



# EFFECTIVE LIBRARY LEADERSHIP FOR REDUCING AND RESPONDING TO STAFF STRESS AND TRAUMA: PART ONE

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# ABOUT BETH:



- Social work practice experience with poverty-related needs, homelessness, substance use disorders, mental health, trauma, and other barriers to economic stability and mobility
- Administrative experience in a variety of both practice and educational settings, including leadership for organizational change
- Collaborations with libraries of all sizes and in all types of communities for 8+ years
- Research focused on trauma-informed librarianship, public library patrons' psychosocial needs, library staff trauma and needs, and ways to address these needs
- Experience with social workers in public and academic libraries
- Consulting business focused on individual library needs assessments, training/professional development, library-based social service program design/development, leadership coaching/support, and program evaluation



# CREATING A PERSON- CENTERED LIBRARY

*Best Practices for Supporting  
High-Needs Patrons*



Elizabeth A. Wahler and  
Sarah C. Johnson

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# OBJECTIVES

- Understand Changing Patron Needs and How They Impact Staff
- Discuss Strategies for Supporting Staff (i.e. "Sustainable Practice")
  - Reducing Staff Stress/Trauma
  - Responding to Staff Stress/Trauma





# TWO-PART TRAINING



Informational Webinar



Interactive Session

# CHANGING LIBRARY NEEDS

- Historical changes affecting public libraries:
  - Deinstitutionalization in the 1960's brought increases in people experiencing homelessness and/or mental illness (Cart, 1992; Torrey, Esposito, & Geller, 2009).
  - The Great Recession and mortgage crisis in 2007-2009 brought an increase in people experiencing challenges related to poverty (Jaeger et al., 2014).
  - Shortage of emergency shelter beds (Henry et al., 2018)
  - Increasing costs with stagnant wages
  - National minimum wage has been \$7.25/hour since 2009 (Currently \$14.42 in Colorado)
    - Estimated current living wage for Colorado for a single adult with 0 children = \$16.54/ 1 child = \$40.21/ 2 children = \$52.70 (MIT Living Wage Calculator, 2024)
  - Increasing municipal statutes that criminalize homelessness (National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, 2019)
  - The COVID pandemic
  - Current political climate

# PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS OF LIBRARY PATRONS



- Psychosocial needs of public library patrons have been increasing in recent decades
  - Top areas of need (Pressley, 2017; Provence, et al., 2021; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler et al., 2021)
    - Homelessness or unsafe/unstable housing
    - Mental health challenges
    - Substance use/overdose
    - Poverty-related needs
- These needs have been increasing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hertz-Palmor et al., 2021; Horowitz et al., 2021; NAEH, 2020)
- Although frequency of needs varies, rural, suburban and urban libraries are experiencing the same types of unmet patron needs (Wahler, 2022)



# STRAINED LIBRARY STAFF

- Libraries are feeling the strain
- Staff are not often trained or qualified to assist with these levels of need (Anderson et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2018)
- Staff sometimes feel conflicted about their role with these needs (Wahler et al., 2020)
- Visitors with these needs often take more time for staff, stretching them too thin or causing difficulty in meeting needs of all patrons (Soska & Navarro, 2020; Torrey et al., 2009; Wilkins Jordan, 2014)
- Violence occurs in many libraries, and some staff fear for their safety or the safety of others due to visitor/patron behaviors (Anderson, 2018; Clark, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler, 2022)
- Some libraries have to frequently call police or for emergency assistance



# LIBRARY WORKER TRAUMA

- Front-line library workers from all types of libraries (urban, suburban, and rural) report high rates of trauma from workplace incidents (Fisher, 2022) and over half report experiencing violence in their job (Wahler, 2022).
  - Incidents include verbal abuse, physical aggression and attacks, threats of violence, sexual harassment, threatening with weapons, and destroying library property
  - These incidents have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began
- The current political climate is contributing to increased threats to intellectual freedom, some bringing threats of violence to library workers
  - Many of these threats are specifically related to library collections related to LGBTQ+ or race-related topics, which can further perpetuate trauma for library staff from marginalized groups
- Threats of violence and actual violence can cause library staff to experience symptoms of or worsening of a pre-existing mental health condition



# COMMON LIBRARY BEHAVIORS FOR STAFF EXPERIENCING TRAUMA



- Describes feeling burned out
- Feels depressed
- Feels ineffective or powerless at work
- Dreads coming to work/calls in sick
- Isolates
- Is frequently irritable
- Is often frustrated with people
- Lacks creativity
- Has difficulty with concentration
- Has difficulty sleeping
- Uses unhealthy coping mechanisms like overeating, drug/alcohol use
- Demonstrates poor boundaries

# SECONDARY/ VICARIOUS TRAUMATIZATION

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- A trauma response/symptoms of PTSD that appear due to the act of listening to trauma stories of others
- Secondary trauma impacts helping professionals, including library workers, and can be a common occupational hazard for anyone working directly with trauma survivors
- The risk is greater for people who are:
  - women
  - highly empathetic by nature
  - trauma survivors
  - untrained or undertrained for dealing with others' trauma
  - socially or organizationally isolated
- Secondary traumatic stress compromises care of others, can lead to hopelessness or feelings of professional worthlessness, and lead to people leaving their jobs or their helping field altogether.

(NCTSN, 2022)

# "INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL"



- Term coined by psychologist Jennifer Freyd (University of Oregon, n.d.)
- Refers to “wrongdoings perpetrated by an institution upon individuals dependent on that institution, including failure to prevent or respond supportively to wrongdoings by individuals committed within the context of the institution.”
- Can magnify or worsen the trauma for the person who experienced it
- Reported by library staff in a number of studies on library trauma





# BURNOUT

- "A syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed."
- Three components/dimensions:
  - Feelings of exhaustion
  - Increased negativity/cynicism about one's job
  - Reduced effectiveness at work
- Risk is increased by:
  - Lack of control at work
  - Lack of job resources
  - Unclear job expectations
  - Dysfunctional work dynamics
  - Isolation/lack of social support (at work or home)
  - Work-life imbalance
- Often results in low morale and disengagement

(Mayo Clinic, 2021 and WHO, 2019)





To make an impact, people in library leadership positions need to have a two-pronged strategy:

1. Reducing avoidable stress and trauma
2. Responding effectively to unavoidable stress and trauma



# NEEDS ASSESSMENTS



- To determine what is needed in your own library, it is recommended that you start with a staff needs assessment
  - Need an anonymous way to gather feedback
  - Obtain information about experiences and challenges of your library's employees, training needs, stress/burnout level, suggestions for improvement
  - Consider some potential activities/changes you might make and use an anonymous survey to gauge interest level
- Helpful resource- [A Trauma-Informed Approach to Assessing Your Library's Needs](#)



**STRATEGIES FOR  
REDUCING STAFF  
STRESS AND  
TRAUMA**



# WORKPLACE CULTURE

- Create a "culture of care" for staff
- Has to be top-down, which can be challenging for middle management if top admin has not bought in
- Includes the following:
  - Intentionally reach out and talk to everyone- connections and relationships are essential
  - Encourage open conversations, emphasize psychological safety (no consequences for speaking up!)
  - Normalize talking about difficult things
  - Be mindful of power dynamics and how they impact communication (create anonymous communication methods as needed)
  - Be intentionally inclusive of everyone- think about who might not be at the table, who isn't participating in conversations, etc. and consider the reasons why. Address/remove barriers to access.
  - Be mindful of your own words, body language, and facial expressions and how others might be affected by them
  - In conversations with others, demonstrate reflective listening and check in to be sure you understand what is being communicated
  - Demonstrate cultural humility when working with others- they are the experts on their own experiences
  - Do not tolerate abuse, harassment, or actions of others that may dismiss or diminish anyone's perspective
  - Don't pay attention to numbers only- they only tell the story of the majority and can lead to inadvertently excluding some people





# HIRING AND ORIENTATION

- The misconception about library work in the public affects who applies for library job openings. Similarly, even people coming out of library school with an MLIS are often unprepared for public library work. Be sure to hire with the reality of the role in mind!
  - This may be someone “who could work in a pub” (from Anne-Maree Pfabe from City of Melbourne Libraries) for public-facing roles
  - Often need someone who:
    - Can build rapport easily with anyone and everyone
    - Can set boundaries as needed
    - Has experience with diverse populations
  - During the hiring process, be open about the challenges faced in your library and the patrons who regularly visit
- Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all staff
- Provide adequate orientation and training
- Connect new staff with more experienced staff for formal or informal mentoring



# ONGOING SUPERVISORY STRATEGIES



- Require breaks, encourage use of annual leave
- Focus on team building and relationship-building between staff and with you
- Make decisions through shared decision-making processes-consult with those affected by a policy/practice before changing or implementing something new
- Maintain open lines of communication
- Provide regular supervision (individual or group/team)
- Use a people-first model of leadership
- Review staffing models and use creative methods of staffing the library to reduce stress on specific people (rotate staff in certain roles or in specific branches)
- Address and stop workplace bullying/inappropriate behavior
- Include conversations about well-being, self-care, and community care in meetings

# SET AND ENFORCE CLEAR BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS

- Establish clear, concise behavioral policies and post them publicly
- Stop problematic behavior early and quickly (although compassionately)
- Encourage and model boundary-setting for staff and create opportunities for practice
- Use your position to address inappropriate patron behaviors, especially when patrons harass staff from marginalized groups (check with these staff first, to be sure this is welcomed!)
- Develop behavioral response guides (and provide ongoing training)



# BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE GUIDES

- Create clear behavioral response guides to establish expectations, emphasize a trauma-informed approach, and empower staff to set boundaries
- These guides usually include the following (see [example](#)):
  - The prohibited patron behavior
  - The specific policy prohibiting this behavior and the reasons why it's prohibited
  - A reminder of the reasons why people may behave this way
  - Guidelines about the expected staff response and permission to set boundaries with patrons as needed
  - Sample scenarios including scripts of how a staff person might respond
- Train all staff on the responses, and practice the scenarios



# ADDRESS TRAINING NEEDS OF STAFF



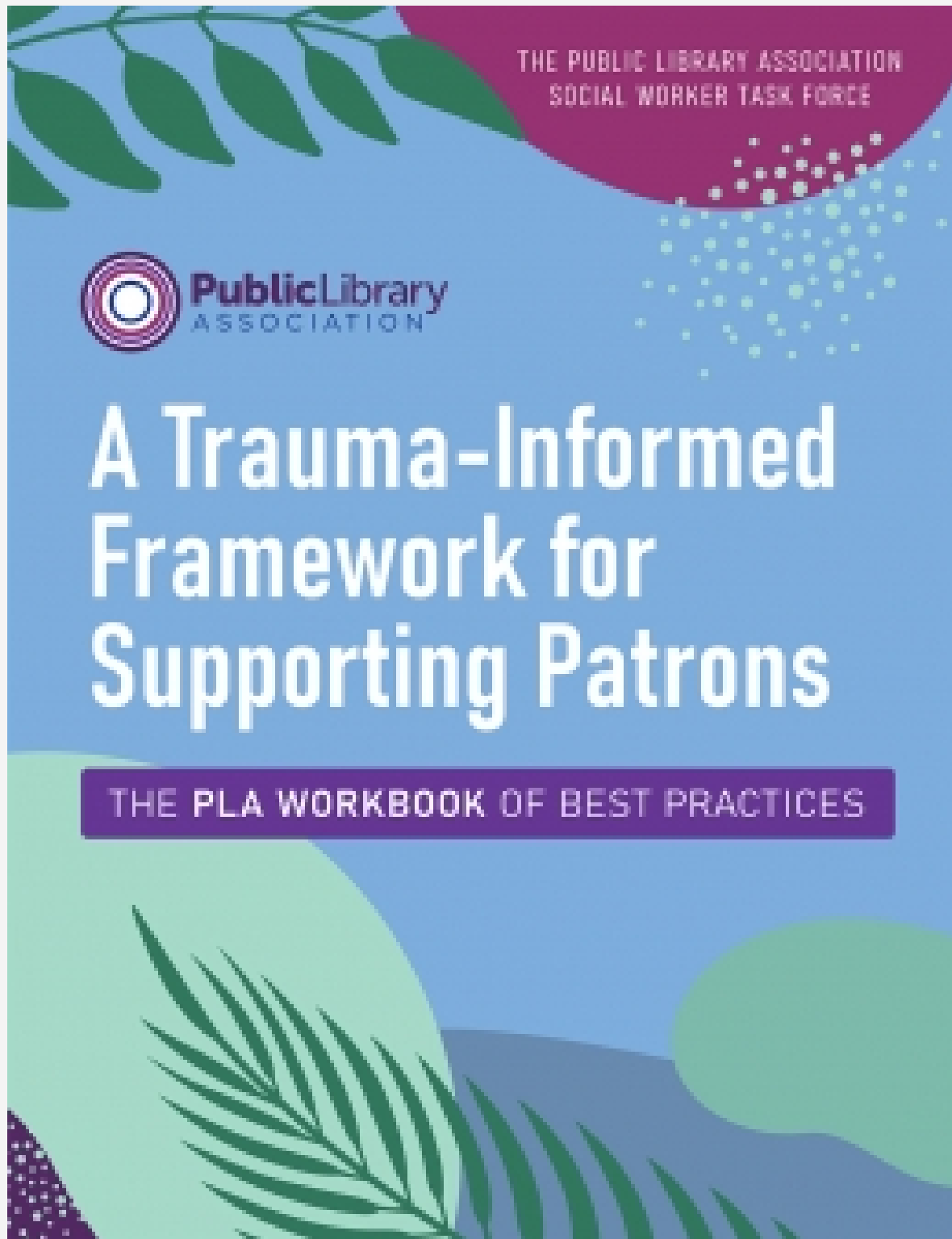
- Trainings could include\*:
  - De-escalation and working with people in crisis
  - Setting boundaries
  - Mental health (Mental Health First Aid is recommended)
  - Trauma and trauma-informed librarianship
  - Substance use
  - Homelessness
  - Poverty
  - Community resources
- Trainings should be:
  - Relevant
  - Practical
  - Teach skills, rather than focusing on theory and concepts only
  - Use staff time efficiently
  - Be adaptable for staff schedules and travel limitations



\*Comes from needs assessments of broad samples of library staff, but libraries should consider doing their own training needs assessment to determine staff priorities/needs



# REGULAR DISCUSSION OF COMMON PATRON SCENARIOS



- Some libraries are using this handbook as a guide for ongoing discussions
- Provides information about trauma-informed librarianship and five skills for managing patron challenges
- Includes scenarios and is intended as a workbook to provide opportunities to practice applying the skills to common situations happening in the library
- Can facilitate conversation and reflection about patron behavior and staff responses

# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE



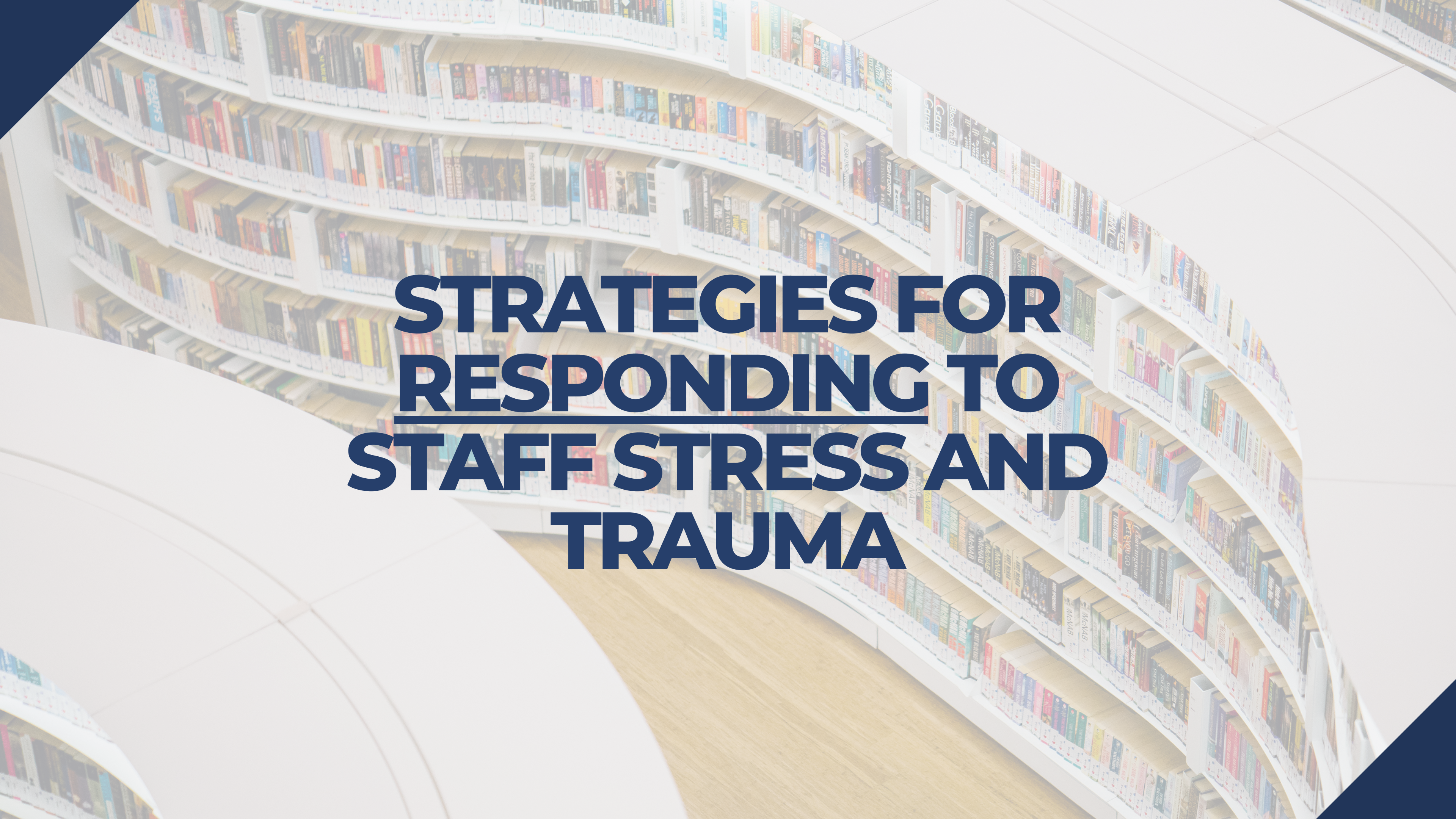
- Borrowed from education, social services, and healthcare
- A strategy for helping staff deal with challenging work environments
- Incorporates activities (group or individual) to allow staff to process workplace scenarios, reflect on their personal responses to those scenarios, analyze their response and actions, and learn new skills to improve their response to future workplace situations
- Used intentionally and on an ongoing basis, not just as a response to a crisis
- Has been found to help staff recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, learn new skills, improve motivation, and improve the quality of service delivery



# SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

- Puts accountability on the organization, rather than solely the individual, for activities aimed at caring for mental health and well-being
- Administration should consider taking steps to support staff well-being such as:
  - Shift focus from self-care to community-care (with the library as the community)- everyone is in this together!
  - Add time in the schedule for staff support groups/pairs to meet (partner with another library if needed)
  - Add wellness or sensory-friendly spaces for staff
  - Balance workloads between staff/branches
  - Add staff support/training days for wellness, team-building, and professional development
  - Ensure policies and practices support staff rather than solely being patron-focused
  - Build community partnerships to offer wellness-focused programming for staff (yoga, mindfulness, etc.)
  - Advocate with the “powers that be” to offer:
    - adequate support programs/EAPs
    - adequate wages
    - adequate staffing/coverage





**STRATEGIES FOR  
RESPONDING TO  
STAFF STRESS AND  
TRAUMA**

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# VARY RESPONSE AS NEEDED

- Responses may vary based on the severity of the incident
  - Need incident response protocols for incidents all along the range of mild to severe
    - All:
      - Personal outreach from a supervisor/manager to the staff person affected to check-in
      - Reflection on the incident and determination about whether there are organizational implications from it (changing policy, adding training, etc.)
    - Consider additional strategies for more severe incidents

# INCIDENT REPORTING PROCESSES



- Have a standardized process for reporting incidents
- Determine what level of info is required and train staff how to complete the form/process. The incident report should be used to guide the library's response.
  - Do not require more info than necessary- retelling a traumatic event can worsen a trauma response for some people
  - This is NOT a place to process feelings about the incident
  - Determine if only certain people need access
- Be sure there is a process for following up when an incident report is filed. Personal outreach/follow-up is essential.
- Have a plan in place for what to do if it's the supervisor/manager who has experienced the traumatic event. Often the manager is expected to step in during a crisis yet managers are impacted the same way other staff are!

# PERSONAL OUTREACH

- Don't underestimate the power of human connection! In all types of incidents, people need to know:
  - They matter
  - You care
  - They are more than "just a number"
- Give people an opportunity to talk about what happened, and be sure you are actively listening to them
- If your organization is large enough that the manager/director can't reach out to everyone when something happens, build this into your structure
  - Even if it's someone lower in the hierarchy who has this role with any given staff member, look for opportunities for top management to still connect and offer support when possible (it means something more when it's the person at the top doing the outreach/connecting)





# REFLECTION

- Create consistent opportunities to reflect on all types of incidents, either in individual supervision, a team meeting/group supervision, or in your incident reporting system
- Need a consistent way to capture what happened and if there's anything that can prevent a similar situation from happening in the future:
  - Policy changes
  - Empowerment to set boundaries earlier in a problematic interaction
  - Training on protocol/practices to ensure consistency
  - Practice with common challenges/scenarios
  - Role clarification for staff
  - Clarification about when to get a supervisor or seek additional support
  - Others
- Be careful not to come across as blaming the staff person- some incidents will happen no matter what someone does! The reflection isn't necessarily to look for what "caused" the incident, but how everyone could better prevent or be better prepared for similar incidents in the future.
- For example- ask "Did any of our current practices/policies contribute to or worsen this incident?" or "Did this event highlight a way we need to improve?" and give choices such as those above.

# EMPHASIZE AND ENCOURAGE SELF CARE

- Encourage staff to share self-care/coping strategies together (if comfortable doing so)
- Focus on sustainable, affordable, and time-efficient strategies such as breathing techniques, reflection/journaling, short sensory breaks ("brain breaks" such as taking a short walk, stretching, listening to music, etc.)
- Allow use of sick time for "mental health days" as much as physical illness
- Ensure staff are knowledgeable about wellness benefits offered through their job at the library and encourage use of EAP/mental health supports
- Acknowledge the limits of self-care
  - You can't "self care" yourself out of poor organizational practices, discrimination/bias, abuse, etc.!
  - Self-care takes resources- time, focus, relationships, money- that many don't have
  - Trauma, vicarious trauma, and burnout are related to workplace/structural factors, so the onus isn't all on an individual to take care of themselves!



# SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORY RESPONSES



- Offer time off the desk, or time off altogether in response to traumatic event
- Normalize talking about mental health and acknowledging the realities of the job
- Practice active and reflective listening
- Demonstrate empathy with the feelings the person is describing to you
- It's okay to not know exactly what to say! Just be genuine in your response- connect with the person human to human





# Procedure

## CRISIS RESPONSE PLANS

- Plan ahead for psychological emergencies as much as you do physical emergencies
  - Consider emergencies that can happen with patrons and staff
- Include:
  - Signs and indicators of the emergency (especially important for defining a mental health emergency)
  - A reminder that staff should not put themselves in harm's way and should call 911 if needed to keep everyone safe.
  - If it's safe to respond, list a step-by-step protocol for who should respond, what they should do, who they should notify, and how
    - How will they alert others and keep people out of the area? Who should they alert?
    - How will they determine if they need to call 911 versus attempt another type of response?
    - Include a reminder to remain calm, consider facial expressions/body language, and practice active/reflective listening to the person in crisis
    - A list of relevant crisis line numbers (in case staff can assist the person in need with calling for help to speak to a qualified person able to intervene more effectively)
- Train staff, or at least some staff on Mental Health First Aid



# CONSIDER OFFERING FACILITATED GROUP SUPPORT TO STAFF



- Group support can help staff process their emotions and responses surrounding serious incidents occurring at work
  - Must be facilitated by someone trained and qualified to lead a mental health-focused group (LCSW, LMHC, etc.)
    - Libraries can contract with a local provider if needed- often more affordable for occasional sessions than people think!
    - Sometimes your local EAP can provide this service to a group of staff, or individually as needed
    - Be sure the person facilitating the group understands the context of the library- have this discussion first, before they are facilitating a group with staff
  - Should be optional- debriefing/processing a traumatic event can be MORE traumatizing for some people
  - If your library is unable to provide this, consider combining resources with others in your region/state or advocating with your state library or library association to consider how they might be able to support this type of intervention (grant funding, etc.)

# REVISITING INSTITUTIONAL BETRAYAL



- Remember that institutional betrayal occurs when we do nothing, or when we minimize harm/trauma, deny it, or ignore it
- The opposite of institutional betrayal is "institutional courage," which is when we "pledge to protect and care for those who depend on the institution," and work to transform our libraries into "more accountable, equitable, healthy places for everyone."
- Institutional courage has been described as "the antidote to institutional betrayal"
- Requires us to be transparent, accountable, and intentional about taking steps to acknowledge the harm experienced, mitigate its risks, work to prevent further harm, and have steps in place to respond effectively to unpreventable harm

(Freyd, n.d.)

# NEXT SESSION:



- Walk through a self-assessment of what may be needed in your own library and determining how to get started!
  - Conducting a needs assessment
  - Creating behavioral response guides
  - Implementing reflective practice strategies
  - Creating emergency response plans for psychological emergencies

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Assessing Your Library's Needs* (2023) by Elizabeth A. Wahler
- *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (2020) by Rebecca Tolley
- *A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Patrons: The PLA Workbook of Best Practices* (2022) by the PLA Social Worker Task Force
- *Creating a Person-Centered Library: Best Practices for Serving High-Needs Patrons* (Coming in Dec 2023) by Elizabeth A. Wahler and Sarah Johnson
- Mental Health First Aid ([mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org))
- *The Reflective Practice Guide: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Critical Reflection* (2015) by Barbara Bassot
- Sample Behavioral Response Guide



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# THANK YOU!

## **CONTACT ME:**



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***QUESTIONS?***