

Library Connect: Early Intervention to Prevent Homelessness

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Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated community hardship in many ways, even in Western Australia where COVID-19 spread has to date been minimal. There has been an increase in people who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness due to financial hardship, employment impacts, and the dearth of affordable rentals and public housing. This has included an emergence of many people requiring support who might not have previously accessed community services.^{1,2}

Against this backdrop of changing and increasing community need, the City of Fremantle and St Patrick's Community Support Centre (St Pat's) initiated the Library Connect project; embedding

a qualified and experienced community support worker within the accessible, safe, and welcoming space of a public library.

Library Connect, when it began, was the second library-based initiative of its kind in Australia, and is partly based on the support service implemented in City of Melbourne's libraries³ in partnership with Launch Housing and the City of Melbourne.

Across North America by contrast, there are over a hundred public libraries which have library-based social workers or social work student placement programs, as well as library-based peer outreach workers and peer navigators — people with a range of lived experience, who are based in libraries to provide support.^{4,5,6,7,8}

Research in the United States has highlighted that *'As a free public space, the library is visited daily by people experiencing homelessness seeking daytime shelter, bathrooms, internet access, and safety from the streets.'*⁹

The Fremantle Library Connect program was initially launched as a one-year pilot in September 2020, and has recently received funding towards another three years. The project is being evaluated by the Home2Health team at The University of Western Australia.

Support Provided to Date

In the first 12 months of the project, there were 556 total recorded contacts. Two-thirds of the requests for support have been from women, and the service supported significant numbers of Aboriginal people and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds.

Who has Library Connect Supported?

556 total recorded contacts

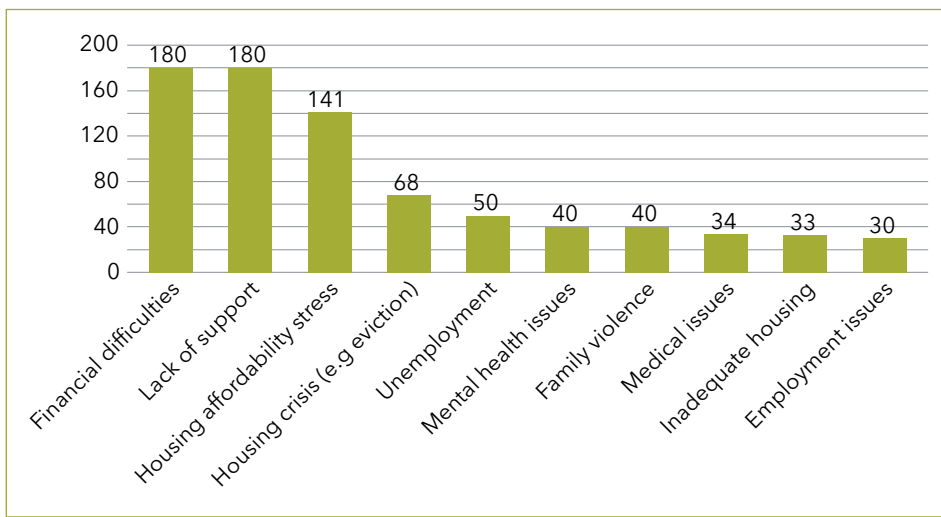
67 per cent female
33 per cent male

23 per cent Aboriginal and/
or Torres Strait Islander

19 per cent born overseas

The most common issues experienced by people supported by Library Connect have included financial difficulties, housing affordability stress and crisis, and lack of support to manage these issues. Issues relating to mental health, family violence, and employment were also common. People often present with and receive support around multiple intersecting issues.





Main Presenting Issues (year 1)

Critical Success Factors

Five key critical success factors have emerged from the project evaluation to date and data gathered from interviews with people who have been supported through Library Connect, as well as interviews, focus groups, and a survey at two time points of library staff and key project stakeholders.

1. Libraries are a Safe Space
2. Early Intervention and Prevention
3. Partnership Model
4. Support & Capacity Building for Library Staff
5. No barriers to Support

1. Libraries are a Safe Space

Libraries are a *safe, neutral, and familiar space* in which to seek help. This *increases accessibility* of the service and reduces stigma and anxiety about seeking support, especially for people accessing support for the first time.

'They feel it's a safe space for them to come — not judgemental, not dangerous, friendly, supportive. I think women can sometimes feel a bit overwhelmed by men's presence, so they prefer coming here because they feel safe here. They come to take some books and stuff, but also to receive some support'

— Library Connect worker

Libraries are also a particularly welcoming and accessible location for families, which can make engaging with support less daunting.

'And the Library is a good place for me. And for kids, the Library is the best place. When in the Library, they're having toys there, they're having books, they're having storytime'

— Library Connect client

2. Early Intervention and Prevention

The Library Connect service provides *early intervention* before issues escalate, particularly for people who have not previously needed support or who may not be comfortable accessing traditional emergency relief or crisis services.

In many instances, Library Connect has provided *critical support for families* — through securing housing, ensuring safety, and supporting school attendance — which has prevented further crisis.

'You don't know what to do, you don't know where to start [the Library Connect worker] really did help me. I have a job, I have my life set, and then something happened. Domestic violence was going on for a while. I just needed to get out. I left everything, I literally started from scratch'

— Library Connect client

3. Partnership Model

The *partnership* between a local government (City of Fremantle) and a community sector organisation

(St Pat's) is considered by project partners to be critical to the Library Connect model.

'[The Library Connect worker's] access to St Pat's information is really valuable. The fact that she's got St Pat's because from a therapeutic point of view ... she needs brainstorming and supervision from a therapeutic agency'

— Focus group participant

4. Support and Capacity Building for Library Staff

Library Connect provides *support and capacity building for library staff* — by having the Library Connect worker on site, with the time, skills, and training to support library staff with *managing and debriefing* on issues or incidents.

'[The Library Connect worker] has done work with some of the people who might be a little bit trickier than others. She has the time to sit with ... people sometimes and just go, "Look, if you want to be in the library space, you have to be more like this," and it helped them build those skills'

— Focus group participant

A specific area of focus has been the development of *trauma informed practice* within the Library. The Library Connect worker has arranged trauma informed training for library staff, and supports library staff in understanding the link between *trauma and client behaviour*.

'Sometimes if they have more of an understanding of what someone was dealing with in their life, I don't think they would escalate things as quickly as they do. We've been trying to go out a lot more and talk to people instead of security intervening because we find that less things will escalate and result in "You're banned from the library"'

— Focus group participant

5. No Barriers to Support

Library Connect offers very flexible support, with *no specific limits* to the number of sessions or length of support which can be offered. Clients can get in contact directly when they



From left to right: Jayne Cleave (City of Fremantle), Andrew Sullivan (City of Fremantle), Sonia Gonzalez (St Pat's), Michael Piu (St Pat's), Michelle Brennand (City of Fremantle)

need support, *without complicated referral processes* or having to tell their story to multiple people.

'I know that I can contact (Library Connect worker) if I have any problem, I can email her and she gets back to me and lets me know how I can go or what time I can come and see her about it'

— Library Connect client

'There are a lot of services but sometimes they can't receive as much help as they need. Maybe once every three months, they can see someone ... whereas here, they can come any time. I always say "Make an appointment but feel free to drop in. If I'm free, I'm happy to have a chat."

— Library Connect worker

Library Connect does not have *specific eligibility criteria* — for age, gender, income, family and/or relationship status, and residency or visa status. Library

Connect supports a *very diverse range of clients* and many clients engaging with Library Connect have not been able to access other services due to these services' eligibility criteria or availability.

To Conclude

In its first year, the project has demonstrated how earlier intervention to prevent homelessness and address hardship can be effectively embedded into a local library setting. There has been significant interest from other local governments about the possibility of this model of support being offered in libraries elsewhere in Western Australia.

Endnotes

1. Cortis N and Blaxland M 2021, *Meeting community needs in difficult times: experience of Australia's community sector*, Australian Council of Social Service.
2. Shelter WA 2021, *Rental Moratorium Roundtable: Mitigating the impact of the ending of the rental moratorium*, Shelter WA and the Real Estate Institute of WA (REIWA).
3. Garner J, Mitchell L, Bell K, Lockwood A and Wardle S 2020, 'Social Work in Australian Public Libraries: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Social Justice', *Public Library Quarterly*, pp. 1-17.
4. Zettervall S and Nienow M 2019, *Whole person librarianship: a social work approach to patron services*, Libraries Unlimited, Santa Barbara, California.
5. Lloyd P 2020, 'The Public Library as a Protective Factor: An Introduction to Library Social Work', *Public Library Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, pp.50-63.
6. Provence M 2020, 'Encouraging the Humanization of Patrons Experiencing Homelessness: A Case Study of the Role of the US Public Library Social Worker', *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 4, pp.431-446.
7. Provence M, Wahler E, Helling J and Williams M 2020, 'Self-Reported Psychosocial Needs of Public Library Patrons: Comparisons Based on Housing Status', *Public Library Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp.244-257.
8. Garner J, Mitchell L, Bell K, Lockwood A and Wardle S 2020 op cit.
9. Provence M, Wahler E, Helling J and Williams M 2020 op cit.

Case Study

Background

Mary, a woman in her late twenties, engaged with Library Connect in November 2020, after coming to WA with her four-year-old son, escaping domestic violence. Mary had arrived in Perth at a time of significant housing crisis — with very high demand and low vacancy rates for rental properties, and high waiting lists for crisis accommodation. She had not previously engaged with community services and had very limited knowledge of available support.

Library Connect support

Library Connect supported Mary with referrals, finding housing, employment, emotional support, emergency relief, and accessing Centrelink.

Current situation

When the Library Connect worker followed up with Mary in September 2021, Mary advised that she was living in the same private rental accommodation and managing well. Mary knows that she can access further support through Library Connect if she needs to in the future.