



LIBRARY COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION 20240226-5

Date: 02/26/2024

Subject: Improving library safety and holistic services for library patrons

Motioned By: Commissioner Davis

Seconded By: Vice Chair Infante Huerta

Recommendation

Provide two (2) FTE or contract Social Work positions and three (3) Security positions to the Austin Public Library department to be managed by Library personnel.

[Brief description of the Board's recommendation]

Description of Recommendation to Council

Requesting that the Austin City Council use their authority to amend the FTE policy around Social Work titles and support the relevant ~\$419,000 budget increase needed to add new positions.

Rationale

Austin Public Library facilities represent some of the only places in the city of Austin where people can go daily and stay for long periods of time. The library's operational needs are unique and evolving, especially considering the rapid change in the city. City Council and other City of Austin departments recognize the critical role that our libraries play in nurturing and strengthening the safety for all residents as evidenced by the City Council's 2019 expansion of the Safe Place program for LGBTQIA+ residents extending to the Austin Public Libraries. The presence of social workers and security personnel enhances the library by making it a safer place for residents to connect the resources they may need.

With limited shelters in the most populous parts of the city, the library is sometimes the only safe place our unhoused neighbors can go where they are welcomed in for free. The library is also often used as a warming or cooling shelter for all Austin residents during times of extreme temperatures that are occurring more and more frequently.

In response and shared responsibility to library customers and residents we must be aware of these evolving needs of the communities and seek combined solutions. The library currently has partnerships with Austin Public Health and with other community-based providers of wraparound services to help address some of the gaps but they are limited in scope and are present in a few library locations for short increments of time. The library commission has heard from members of the public, staff, and library leadership and we feel that the current model is not sufficient or sustainable.

Social Workers in public libraries is a growing trend across the United States and many large cities have found the addition of social workers to library staff to be integral to the delivery of day-to-day services. Many library patrons are coming in with multiple needs that require specialized training. Issues of housing insecurities, mental health, substance abuse and medical assistance needs are complex. Addressing these complex issues are beyond the scope of most Library Workers' training and job descriptions and places undue pressure and responsibility on them.

The libraries experience ongoing security challenges especially at the Terrazas, Little Walnut Creek, Ruiz, Menchaca, and Central locations. A new trend in incidents at the North Village, Spicewood Springs and Willie Mae Kirk branches has arisen as well. Additional Security Services positions are needed to provide more dedicated staff to each branch. These positions respond to incidents such as:

1. abusive, indecent, profane, or vulgar language,
2. disrupting use of library services or property,
3. vandalism, theft, or damage to property,
4. and harassment, sexual harassment, abuse, threats, or fights.

These new positions are needed to work collaboratively with social workers to determine the appropriate de-escalation needed to ensure that Austin's libraries are safe and welcoming for all.

References

- [Social Workers and Librarians](#) - American Library Association
 - [Why US Libraries are on the Frontlines of the Homelessness Crisis](#) - The Guardian
 - [Colorado librarians are now front-line crisis workers, managing homeless patrons, mental illness, book-banners](#) - Greeley Tribune
 - [Salt Lake City downtown library's new social worker has already helped thousands](#) - The Salt Lake Tribune
 - [The Changing Role of Libraries: How Social Workers Can Help](#) - The Journal of Contemporary Social Services
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Vote: 7-0-0-1

For: Vice-Chair Infante Huerta, Commissioners Rosenthal, Mehta, Davis, Herrera Moreno, Frayjo, Masters

Against: 0

Abstain: 0

Absent: Commissioner DeRosa

Attest: 

Laura Polio, Library Commission Staff Liaison