a Maine public library for at least one year over the past four years, we reached out via statewide library listservs and at the Maine Library Association conference. We also contacted some library directors individually, in an attempt to expand geographic representation. Ultimately, we interviewed 26 participants from 12 counties. Three participants worked at libraries with a service area of fewer than 2,500 people; 10 participants represented medium-sized libraries serving populations between 2,500 and 10,000, and 13 participants were from larger libraries serving populations of 10,000 and up. Participants held a variety of job titles and had a range of years of experience in their libraries, from 1 year to more than 30.

We completed all interviews via Zoom, using auto-generated transcripts for analysis. We shared information about methods and risks with participants before the interview, and all participants provided verbal consent to be recorded. Though structured to take 30-45 minutes, many interviews lasted longer. All participants are identified by pseudonyms in this article.

The concept of unmet basic needs can be challenging to define. Basic needs are generally considered to be food, clothing, and shelter, but there are always root causes that may compound these issues: lack of household income, lack of access to health care, lack of reliable access to the internet or even electricity. Given the complexity of the concept of unmet basic needs, we didn't define the term for participants; instead, we encouraged them to tell us which basic needs their patrons were seeking.

FINDINGS

We found several overarching themes that illustrate the evolving role of Maine public libraries. All participants have encountered people seeking assistance with unmet basic needs at their library—though the types of needs varied greatly—and most have responded by providing support that goes beyond typical library

services. In addition, most participants had noticed increases in patron misconduct over the past four years. However, participants differed in terms of how these issues affected their libraries and in the specific strategies they developed to respond.

The types of needs seen by participants seemed to correlate to the density of the population their libraries served. Large libraries in service center cities saw more unhoused people and acute untreated mental health conditions, especially substance use; however, these libraries also have more local agencies providing support. Small- and medium-sized libraries in wealthier towns experienced fewer impacts, especially if the towns were not experiencing significant population growth. Similarly sized rural libraries with lower per capita income saw something different. They encountered more people struggling to heat their homes, access social services remotely, find shelter, or get treatment for mental health crises. However, across the board, the most common needs participants observed were housing, food and water, hygiene and personal care, access to essential social services like case management or behavioral health, and assistance with heating or utilities. And overall, more than three-quarters of participants saw an increase in people seeking assistance with basic needs since 2020.

Several participants discussed lack of access to technology or the internet, describing how digital equity is essential for many resources and services. Alan, the director of a medium-sized rural library, observed that applications for many state services moved online during the pandemic and have largely remained online. He noted that most state services have little presence in his county, visiting monthly, if at all. Similarly, Henry, the director of a small, rural library in northern Maine, discussed how these online application processes have created barriers for many older adults who are unable to access the applications and services without help. At her rural western Maine library, Carrie also saw online-based applications making it difficult, if not impossible, for her patrons to access essential services. She encounters people who have never used a computer before being told to “just go online” to apply for things like low-income housing and having no idea where to begin. Such experiences expose the gaps of online-based access to key resources and underscore the need for both digital literacy initiatives and in-person options.

We also asked participants to describe the types of misconduct they have seen at their libraries, what issues come up most often, and whether there have been changes

since 2020. The intensity of experiences varied, but more than three-quarters of participants had dealt with disruptive or aggressive behavior from patrons and more than half had encountered substance use at their library over the past four years. Other common behavioral issues included the misuse of bathrooms (smoking, substance use, or bathing), sleeping at the library, and youth behavior issues. Most participants said they had noticed an overall increase in behavioral issues since 2020. Other participants described patrons screaming in the library, cursing at children, making sexually inappropriate comments to library staff, leaving trash and belongings inside and outside the library, along with a general level of mistreatment from patrons. “It’s like people forgot how to act in public...it is a real thing where people treat us as their maids, their tech support, their therapist, their assistant, you know....they don’t treat you as a person,” shared June, a librarian at a medium-sized library. The impact of behavioral issues was felt most acutely by more urban libraries. For example, Elijah, a librarian at a large, urban library, noted that his library has had to shut down multiple sets of library restrooms due to increased substance use and other misconduct taking place in these spaces.

How Libraries Are Responding

In response to these needs, many of the libraries we surveyed are dedicating more staff time to helping patrons navigate resources, such as helping people find a local food pantry, assisting applicants for public housing and benefits, or referring people to case management agencies. Many participants described having resource lists on where to find food, where to find shelter and housing, and general information about agencies and resources available in the community. Library staff are often the primary resource navigators in their community; when asked who else was doing this work in their community, many participants could name only one or sometimes no other agencies doing so. Paul, the designated resource navigator at a medium-sized rural library, described how even the local police department would refer people to the library. “When they find people that need resource navigation and the officers aren’t able to help them with that specifically, they will send them to [the library] and we will do our best to help them and get them connected with who they need,” he said. Henry, the director of a small library in northern Maine, put it succinctly: “We’re the town’s help desk.” Most participants noted that resource navigation has been integrated into existing staff roles and duties, but a few libraries have created or enhanced staff roles to

specifically focus on this work. Some staff in these roles have previous experience with crisis work and one is a licensed social worker, but many have taken on this difficult and sensitive work without formal training. These shifting roles are the social work creep described by Renee; increasingly, public library staff are taking on duties that border on social work.

Resource navigation is most effective when it involves partnerships with social service agencies. Participants reported that libraries often partnered with case management agencies, Maine's Area Agencies on Aging, domestic violence groups, and law enforcement, often with a focus on meeting the needs of a specific population, such as unhoused people, older adults, or at-risk youth. Many participants had developed such partnerships to provide services to patrons both inside and outside the library.

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Henry talked about his collaborations with both his local Agency on Aging and a local youth mental health provider and shelter. Because of the relationships he's built with these agencies, Henry is able to call the organizations and request someone come to the library to provide support, housing navigation, and other essential services for patrons. "We're a small community. We're able to communicate pretty directly and quickly. If I need to contact the Agency on Aging, I know who to ask for when I call, and they know me," said Henry, describing how important these partnerships have been in his community.

Coauthor Olivia Scott, a resource navigator at Bangor Public Library, described having a web of resources involving local social service agencies. "I work with about 60 different agencies in the area. And I really create a web where I can reach out to different agencies for different things. Everything is always changing, so figuring out how to keep up those relationships with the different agencies is really important.... I've built relationships with government agencies, relationships with nonprofits, and for-profit agencies. Really, just anybody that's offering

assistance to people." To connect patrons to these agencies, Olivia facilitates direct referrals, coordinates with agencies on outreach events, and collaborates with a care coordination group to specifically help people who are unhoused. This group consists of local agencies that try to collaboratively support unhoused individuals who have consented to participate in these service programs and have their information entered into the Homeless Management Information System.

Beyond resource navigation, some participants have developed unique programs to meet patrons' needs. In response to food insecurity, for example, several of the libraries offered programs that provided food or meals, and some libraries even had a small food pantry available to the public. Angela, who works at a small library in western Maine, grows a community garden and makes the produce available to patrons, donating any extra produce to a local food pantry. Gloria, who's employed at a large library, emphasized the importance of "meeting people where they're at" and addressing their basic needs for things like food before tackling other issues. Gloria shared that "because [her library is] known as a free food access site, folks are less scared to come in and ask [them] about other things." Libraries have stepped into the role of providing basic need relief out of necessity, due to the high volume of needs of their patrons.

Many participants described developing policies or procedures in response to wellness and safety concerns in the library. Policies relating to bathroom use were often mentioned. For example, Rob shared that due to substance use issues at his large urban library, they now enforce a time limit for bathroom use and do regular wellness checks to see if someone has been in the bathroom too long. Most libraries tightened their policies and procedures to help manage behavior, but some did the opposite.

Janet, a librarian at a large library in southern Maine, spoke about how her library worked to loosen policies around sleeping and wearing socks in the library. While most participants had anti-sleeping policies in their libraries, her library allows individuals to sleep, though library staff frequently observe and check on patrons who may be having difficulties. Gloria's library has a nuanced approach to their no-sleeping policy; they do walk around and wake people up long enough to make sure that the person is responsive, but it is treated as a question of wellness, not as a matter of misconduct. If people aren't responsive, then staff seek medical assistance.

Impact on Libraries

While many public libraries are finding innovative ways to help patrons meet their basic needs and respond to behavioral challenges, these issues have significant impacts for library operations, staff, and the perception of libraries in their communities. Providing resource navigation and responding to increased behavioral issues can be time-intensive and takes library staff away from their other duties. Janet, a library director in southern Maine, feels that dealing with behavioral issues negatively affected other library services because it used significant staff time, and Henry shared that responding to patrons in crisis affects his ability to do basic operational tasks like processing and weeding books and maintaining the building at his small, rural library. “It’s hard to shelve books when you have somebody who’s going to lose their house in a week asking for help. And especially only having one staff member here at a time. That can be really hard...I get here early, and I leave late so that I can get things done,” he said.

These issues significantly affect the experience of library staff. More than three-quarters of participants described the toll such tasks have on staff, increasing the risk of burnout, turnover, and other negative outcomes. Renee, a solo librarian in the midcoast area, told us how repeated crisis situations kept her in a constant reactive state and made it hard to focus on her other work. Many participants reflected on the tension that can arise for staff when they feel they are being asked to do things outside of their job descriptions or beyond their comfort levels. “It’s very much outside of what people imagined when they wanted to become a librarian,” said Alice, a library director in southern Maine, describing how her staff often felt uncomfortable or unsafe confronting behavioral issues. Similarly, Lauren, who works at a very large library, shared, “I feel like [library staff] have to face a lot more than they signed up for....They didn’t ask to be crisis workers, and sometimes they end up in that situation.” Several participants discussed the emotional burden placed on staff when they are unable to connect a patron to vital resources. For example, Gloria described the terrible feeling of having to kick out patrons at closing time after being unable to find them a bed in a local shelter. Across the board, these experiences weigh heavily on staff. Several participants discussed the secondhand trauma that staff experience from responding to frequent crises: “Staff are the ones that end up finding a person with a needle in their arm passed out on the bathroom floor, and

then they have to deal with the trauma of experiencing that,” said Rob, the director of a large library. Participants reported that these difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences contribute to increased staff burnout and turnover. From responding to overdoses to performing de facto casework, library staff are being asked to perform duties that go well beyond traditional library roles.

Not everyone is pleased with how public libraries are supporting patrons with unmet basic needs or responding to behavioral issues. Several participants talked about negative perceptions of their library, citing examples of patrons who felt unsafe or uncomfortable visiting due to the presence of unhoused people or people using substances. Alice has heard from many patrons that they don’t feel comfortable bringing their family into or using the bathrooms at the library due to the unpredictable behaviors of other patrons. Similarly, Edward, a library director in midcoast Maine, noted that some patrons found it intimidating and stayed away from the library when unhoused people were present. Overall, 15 out of 26 participants (including 92 percent of respondents from libraries serving populations greater than 10,000) said that there were some negative perceptions of the library in the community due to misconduct and some patrons’ visible, unmet basic needs. Grace, who works at a very large library, expressed frustration at people who criticize her library for “encouraging” behaviors like substance use by providing sharps containers in the bathrooms. “We’ve kind of been handed this whole soup of societal problems that libraries did not cause, and we are the de facto place that is trying to bridge the gap and provide what services we can, while still being a library,” she shared, adding that rather than treating the presence of unhoused people as the problem, their lack of housing should be treated as the problem.

Still, 7 of the 15 participants who reported negative perceptions also said that it was mixed with positive feedback, and 10 other participants said that there was no change in perception or that the reception was positive. Paul, who works at a library in central Maine, noted that his community has embraced his library’s expanded efforts to assist people with unmet basic needs, causing them to see it as more of a resource than before. He also thinks that libraries should expand their work to meet emerging needs, saying, “You don’t want to alienate people and cease doing your original mission. But your original mission probably should grow, change, and expand.”

SOLUTIONS AND SUPPORTS

These changes to public libraries' roles have significantly affected staff morale, operations, and the patron experience. When we asked our participants what changes would take some of the pressure off public libraries, they overwhelmingly identified the need for expanded infrastructure—including housing, transportation, and public restrooms—as well as improved access to mental and behavioral health services. Within the public library field, participants also saw a need for improved training and educational opportunities for library staff to better prepare them for navigating resources and responding to challenging behavioral issues. Lastly, we heard that public libraries need funding, staff time, and support to match their vital role.

To reduce social work creep in public libraries, it is important to give staff the tools, resources, and training to provide a more appropriate kind of support: resource navigation.

Many participants discussed the need for investments in the built infrastructure to help address some of the underlying reasons that libraries see so many patrons with unmet needs. Probably the most obvious of these solutions are more supportive housing, public housing, and transitional housing. People simply do not have anywhere to go, and the cost and lack of availability of housing affects everyone, including families, teens, and older adults. There is also a huge gap in Maine's public transportation system, particularly in rural areas, leaving many Mainers struggling to get to medical appointments, substance use treatment, or even just out of the house. While libraries have tried to bridge that gap with supportive services and partnerships, it is still a big need and one that needs to be addressed for the health and safety of Mainers across the state. Morgan, a library director in a sparsely populated area, described spending all day trying to support an unhoused community member only to have to turn them away because the closest shelter was more than three

hours away and there was no transportation to get them there. Morgan's experience speaks to the need for improved housing and transportation options throughout the state, not just in Maine's larger cities.

Public libraries are one of the last remaining public spaces where people can spend time or use the bathroom without the expectation of making a purchase. Participants in cities and small towns alike report that public libraries often have the only public restrooms in their community. Similarly, libraries are becoming de facto day shelters due to the lack of public spaces in communities. The prevalence of unhoused patrons in public libraries is a direct result of the lack of free public spaces. Beyond basic physical needs, many participants said that patrons are coming to the library to fill their social and emotional needs. Angela, the director of a small and rural library, shared that she is often told by patrons that they have “no one else to talk to,” and she frequently finds herself just listening to patrons. While social isolation has long been identified as a public health issue (Office of the US Surgeon General 2023), particularly for older adults, many participants believe social isolation was exacerbated by the pandemic. Therefore, Maine needs more supportive public spaces beyond libraries where people can connect socially.

To reduce social work creep in public libraries, it is important to give staff the tools, resources, and training to provide a more appropriate kind of support: resource navigation. This may look like hiring a community resource navigator in some libraries, but in others it may mean providing training and support to existing library staff. Looking across Maine, we see at least three different models of community resource navigators: at Bangor Public Library, Millinocket Memorial Library, and Portland Public Library. A community resource navigator may take on different roles in the community. In Bangor, Olivia provides direct guidance to people in the library with unmet basic needs, but she is also a part of the continuum of care, meaning that she can coordinate among service agencies and the patrons they serve. Other community resource navigators may focus more on bringing agencies into the library to provide services, a model that requires a community with service providers that can serve in that role.

Hiring a community resource navigator at every public library in Maine is unrealistic, but a helpful alternative might include broad training and support for library staff, perhaps supported at the state level. Renee was one

of several participants who said she wished there was more guidance from the Maine State Library on resource navigation, such as through a dedicated consultant, training on best practices, or a resource guide. Many participants' libraries had provided specific training on topics like de-escalation, and over half offered naloxone training for opioid overdoses. But a central clearinghouse of training and guidance would reduce the burden on individual libraries to buy materials, hire trainers, or accumulate lists of statewide resources. The additional training needs that participants voiced also highlight the importance of stronger formal education for library and information science students to better equip them for the difficult realities of public service. For example, library and information science programs could include courses on de-escalation strategies and self-care, similar to those now offered by many social work and medical training programs.

Funders and politicians sometimes assert that social services agencies are duplicating each other's work, and some may argue that resource navigation in public libraries is another such duplication. However, this assertion does not align with the experience of our participants. Although many participants were aware of relevant social service agencies, these agencies were often understaffed and relatively inaccessible, particularly in rural areas. For example, some agencies have a single liaison that serves a large geographic area, such as the Overdose Prevention Through Intensive Outreach, Naloxone, and Safety (OPTIONS) program, which has a single liaison for Piscataquis County.¹ Similarly, many statewide agencies, such as the Department of Health and Human Services, lack adequate staff to handle in-person outreach, so the department funnels people to online applications even when many people lack basic digital skills or technology access. Even local services such as General Assistance can be difficult to access without resource navigation support. While every town in Maine has access to General Assistance funds, people are often unaware of the funds, what they can be used for, and how to apply. Many towns do not promote General Assistance or help people with the complex application process. Applicants need to advocate for themselves to access the program. Meanwhile, some municipalities have cut their General Assistance budgets and the stipends have less spending power in light of recent inflation. Thus, existing social service agencies and programs leave critical gaps, proving that further investment is needed to ensure that these supports are truly accessible

to all Mainers and underscoring the need for resource navigation in the interim.

Many participants who described increased misconduct in their libraries linked these issues to untreated or undertreated mental, physical, or behavioral health conditions. Access to treatment is limited by long waitlists, costs, stigma, and a lack of knowledge of available resources; libraries are dealing with the effects of this lack of access. For example, patrons who are unhoused or with other unmet basic needs often come to the library with open wounds or other injuries, resulting from lack of access to care and resources. Library staff are not trained in wound care, but many patrons need help caring for wounds and are unable to access services anywhere else. While library staff do their best to manage physical, behavioral, and mental health crises, it is unfair to expect them to provide these services without proper training, knowledge, or support.

Above all, Maine's public libraries need more stable public funding to complete this work.

Above all, Maine's public libraries need more stable public funding to complete this work. While some libraries are well-supported by their municipalities, funding for Maine's public libraries varies greatly. In 2022, 55 percent of Maine public libraries were private nonprofit organizations rather than municipal departments, and of these nonprofit public libraries, over half received less than 50 percent of their operating revenue from their municipality (MSL 2023). For many public libraries, particularly small and rural libraries, it's a year-to-year struggle to prove their value to town councils who may not understand the range of roles libraries play in maintaining social infrastructure and supporting Mainers' non-book-related needs. This lack of municipal investment is reflected in low staff numbers, particularly for small and medium-sized libraries. In 2022, Maine public libraries serving populations of 2,500 or less had an average of 0.7 full-time employees, and libraries serving populations between 2,500 and 10,000 averaged 2.8 full-time employees (MSL 2023). As we heard from many participants, this staffing level is inadequate for managing a public space safely and

sustainably, let alone for responding to increasing patron needs. In contrast, many other states, such as Ohio, New York, and Texas, at least partially fund public libraries at the county or state level, which can create greater stability for many libraries and level the playing field for rural libraries. In fact, Bangor Public Library and Millinocket Memorial Library, two of the three public libraries in the state with a dedicated community resource navigator position, were only able to fund their positions through one-time American Rescue Plan Act funding distributed by the city of Bangor (in Bangor's case) and Penobscot County (in both cases), which highlights the precarity of funding for these important positions. Ultimately, there won't be a one-size-fits-all approach to funding public libraries, but it's clear that we need more government investment in libraries as libraries address these critical community needs.

AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Some issues raised by participants were outside the scope of our article, but we feel they are worthy of further research. Many participants noted increased youth behavioral issues since 2020, though participants also recognized that libraries are one of the few public spaces where teens are welcome. In addition, several participants have seen incarcerated people being released into homelessness, sometimes directly into libraries. One participant from a large urban library shared that law enforcement officers have driven from other counties to drop off people recently released from jail or prison at her library. Another participant noted that his town *needed* a robust General Assistance department because it was the county seat and people from across the county were released into homelessness there. These anecdotal stories cannot be fully explored by this study, but they suggest areas for further research into reentry planning in Maine.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the people in crisis whom she serves, Grace shared: "This is happening whether we're here or not.... It feels important to me to be witnessing it." Yet witnessing takes a toll, both on library staff and operations. Gloria spoke about this as well: "No one wants to be like, 'Small child? You're going to sleep on the street,' you know? Or 'Small human? No, we can't give you bus fare to get to your family in Portland.'" Every day, public libraries across Maine witness people in crisis but they are ill-equipped to respond to these basic needs.

So what is to be done? Grace wants policymakers to "turn their attention to those broader systemic solutions" and acknowledge that "libraries are filling this gap... because other institutions have failed." We repeatedly heard from participants that communities need local, direct support to manage the unmet basic needs of Mainers. It cannot be just a website or a phone number. It cannot be one afternoon a month. Likewise, we heard repeatedly that Mainers, of all ages and in all regions, need more access to behavioral and mental health treatment.

We heard from library staff from across the state in communities of all sizes that we need greater investment in transportation, public housing, and community gathering spaces. Libraries are community gathering spaces, but being the only or one of few community gathering spaces puts far too heavy a burden on public libraries. Small libraries in particular may lack the types of spaces needed to simultaneously accommodate after school tutoring, story times, day sheltering for the unhoused, book groups, public computer use, and teen hangouts. As long as we are a public space, we will continue to deal with these challenges, but the impact on libraries and library staff could be lessened through statewide training initiatives, increased staffing, and more stable and equitable government funding of public libraries.

We said it above and we will repeat it here: libraries serve the people who come to the library. As institutions statewide struggle to support Mainers with unmet basic needs, libraries are struggling to serve these populations. We need a statewide commitment to shift this work away from libraries, for which it is a secondary focus, and into agencies for which this work is a primary mission. The longer we delay, the greater the loss to library staff and patrons.

NOTES

1 <https://knowyouroptions.me/options-liaisons/>

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