From Risk to Resilience

A trauma informed framework for sustainable library services

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To the amazing person working in a public library,

I wish I knew your name I really do. I would use it and look you in the eyes and say thank you.

I see you. I see the challenges and triumphs that often intersect and take their toll. For the unseen work that you do to support those who have fallen through the cracks. For the joy that comes when people connect and their needs are met. For the triumph of a job well done.

For the challenges that you've navigated and the ones to come. I see you. The impact, the toll, the abuse that is hurled your way, adults acting out as they cry out for attention, the depth of sadness that comes when you see the relentless line of people in crisis, the waves of emotions that smash you, only for you to think the raging waters have calmed only to be smashed again … until the next triumph carries you through. I see you.

What you do is valuable beyond measure. It is worth far more than your remuneration, it is worth far more than what you see in front of you.

The work you do contributes to generational change simply one person, one family, at a time. Economic and social measurements can't measure what you do. You make those in absolute crisis, smile for the first time in a long time, you take someone who has had the book of life thrown at them and help it all make sense. You guide, coach, teach and listen those who have no one - often without realizing. That is worth more than what can be measured.

The child who learns to read because their parents were encouraged to read, the teenager who found a safe space to just be, the language barrier you removed with your patience and kindness, the sleep someone got because your couch was the safest option… do I go on. What you do can't be measured. It also cannot be replicated anywhere else.

So, for now, as you feel the weight, as you witness the experience of humanity walk through the doors each day, know that you are seen and valued.

Know that you make a difference that cannot be measured. Know that it is okay to stop and breathe. Know that it's okay to take all the time you need to recharge. For when you do, and you will, the triumphs will always outweigh the challenges.

From risk to resilience: a trauma informed framework for sustainable library services

Abstract

Public libraries are unique institutions that aim to serve as inclusive, judgment-free spaces for all members of the community. Frontline staff who uphold these values often encounter traumatic situations, both directly and indirectly. This paper explores the significance of trauma-informed service delivery in libraries, focusing not only on the nature and impact of trauma but on the mechanisms through which library services can reduce hazards, support their staff and effectively reduce psychosocial safety risks. Drawing on lived experience and a wide range of research, this paper argues for a holistic, systemic approach to trauma-informed practice that acknowledges the complexity of public library work and the humanity of those who perform it.

Introduction

Emerging research and firsthand accounts increasingly highlight the exposure of frontline library staff to trauma in the course of their duties. This trauma, whether acute or cumulative, direct or vicarious, arises from the unique social role libraries occupy as all-access community spaces. Unlike commercial or other government institutions, libraries serve as informal sanctuaries where individuals seek rest, safety, connection, and assistance, without formal referral or obligation.

The perception of library work as primarily literary or administrative fails to account for the emotional labour, critical decision-making, and people skills required when working in a public-facing role. Library professionals are frequently called upon by those in crisis to support them as they are experiencing homelessness, mental health crisis, domestic violence, and/ or systemic marginalisation. As libraries increasingly absorb responsibilities traditionally held by typically under-resourced social services, the community expects staff to provide and undertake bureaucratic guidance, digital literacy support, and emotional care, tasks that extend beyond the conventional scope of library work and introduce ethically complex and psychologically demanding challenges.

The cumulative impact of these interactions is significant. Staff report symptoms consistent with burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress, which in turn affect team cohesion, service quality, and organisational culture. Without adequate structural support, exposure to trauma-related risks can compromise the capacity of library services to operate effectively and uphold their core values. This, in turn, signals the need to critically examine whether existing service values remain fit for purpose, or whether they require adaptation in response to evolving community conditions and increasingly complex service demands.

For the purposes of this paper, t*rauma* refers specifically to violent or aggressive behavioural interactions between library users and staff, this has been identified as the most prevalent source of trauma across all types of libraries, with a particular focus on public library settings. While this focus reflects the dominant pattern, it does not exclude other forms of distressing behaviour that may adversely affect staff wellbeing.

The *psychosocial safety hazards* as per the Workplace Health and Safety Act (2011) which was updated in April 2023, that will be addressed in this paper are:

- Harmful behaviours including harassment
- Violence and aggression and;
- Exposure to traumatic events or materials.

These hazards rarely occur in isolation within public library environments. Instead, they frequently interact and compound, increasing both the likelihood and severity of harm. For example, following a distressing incident, factors such as inadequate organisational support, low job control, or unclear role expectations can amplify the impact on staff. Recognising how these hazards intersect is critical to effectively managing psychosocial risk.

This paper begins by outlining the conceptual and legislative context underpinning trauma-informed practice in public libraries. It then presents case study findings drawn from diverse service environments, followed by a discussion that synthesises key workforce, leadership, and organisational implications. Finally, an applied toolkit is provided to support the implementation of trauma-informed approaches within public library contexts.

The tapestry of public library practices

This section establishes the conceptual foundation for the paper, defining key terms and outlining the evolving role of public libraries within increasingly complex social environments. Public libraries are increasingly responding to a wide range of complex community needs, including homelessness, mental health challenges, domestic violence, and digital exclusion. As accessible and low-barrier public spaces, libraries are often approached as informal points of support for individuals experiencing social and economic vulnerability.

This expanding role has significantly altered the nature of frontline work. Library staff are now required to manage complex and, at times, emotionally demanding interactions while maintaining consistent service delivery. As these expectations increase, so too does the potential for psychosocial risk, reinforcing the importance of clear boundaries, organisational support, and structured responses to challenging situations.

In response to these changing conditions, libraries have adopted a range of service delivery models designed to guide practice and better support frontline staff. These include:

Customer-Centric model

This model prioritises patron experience through leadership, innovation, and continuous improvement. While it enhances user satisfaction, it must be implemented carefully to avoid placing disproportionate pressure on staff to meet escalating customer expectations.

Human-Centred approach

This approach extends customer-centricity by recognising staff as essential contributors to service quality. It emphasises mutual care and positions libraries as community-centred institutions, where staff empowerment and wellbeing are prerequisites for meaningful and sustainable patron engagement.

Trauma-Informed service model

This model acknowledges the impact of trauma on both patrons and staff. It encourages empathetic, anticipatory care by shifting interactions from “What is wrong with you?” to “What do you need?”.

Frameworks such as the Victorian Government’s *Trauma-Informed Practice* model outline system-wide principles for embedding trauma-informed approaches across governance, policy, physical environments, and workforce development. These approaches aim to ensure services promote safety, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness. (Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, 2022)

Although libraries are not clinical environments, they increasingly function as informal community care spaces. Their open-access, low-barrier design positions them within broader social infrastructure, frequently serving individuals experiencing distress, marginalisation, or trauma. In this context, library staff encounter complex psychosocial dynamics comparable to those faced by frontline human services professionals, often without equivalent training, organisational support systems, protective policies, or environmental safeguards.

Drawing on practitioner experience and research evidence, this paper argues for a holistic, systemic approach to trauma-informed practice that recognises both the complexity of public library work and its implications for workforce wellbeing.

Service delivery models represent only one aspect of public library practice. They operate alongside other critical elements, including community engagement, social service partnerships, policy frameworks, spatial design, and organisational culture. For libraries to function effectively, these elements must be aligned. This alignment is essential to support not only the communities they serve, but also the staff who deliver services and the local governments that sustain them.

Together, these service delivery models reflect the expectation of an increasingly human-centred orientation that cannot be implemented effectively without corresponding systems of psychosocial safety and organisational protection.

Global approaches to psychosocial safety vary. (*See Appendix A: Short Comparison of psychological safety standards a global perspective*) Australia leads the way with enforceable legislation mandating the management of psychosocial hazards. Canada for example offers a voluntary national standard, while New Zealand and the UK embed psychosocial safety within broader health and safety frameworks. The United States lacks federal mandates but demonstrates growing interest through initiatives such as those promoted by the Network of the National Library of Medicine. Ultimately, equipping staff to respond to trauma with empathy and professionalism is not a discretionary service enhancement, but rather it is becoming a foundational requirement for effective and sustainable library service delivery.

These global variations in psychosocial safety standards highlight a crucial point: the realities faced by public libraries require more than compliance; they demand a reconceptualization of what library work truly entails. This includes the reframing of the prevailing narrative of public libraries. Public libraries are not passive spaces but rather, constitute dynamic, complex, and deeply human organisations. The labour of library professionals is simultaneously cognitive and effective, encompassing procedural rigor alongside relational engagement. Within this context, the recognition and responsive management of trauma is not ancillary to library service it is integral to its sustainability and operational framework.

As we look ahead, we must commit to weaving a stronger, more compassionate tapestry of service, one that respects the role staff play to keep our libraries open, inclusive, and resilient while ensuring services rendered are relevant. To do so, we must first examine the current position of public libraries in order to chart a purposeful path toward where library services need to be.

Divergent Expectations: Public perceptions and professional roles

As noted, public libraries occupy a unique position within the community, often perceived as neutral, accessible spaces that provide educational and informational resources. Expectations placed upon library staff by the public can be complex and, at times, contradictory. While patrons may view libraries as places of refuge and support, their perception of staff responsibilities does not always align with the realities of frontline service. In the 2025 article *Public Libraries and People Experiencing Homelessness: The Experience and Attitudes of Library Users*, Dr Jane Garner highlights a significant disparity between public and staff perspectives. The research reveals that 43.22% of library users surveyed did not support the notion that assisting people experiencing homelessness falls within the remit of library services, whereas 59.03% of library staff affirmed that providing social support is part of their professional role. This divergence underscores a broader tension between traditional expectations of library services focused on books and information and the evolving, often informal, social service functions that staff are increasingly expecting to perform. Addressing this gap requires organisational clarity and public awareness about the multifaceted role of libraries in contemporary society.

Library professionals are frequently drawn to the field by a shared commitment and passion for learning with the opportunity to make a meaningful impact in their communities. Libraries offer a dynamic, inclusive environment where staff can promote access to information, support wellbeing, and foster social connections. For many staff, this vocation is not solely defined by the delivery of technical services, but by a broader ethos of care, responsiveness, and social stewardship (Rodger & Erickson, 2021; Matteson, Chittock, & Mease, 2015). With that in mind, a compelling question emerges: *What sustains and fulfills library staff in their roles?* Is professional satisfaction derived purely from the provision of library services, or does it extend into what might be termed “mission creep” the informal, often unacknowledged provision of emotional labour, generosity of spirit, and social support? Responses to this question likely vary across individuals and contexts, forming a spectrum of motivations ranging from a need to help, a desire to help, to an expectation of helping (Unegbu, Babalola, & Basahuwa, 2020).

Interestingly, if members of the public were asked the parallel question of, *what do you expect from library staff? T*heir responses might mirror those of staff: some do not want help, some may want help, and others expect help. These reciprocal dynamics underscore the relational nature of library work and highlight the importance of understanding both staff motivations and public expectations in shaping sustainable, trauma-informed service models (Founds, 2023; Robertson, 2024).

Leadership and psychosocial safety in public libraries

Taking a step back from the notion of library staff job satisfaction and the impulse to potentially over serve library users, let’s consider the Librarians themselves. The university-qualified professionals who have invested years of study to enter this field. In most library services, completing a master’s degree is the benchmark for becoming a Librarian. Yet, what is often missing from this academic preparation are the people leadership skills essential for guiding teams, managing public interactions, and navigating the tensions that exist between these responsibilities.

Carrie Dickersom the author of *Leading with Empathy*, notes “A true people leader does more than supervise-they inspire trust and growth by leading with empathy, clear communication, and integrity.” (2025). While Juliet Bourke the

author of *Six Signature Traits of Inclusive Leadership* adds that “leaders empower others, foster inclusion, and cultivate a connected culture where individuals feel valued and supported.” (2016). Interestingly, this sense of connectedness mirrors one of the most common expectations of libraries expressed by communities: the desire for connection and belonging. Beyond leadership, Librarians frequently serve as site supervisors, bearing responsibility for everything that happens within their space, including oversight of workplace health and safety, adding another layer of complexity to their role.

Under the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (Qld)*, all organisations, including public libraries, have a legal duty to ensure the health and safety of their workers this includes both physical and psychological wellbeing**.** This duty applies to all persons conducting a business, including local government and library leadership. In practice, this means proactively identifying and managing risks such as workplace stress, bullying, high workloads, and poor role clarity. (WorkSafe Queensland, 2025). For public libraries, where staff often engage with diverse and vulnerable community members, this responsibility is particularly significant. Ensuring a safe and supportive environment not only protects staff but also enhances the quality of service delivered to the community.

The introduction of the *Managing the Risk of Psychosocial Hazards at Work Code of Practice 2022*, enforceable from April 2023, has clarified and strengthened the obligations of employers in Queensland (WorkSafe Queensland, 2022). These laws require organisations to treat psychosocial hazards with the same seriousness as physical risks. For public libraries, this means implementing structured risk management processes, identifying hazards, assessing risks, and applying control measures. Failure to comply can result in regulatory action. The updated legislation also places greater emphasis on consultation with staff, ensuring their voices are heard in shaping safe work practices (WHS & Training Compliance Solutions, n.d.). To meet these obligations, libraries must develop and maintain clear policies and procedures that address psychosocial risks, outline reporting mechanisms, and support early intervention. This should include but not be limited to robust conditions of entry that support staff safety and clear guidelines around banning procedures.

These documents should be regularly reviewed and aligned with the Code of Practice (WorkSafe Queensland, 2022). Additionally, Service Level Agreements (SLAs) between councils and the Library Board of Queensland now reflect expectations around staff wellbeing, compliance with WHS legislation, and the responsible use of funding (Library Board of Queensland, 2022; State Library of Queensland, 2024). Embedding wellbeing into service level agreements and operational frameworks ensures that staff support is not just a policy ideal but a contractual and strategic priority. This alignment helps create a culture of care, accountability, and continuous improvement across Queensland’s public library network.

Shared responsibility of psychological safety

While organisations have a legal and ethical duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace, it’s equally important to recognise that staff also have a personal responsibility for their own wellbeing. Psychological safety laws and workplace policies create a foundation for support, but they cannot replace individual self-awareness, self-care, and proactive communication. Staff are often encouraged by their workplace to engage in practices that support their mental and emotional health such as setting boundaries, seeking support when needed, participating in wellbeing initiatives, and contributing to a respectful and inclusive workplace culture. By taking ownership of their own wellbeing and working collaboratively with colleagues and leaders, staff help create a resilient and supportive environment that benefits everyone. Ultimately, psychological safety is a shared responsibility, requiring both organisational commitment and individual engagement.

Staff workplace health safety obligations and psychosocial safety

In addition to organisational responsibilities, all staff have legal and ethical obligations under Queensland’s Work Health and Safety Act to take reasonable care for their own health and safety, as well as that of others in the workplace. This includes contributing to a psychologically safe environment by treating colleagues and patrons with respect, reporting hazards or incidents, and following established procedures. Psychosocial safety is not just a management issue it’s a shared responsibility. Staff play a key role in identifying and reporting early signs of stress, conflict, or unsafe behaviour, and in supporting a culture where wellbeing is prioritised. By actively participating in safety initiatives, engaging in respectful communication, and upholding professional standards, staff help create a workplace where everyone can thrive.

Building resilience and engagement is a two-way responsibility

Resilience is the capacity to adapt and recover from stress or adversity, and it is a critical skill for library staff operating in dynamic, often emotionally demanding environments such as public libraries. Research consistently shows that resilience is linked to improved well-being, job satisfaction, and performance outcomes in the workplace (Good et al., 2025; Gifford & Young, 2021). While organisational support is essential, individuals also play a key role in cultivating

personal coping strategies within the context of clear organisational boundaries, maintaining healthy limits, and recognizing when to seek help.

However, an unchecked emphasis on resilience can inadvertently shift responsibility onto individuals, particularly when structural issues such as excessive workloads, role ambiguity, or repeated exposure to emotionally charged interactions remain unaddressed. When resilience is framed solely as the ability to endure or adapt, it risks normalising harm rather than preventing it. Firmer boundaries around behaviour, emotional labour, and organisational expectations are therefore essential. These boundaries signal that staff wellbeing is not contingent on endurance alone, but is actively protected through clear limits, respectful practice, and leadership accountability. In this context, resilience is about being supported to work within safe, ethical, and humane conditions, rather than being encouraged to tolerate what is unsustainable.

Equally important is engagement: the emotional commitment that drives employees to contribute their best work sustainably (Buckingham, 2021). Engagement and resilience are deeply interconnected; employees who feel psychologically safe and supported demonstrate higher adaptability and trust in leadership (Newman, 2025; Lindén et al., 2025). This underscores the need for a two-way relationship between staff and leadership. Leaders must be open, responsive, and proactive, while staff are encouraged to take initiative by sharing ideas, raising concerns, and participating in shaping a positive workplace culture (Klasmeier et al., 2025; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022).

When both parties commit to this mutual responsibility through wellbeing initiatives, respectful communication, clear boundaries, and collaborative problem-solving, the result is a psychologically safe environment that fosters trust, strengthens resilience, and enhances engagement (Global Wellness Institute, 2025; Knight, 2025). In libraries, where staff often face unique challenges such as secondary trauma and high emotional labour, adopting trauma-informed and resilience-building practices is particularly vital (Robertson, 2024).

Resilience and engagement are not static qualities but ongoing processes that thrive in environments of trust, collaboration, and shared accountability. By embracing this two-way responsibility, libraries can create workplaces where staff feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute meaningfully. This commitment not only benefits individual well-being but also strengthens the collective capacity of libraries to serve their communities with empathy, adaptability, and excellence.

Public libraries as social infrastructure

The reality of public opinion

> Libraries, as they exist in the twenty-first century, are the only remaining public domain. In a library, anyone of any walk of life can come and go as they choose (Stack-Nelson, L. 2018).

Loneliness, as noted by *The Healthy Mind Co.*," is not merely the state of being alone, but rather the absence of meaningful social connection." (2025) In this context, public libraries particularly through their diverse programming have emerged as vital spaces for fostering such connections across urban communities. Dr. Salene Schloffel-Armstrong, a geographer, explores this evolving role in her paper *The Public Library and the Futures of Social Infrastructure*. She positions public libraries as integral components of social infrastructure, aligning with Eric Klinenberg's (2002) concept of the "third space" a neutral, accessible environment that facilitates social interaction and community cohesion.

Schloffel-Armstrong identifies a key tension between the traditional "book" function of libraries and their expanding "more-than-book" roles. While some library services may prefer to focus solely on literary and informational resources, community expectations increasingly demand that libraries evolve into hubs of social engagement and support.

Her research underscores the library's emerging role in what she terms the "repatterning of the landscape of care." This includes libraries stepping into nontraditional roles such as offering referrals for housing, hosting social programs, and providing digital literacy education. These functions reflect a broader shift in how care and community support are distributed across public spaces.

The term social infrastructure refers to geographic spaces that play a crucial role in the social life of cities, such as parks, schools community centres and libraries. (Van Melik, R., & Merry, M. S.2023). According to the Australian Urban Observatory (n.d.), such infrastructure is closely associated with improved physical and mental health outcomes, as well as increased satisfaction with one's local environment.

Historically, libraries were not consistently acknowledged as integral components of social infrastructure. However, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored their essential role in fulfilling the fundamental human need for connection (and

information), as conceptualized in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). In the aftermath of widespread social isolation, libraries experienced a notable surge in demand not only for traditional services but also perceived as a place where a sense of belonging and community could be fostered. This shift highlights the need to formally recognise libraries as critical elements of social infrastructure within policy and practice at local, state, and national levels.

Recent data from the *National and State Libraries Australasia* and the *Australian Library and Information Association* (2025) reinforces this trend. Key findings include:

- A 10% increase in physical visitation, reaching 88 million annually, while online visits declined by 10% to 60 million.
- Delivery of a record 409,000 programs attracting over 7 million attendees, with literacy and lifelong learning programs being the most popular an increase of nearly 1 million attendees compared to 2022–23.
- Despite these achievements, funding pressures persist. Although total expenditure rose by 6% to $1.385 billion, inflation-adjusted per capita spending has decreased by 12% over five years, and collection expenditure has declined by 14% in real terms.

This surge in engagement reflects the demand for traditional library services and the vital role libraries play in fostering social connection and belonging. Yet, the juxtaposition of rising community expectations against declining real-term budgets places significant strain on both staff and service delivery.

The importance of libraries as social infrastructure was further emphasized in a recent submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Regional Development, Infrastructure and Transport inquiry into local government sustainability. The submission noted that "Australia faces major challenges in trust, social connectedness, and social cohesion," and highlighted libraries as spaces that "bring people together from across the political spectrum and help us build trust in our societies and our government officials" (Australian Library and Information Association, Australian Public Library Alliance, 2024, p. 5).

Libraries have evolved into a vital component of social infrastructure, fostering trust, learning, and community connection. Rising visitation and program participation underscore their growing importance, yet funding has not kept pace with demand. To sustain these benefits, libraries must be formally recognised in policy and planning as essential spaces that strengthen social cohesion and resilience across Australia and be compensated accordingly.

Public libraries as catalysts for connection and engagement

'To restore civil society, start with the library'
Klinenberg (2018).

Public libraries are unique where the full spectrum of the human experience is witnessed daily. They serve as sanctuaries, places where individuals seek safety, belonging, and connection. This connection is not always rooted in familiarity; often, it is the simple presence of others, even strangers, which fosters a sense of community. Libraries are places where people come to feel seen and valued. For others, the library represents a refuge, a place to seek help and connection during times of vulnerability or crisis. Sometimes, this need for connection is expressed through challenging behaviours, which can impact the safety and comfort of others. This reality reflects the complex social role libraries play in contemporary society: balancing inclusivity and support while maintaining a safe, welcoming environment for all.

Emerging research consistently demonstrates that meaningful social engagement is linked to improved mental health outcomes. Individuals who feel connected to others tend to experience lower levels of stress, greater self-compassion, enhanced emotional regulation, and increased empathy. These findings highlight the critical importance of creating environments that actively foster connection and engagement, with library programming serving as a key mechanism to achieve this objective. Examples of such initiatives include:

Libraries Victoria example:

In *The health and wellbeing benefits of public libraries across Victoria* (2023) report community value estimates of libraries found the following:

> The report found the average value community placed on public libraries was $73.1 per year. This figure represents the average amount each respondent was willing to pay for all the services on offer from public libraries. In terms of specific library services: Core services had a higher community value than complementary

services, with aggregate core service community value at $61.7 per year (84.3% of total community value), compared to $11.5 for complementary services (15.7%). Core services include physically collections, digital collections, program delivery, technologies and internet, staff assistance and physical spaces. Complementary services include physical health programs / resources, mental health programs and resources and social connection programs.

The report also summarised that the return on investment within community of spend on libraries in Victoria was $1.98 (SGS Economics and Planning, 2023).

New York Libraries example:

Supporting the value of libraries in community, The New York Public Library published it's L*ibraries and Wellbeing Report* in 2024, This study highlights that libraries are essential for human flourishing, offering spaces that foster positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Patrons consistently report feeling calmer, more connected, and more purposeful after engaging with library services and programs. Libraries act as trusted community hubs, reducing isolation and promoting well-being through meaningful social interaction (The New York Public Library & University of Pennsylvania Positive Psychology Centre, 2024).

Libraries 4 Heath example: Texas USA

The theme of connected community is central to the integration of psychosocial safety within rural libraries where they typically have one to two staff members on site. Rural communities often experience barriers such as limited access to healthcare, geographic isolation, and persistent stigma around mental health. Libraries, as trusted and inclusive spaces, can bridge these gaps by fostering meaningful connections between individuals, resources, and professional support. Initiatives like Libraries for Health (L4H) exemplify this approach by embedding mental health services into library settings, offering safe spaces for conversation, and linking patrons to qualified practitioners. L4H, developed through a partnership between St. David's Foundation, RAND, Via Hope and public libraries this program aims to build community capacity for mental health and wellbeing by integrating support directly into library environments. (RAND, 2025)

Examples of the benefits for both rural and urban libraries integrating programs such as L4H include:

- **Rural Libraries:** Increased access to mental health resources in areas with limited services; reduced stigma through community-based support; stronger partnerships with health providers; and enhanced staff capacity to manage complex social needs.
- **Urban Libraries:** Greater reach to underserved populations; improved inclusivity for diverse communities; opportunities for collaboration with local health networks; and positioning libraries as proactive agents in public health and wellbeing.

The value of this connectedness is profound. When community members feel supported and understood, they are more likely to seek help, share experiences, and build networks of care. This not only strengthens individual wellbeing but also cultivates a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. In rural contexts, where isolation can exacerbate mental health challenges, libraries serve as vital anchors creating opportunities for engagement, reducing stigma, and promoting equity in access to support. By integrating initiatives like L4H, libraries reinforce their role as pillars of connected communities, ensuring that mental health care is approachable, local, and embedded in everyday life. Importantly, fostering these connections also reduces psychosocial safety hazards for staff by minimizing the likelihood of escalated behaviours, lowering stress associated with conflict, and creating a more predictable, supportive environment. When patrons feel valued and engaged, interactions are less adversarial, enabling staff to focus on service rather than crisis management. This proactive approach not only mitigates risk but also strengthens community cohesion, transforming libraries into safer, more inclusive spaces for all.

Social prescribing methodology and relevance to public libraries

Social prescribing is a community-centred model of care that links individuals with non-clinical supports addressing social, emotional and practical needs. It is commonly defined as *"a mechanism for linking patients with non-medical sources of support within the community"* (Zurynski et al., 2021). This model has expanded rapidly in recent years, particularly in the United Kingdom, and is gaining momentum in Australia as a strategy to improve wellbeing by tackling social determinants of health such as loneliness, financial hardship and limited community engagement. Australian social prescribing research emphasises that improved cross-sector referral pathways are needed to overcome fragmented service systems and provide equitable access to social and community supports (Bogomolova et al., 2024).

Public libraries are recognised as ideal partners in social prescribing due to their accessible, non-stigmatising and community-embedded nature. According to the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA), libraries act as information hubs, connectors and safe community spaces offering inclusive programs and opportunities for learning and social interaction (ALIA, 2024). These functions align closely with the aims of social prescribing, which seeks to improve wellness through community participation, knowledge access and reduced isolation (ALIA, 2024). Importantly, libraries complement health services by supporting wellbeing through informational, social and recreational pathways rather than clinical intervention.

Examples such as the Campaspe Library Outreach Service illustrate how libraries can collaborate effectively with health providers to reach socially isolated individuals and enhance awareness of non-clinical community supports (ALIA, 2024). National initiatives, including the ARC-funded social prescribing research program, further highlight the growing recognition of libraries as part of a broader ecosystem of community-based supports that improve population wellbeing (Centre for Social Impact, 2024).

As Australia continues to expand social prescribing infrastructure, public libraries offer a low-barrier, scalable and community-trusted environment that strengthens social connection, reduces service gaps and supports holistic, person-centred care.

Compassion Project example:

A final example is the transformative potential of compassion-driven initiatives such as the one vividly illustrated in *The Compassion Project: A Case for Hope & Human kindness from a Town That Beat Loneliness* (Abel & Clarke, 2020). Abel and Clarke argue that meaningful change arises when communities leverage existing resources both tangible assets and intangible forces such as compassion and goodwill to support those in need. They note that “active compassion is unquestionably good not just for people’s morale but also for their health and wellbeing” (p. 13). Within this context, public libraries extend beyond their traditional role as custodians of information to serve as vital components of social infrastructure, fostering both individual and collective wellbeing. Through diverse programming and outreach initiatives, libraries create spaces for connection, inclusion, and opportunity elements essential for fostering resilience and social cohesion.

Public libraries, deeply embedded in the social fabric of their communities, are well-positioned to facilitate these outcomes. Whether through a warm greeting from staff, programs designed to encourage interaction, or simply providing a space for community groups to gather, libraries offer multiple pathways to connection. These seemingly small interactions contribute to a broader culture of care and inclusion.

The cost benefit of such initiatives can be profoundly positive, delivering substantial benefits at a fraction of the cost of clinical interventions. For example, Queensland’s First 5 Forever program which is funded at $20 million over four years and now supported by $5 million annually, demonstrates how a relatively modest investment in early literacy and family engagement through libraries can deliver long-term social and health benefits, reducing future demand on health and education systems (State Library of Queensland, 2023). By leveraging existing library infrastructure, social prescribing models can achieve high impact at low cost, making them a sustainable strategy for improving community wellbeing and increasing library use.

To summarise, regardless of whether current service models, library leadership, or frontline staff fully endorse the concept of libraries as integral components of social infrastructure, evidence suggests that communities increasingly perceive libraries as spaces for connection and belonging. This emergent expectation is reshaping operational priorities, often without corresponding adjustments in funding or resource allocation. Consequently, programs designed to address social needs frequently rely on staff time and goodwill, raising further critical questions regarding psychological safety, sustainability, accountability, and workforce preparedness.

For decision-makers, this represents a strategic inflection point. Immediate action is required to:

1. Embed workforce development initiatives that prioritise people leadership, conflict management, and trauma-informed practice within professional training frameworks.
2. Reassess funding models to ensure that socially responsive programming is adequately resourced rather than dependent on current staff skills.
3. Integrate sustainability and evaluative mechanisms into organisational planning to safeguard staff wellbeing while maintaining service quality and community trust.

Public libraries stand at the intersection of knowledge, community, and care, uniquely positioned to transform social challenges into opportunities for connection and community growth. By embedding compassion-driven practices and fostering inclusive environments, libraries not only enhance individual wellbeing but also mitigate risks associated with isolation, crisis, and disruptive behaviours. When people feel seen, supported, and engaged, the likelihood of conflict diminishes, creating safer spaces for all. This proactive approach reduces strain on emergency and clinical services, strengthens community resilience, and ensures libraries remain trusted sanctuaries of belonging. In an era marked by

social fragmentation, libraries as catalysts for connection are not a luxury, they are an essential strategy for building healthier, safer, and more cohesive communities.

Strengthening organisational resilience through trauma-informed practice

Organisational resilience is the ability to adapt, recover, and thrive amid challenges and disruptions. When viewed through a trauma-informed lens, resilience goes beyond operational continuity, it prioritises the psychological safety and wellbeing of staff and customers. Trauma-informed principles acknowledge that adversity and stress can impact behaviour, decision-making, and engagement. By embedding these principles into policies and practices, organisations create environments that reduce harm, foster trust, and support recovery.

A trauma-informed approach to resilience begins with recognising the prevalence of trauma and its effects. This means designing systems that emphasise safety, transparency, and empowerment. For example, clear communication during times of change can mitigate uncertainty, while flexible procedures allow staff to manage stress without compromising service delivery. Leaders play a critical role by modelling empathy, promoting collaboration, and ensuring that organisational responses do not inadvertently retraumatise individuals.

Ultimately, resilience is strengthened when organisations view wellbeing as integral to performance. Trauma-informed strategies, such as staff training, reflective supervision, and inclusive decision-making, help build a culture of care. This culture not only supports individuals during crises but also enhances long-term adaptability, enabling the organisation to maintain its mission while safeguarding its people.

Connection and engagement from a library leadership perspective

Recent findings, such as those presented in the *Fraser Coast Report: How Engagement Can Reduce Psychosocial Hazards* (Gallop, 2024), underscore a compelling correlation between workforce engagement and the reduction of psychosocial risks. The report highlights a 4.5% increase in talent retention, a notable reduction in sick leave among engaged employees, and a doubling of staff engagement rates to 48%, well above the national average of 37%. These outcomes point to a critical insight: a connected and engaged workforce is a safer, healthier, and more resilient one. Beyond reducing risks, engagement fosters psychological safety, which is essential for staff wellbeing and performance. Teams that feel valued and supported are more likely to demonstrate adaptability, creativity, and collaborative problem-solving, qualities that are vital in complex service environments like libraries. Adding to this, the more connected and engaged teams are, the better equipped they are to serve their communities with empathy, consistency, and care, reinforcing the library's role as a trusted anchor for social connection and wellbeing.

The role of leadership in fostering engagement

Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the psychosocial climate of a workplace. Their ability to connect meaningfully with staff, demonstrate empathy, and respond proactively to concerns directly influences employee wellbeing. Key leadership behaviours that contribute to increased connectedness and reduced psychosocial hazards include:

- **Visible and authentic engagement**: Leaders who regularly interact with staff, listen actively, and show genuine interest in their experiences foster trust and psychological safety. This also refers to those in library leadership who work in administration. The ability to engage with staff in this way strengthens connection, enhances psychological safety, and contributes to the reduction of psychosocial risk across the organisation.

- **Empathy and emotional intelligence**: Understanding the emotional and professional challenges staff face allows leaders to tailor support and solutions effectively.

- **Hearing and listening to staff experiences:** Effective leadership goes beyond hearing words; it involves active listening with empathy and curiosity. Leaders should acknowledge what is shared, ask clarifying questions, and demonstrate that feedback informs decisions. This practice builds trust and reduces feelings of isolation. Staff value the opportunity to be heard.
- **Transparent communication**: Keeping staff informed and involved in decision-making processes reduces uncertainty and builds a sense of shared purpose.

When leaders consistently model these behaviours, they foster a culture in which staff feel valued, safe, and supported, enhancing engagement while reducing psychosocial risks across the organisation.

Understanding staff experiences

To effectively mitigate psychosocial risks, leaders must go beyond surface-level interactions and actively seek to understand the lived experiences of their teams. This requires intentional strategies that prioritise listening, transparency, and inclusion:

- **Regular check-ins and feedback loops:** Establish structured opportunities for staff to share thoughts, concerns, and suggestions such as one-on-one meetings, team huddles, and anonymous feedback channels. These interactions should be consistent and framed as safe spaces for open dialogue, not performance evaluations.

- **Data-Informed insights:** Use engagement surveys, exit interviews, and wellbeing assessments to identify patterns and emerging risks. Combining qualitative feedback with quantitative data allows leaders to pinpoint systemic issues such as workload imbalance or unclear role expectations and take proactive steps before they escalate.

- **Inclusive leadership practices:** Ensure diverse voices are heard and valued, particularly those from underrepresented or vulnerable groups. This includes adapting communication styles, providing multiple avenues for input, and actively addressing barriers that prevent participation. Inclusive practices help build trust and reduce feelings of isolation or marginalization.

- **Contextual understanding:** Recognise that staff experiences are shaped by factors beyond the workplace, such as community pressures or personal circumstances. Leaders who approach conversations with empathy and curiosity can better tailor support and avoid assumptions that may exacerbate stress.

- **Closing the loop:** Feedback must lead to visible action. Communicating what has been heard and what changes will follow reinforces psychological safety and demonstrates that staff voices matter.

Understanding staff experiences is essential for identifying psychosocial risks and building a workplace culture where feedback informs action, inclusion is intentional, and wellbeing is prioritised.

Leadership response to incidents

When incidents occur, whether related to workload, interpersonal conflict, or exposure to trauma, leadership response is critical. The way leaders act in these moments sets the tone for organisational culture, library branch team culture and directly impacts staff trust, morale, and safety. Effective responses include:

- **Timely and compassionate action:** Responding to incidents promptly and with empathy demonstrates that staff wellbeing is a priority. This involves acknowledging the event's impact, validating staff experiences, and providing immediate support such as temporary workload adjustments or access to debriefing. Simple questions like *"What can I do for you?"* or *"Can you tell me more about what happened?"* helps build trust, strengthen insight into staff needs, and create opportunities to offer targeted support and implement meaningful changes. These practices reinforce that staff and their experiences are valued.

- **Root cause analysis and systemic change:** Moving beyond individual coping strategies toward systemic supports that align service expectations with staff safety and organisational capacity. This could involve reviewing staffing levels, workflow design, or communication practices. Leaders should use incident data to inform policy updates to tighten staff support and to reduce the likelihood of recurrence.

- **Supportive infrastructure:** Ensuring staff have access to mental health resources, structured debriefing opportunities, and clear, confidential reporting pathways. This infrastructure should be visible and easy to navigate, reducing barriers to seeking help and reinforcing psychological safety.

- **Transparent communication and follow-up:** Keeping affected staff informed about actions taken and next steps builds trust and demonstrates accountability. Follow-up conversations should check on recovery and offer ongoing support, rather than assuming resolution after initial intervention.

- **Training and preparedness:** Equipping leaders and supervisors with skills in trauma-informed practice, conflict resolution, and crisis response ensures they can act confidently and consistently. Regular scenario-based training helps normalize proactive responses and reduces hesitation during high-stress situations.

Building a culture of care

Reducing psychosocial hazards requires a sustained, organisation-wide commitment to wellbeing. A culture of care is built through consistent actions, clear values, and leadership that prioritises people as much as performance. This

means embedding psychological safety into everyday practices, ensuring staff feel respected, supported, and empowered to speak up without fear of reprisal.

Key elements of a care-driven culture include:

- **Leadership modelling:** Leaders must consistently demonstrate the behaviours they expect from their staff: empathy, transparency, and accountability. When leaders model care, it sets the tone for the entire team.

- **Wellbeing as a strategic priority:** Staff wellbeing should be integrated into strategic planning, not treated as an optional add-on. This includes allocating resources for mental health support, training, and workload management.

- **Engagement embedded in organisational life:** Engagement is not a program; it is a mindset woven into policies, communication, and decision-making. When staff feel heard and valued, trust and resilience grow.

- **Recognition and appreciation:** Celebrating contributions and acknowledging effort reinforces a sense of belonging and reduces stress. Recognition should be timely, authentic, and inclusive.

- **Continuous learning and adaptation:** A culture of care evolves. Regular review of practices, feedback loops, and openness to change ensure that wellbeing initiatives remain relevant and effective.

Ultimately, a culture of care transforms libraries into workplaces where safety, respect, and connection are non-negotiable, creating an environment where staff thrive and service excellence becomes the natural outcome.

Strategic positioning of public libraries in community contexts

Libraries position themselves within communities by aligning three core elements: public library practice, social infrastructure, and community connection. Public library practice encompasses the policies, programs, and service standards that ensure accessibility, equity, and responsiveness. Their role within social infrastructure highlights libraries as trusted community spaces where relationships are formed, isolation is reduced, and shared experiences occur (Klinenberg, 2018; Rivano Eckerdal & Engström, 2024).

To sustain this role in increasingly complex community environments, libraries must adopt a strategic approach that prioritises staff wellbeing, community relevance, and operational resilience. This involves setting clear boundaries to protect staff and patrons, embedding trauma-informed practices into service delivery, and implementing evidence-based policies that reflect organisational values. Coupled with a deep understanding of local context, these strategies enable libraries to create safe, adaptive, and future-ready services, positioning them as essential pillars of community life.

These elements: practice, infrastructure, and connection, are not isolated strands but interwoven threads of a larger tapestry that defines the library's identity and impact within community. When libraries intentionally weave these threads together, they create a tension strong enough to withstand challenges and flexible enough to adapt to change. In doing so, libraries affirm their role as resilient, connected, and trauma-informed organisation that hold communities just as they are in times of both stability and uncertainty.

This positioning is further strengthened by a comprehensive strategic framework built on interconnected points. Each representing vital threads that, when woven together, creates a cohesive and sustainable library service. By embedding these principles into planning and practice, libraries ensure that their commitment to connection and resilience is actionable and anchored in strategies that sustain both staff and purpose.

Strategic framework for positioning libraries and reducing psychosocial hazards.

1. Acknowledge libraries' evolving role

- Recognise libraries are embedded within social infrastructure, providing spaces for connection and inclusion without additional cost.
- Communicate the extension of library functions beyond books to encompass community engagement and wellbeing.

2. Embed people-centred service

- Implement trauma-informed service delivery across all customer interactions.
- Develop trauma-informed service teams through training and reflective practice.

3. Prioritise risk awareness and mitigation

- Identify psychosocial hazards proactively and integrate risk management into operational planning.
- Establish clear protocols for incident response and staff support.

4. Define and communicate boundaries
- Create policies that balance accessibility with staff safety.
- Train staff to apply boundaries consistently and confidently not only to self, but as a team also.

5. Understand community context
- Conduct regular community needs assessments to inform programming and service design.
- Adapt services to reflect local demographics, cultural norms, and emerging social challenges.

6. Articulate vision and policy
- Develop a clear organisational vision that prioritises wellbeing and engagement.
- Align policies with strategic goals to ensure consistency and accountability.

7. Tell the story of libraries
- Advocate for libraries' role as social infrastructure through data, case studies, and community impact narratives.
- Share the humanness of library experiences both from a patron and staff members point of view. The challenges, the successes and everything in between forms a narrative of not only the necessity of libraries in community, but the equipping and support staff required to serve their community.
- Use storytelling to build stakeholder support and secure sustainable funding.

8. Build a culture of care
- Train staff top down, so expectations and knowledge are consistent.
- Model inclusive, empathetic leadership behaviours.
- Embed engagement and wellbeing into organisational life through recognition, feedback loops, and continuous improvement.

Summary

Public libraries are vital community spaces where the full spectrum of human experience unfolds daily. Far more than literary or informational environments, they function as dynamic element of social infrastructure where individuals seek connection, support, safety, and belonging. This role in community, while essential, places significant emotional and psychological demands on frontline staff that traditional service models and organisational structures have not fully anticipated. The evidence presented in this paper shows that trauma exposure, emotional labour, and rising community expectations are not peripheral challenges but central operational realities shaping staff wellbeing, service quality, and the long-term sustainability of library services.

A trauma-informed framework provides a pathway to transform these risks into organisational resilience. By acknowledging the prevalence and impacts of trauma, libraries can strengthen their foundations through policies, leadership practices, and service models that centre around safety, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness. This requires a systemic shift: reframing of staff psychological support as a core operational priority, embedding psychosocial risk management into everyday practice, and developing leadership capability that values connection, transparency, and empathy.

Recognising libraries as essential social infrastructure is equally important. As community needs evolve through increasing loneliness, social fragmentation, and gaps in formal support systems, libraries continue to serve as anchors of cohesion and perceived safety. To sustain this role, staff must be supported through clear boundaries, consistent training, collaborative partnerships, and a workplace culture grounded in care and accountability.

Moving from risk to resilience requires a shared and sustained commitment across all levels of the organisation. Trauma-informed principles must be embedded not only in frontline practice but in leadership behaviour, policy development and resource allocation. When structures, systems, and people align around safety, transparency, and care, libraries become environments where staff are genuinely supported and able to perform their roles with confidence and integrity. This alignment strengthens organisational resilience, reduces psychosocial hazards, and enhances the quality of service delivered to the public. By embracing this holistic approach, libraries position themselves as resilient, compassionate, and future-ready organisations, places where both communities and staff can continue to grow, connect, and thrive.

Navigating the wild: case studies

Every public library service operates within a distinct context shaped by local government frameworks, elected officials, leadership approaches, and service delivery models. A consistent and unifying principle is upheld across the sector: staff and community remain at the core of every library service's mission. Regardless of structural or strategic differences, public libraries share a collective commitment to understanding and meeting the needs of their communities while supporting the wellbeing and capacity of frontline staff.

This section presents a series of fourteen case studies that explore how diverse library services are navigating the complex intersection of customer-centric service, trauma-informed practice, and community responsiveness. Drawn from a range of library services, these examples highlight innovative strategies designed to support both patrons and staff in high-demand environments.

Case Study methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, investigative approach drawing on multiple case studies to examine how public libraries respond to increasing psychosocial complexity and implement trauma-informed practices across diverse service contexts. This approach enables the exploration of real-world practices through the experiences and insights of practitioners, providing depth and contextual richness to the findings.

A multiple case study methodology was selected to allow for comparative analysis across library systems operating within different governance structures, geographic locations, and community environments.

Case Study selection and scope

A total of fourteen case studies were included in this research, comprising:

- study tour libraries (Brooklyn, Queens, and Philadelphia)
- international case studies
- national (Australian) library services

Cases were selected using an intentional sampling approach to capture variation across:

- organisational scale
- service delivery models
- community demographics
- levels of exposure to complex social needs

This diversity enables the identification of transferable practices while recognising the influence of local context on service delivery.

Data collection

Data was collected through direct engagement with library practitioners, primarily via in-depth, semi-structured conversations of approximately one hour in duration. These discussions focused on:

- current operational practices
- planned initiatives
- organisational responses to complex community needs
- reflections on staff experience and service challenges

Participants were encouraged to share both formal practices and lived experiences, allowing for a holistic understanding of how trauma-informed approaches are applied in practice.

In addition to practitioner input, contextual information was considered, including:

- community characteristics
- organisational structures
- local service environments

This ensured that each case study reflected not only individual perspectives but also the broader operational context in which each library operates.

Analytical approach

Data was analysed using a data-driven thematic analysis approach. Recurring patterns and shared challenges were identified across the case studies, with particular attention to:

- workforce capability and training
- boundary setting and role clarity
- organisational support structures
- partnerships and integrated service models
- leadership responses to psychosocial risk

The analysis focused on identifying both common themes and contextual variations, enabling the development of a set of insights that are both grounded in practice and applicable across different library environments.

These themes inform the cross-case analysis presented in the From Insight to Action section and underpins the development of the Policy and Practice recommendations outlined later in this paper.

Methodological considerations and limitations

This study is based on practitioner perspectives and intentional case study selection, which may limit the statistical transferability of the findings. However, the diversity of cases included strengthens the broader relevance of the insights across comparable public library contexts.

Given the qualitative nature of the research, findings are interpretive and context dependent. Nevertheless, the consistency of themes across multiple case studies strengthens the credibility of the conclusions drawn.

Contribution of the methodology

By grounding the research in practitioner experience and real-world library contexts, this methodology provides:

- practical insight into contemporary service challenges
- evidence of emerging patterns across the sector
- a foundation for applied frameworks that support trauma-informed best practice

This approach aligns with the need for a holistic and systemic response to trauma-informed service delivery, while recognising the complexity of public library work and its impact on staff.

Table 1: Summary of Case Studies

Case Study	Location	Theme	Focus	Strategy
Study tour case studies				
Brooklyn Public Library: Justice Initiative	Brooklyn USA	Equipping leaders and staff; fostering connection; growing collaborative partnerships	Creative use of funding for staff training and community partnerships	Leveraging justice-focused programs to strengthen staff capacity and community engagement
Brooklyn Public Library: Info Commons	Brooklyn USA	Equipping leaders and staff; fostering connection;	Staff skill shares, clear boundaries	Staff training programs, onsite social workers
Queens Public Libraries	Queens USA	Growing collaborative partnerships	Supporting staff and community through integrated services	Staff training programs; onsite social workers; strong community partnerships
Free Library of Philadelphia	Philadelphia USA	Equipping leaders and staff; growing collaborative partnerships	Equipping staff and building partnerships	Staff training initiatives; partnerships with social workers
Global case studies				
Los Angeles Public Libraries	Los Angeles USA	Equipping leaders and staff; growing collaborative partnerships	Supporting staff and community through integrated services	Development of Library Experience Office; staff training programs; onsite social workers
Pima County Public Library	Arizona USA	Equipping leaders and staff; strengthening organisational support	Trauma-informed care for staff and community	Equipping staff with tools and training to provide trauma-informed services
Toronto Public Libraries	Toronto Canada	Strengthening organisational support	Safety and trauma-informed engagement	Library Safety Specialists trained in trauma-informed approaches
Canada Public Libraries	Canada	Fostering connection, Growing collaborative partnerships	Social impact of libraries through spaces, collections, programs and partnerships	Emotional, social, intellectual and creative impact on community. Supports library staff.
National case studies				
Logan Libraries	Queensland, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff; strengthening organisational support	Staff wellbeing and operational insight	Implementation of pulse checks; Work well project
Redland Libraries	Queensland, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff; strengthening organisational support	Equipping staff	Training and resources to manage low-frequency, high-impact events
Metropolitan Library Service	Queensland, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff	Leadership and staff safety	Supporting staff safety; equipping leaders.
City of Moreton Bay Libraries	Queensland, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff; strengthening organisational support	Policy and staff capability	Targeted staff training; development and implementation of policy and procedure frameworks
Newcastle Libraries	New South Wales, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff; strengthening organisational support	Staff safety and community expectations	Supporting staff safety; equipping leaders.
Merri-Bek Libraries	Victoria, Australia	Equipping leaders and staff; fostering connection	Supporting community through integrated services	Supporting staff safety; onsite social workers

Summary of case study findings

The fourteen case studies examined span diverse geographic and cultural contexts; several common threads emerge that inform the recommendations of this paper. Notably, every individual consulted identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical inflection point, marking a shift in community behaviour and contributing to an observable increase in aggression and violence directed toward library staff and other users. This phenomenon underscores the evolving complexity of libraries as public spaces and the heightened emotional workload required of staff.

The key findings from the case studies are summarised below. These points represent the major themes that arose consistently across most if not all case studies.

Disconnected communities

A growing sense of social fragmentation is increasingly evident within library environments. Libraries, as one of the few remaining free accessible public spaces, are now serving as informal safety nets for individuals experiencing personal crises. These crises often manifest in requests for assistance that extend well beyond traditional library services, such as navigating housing insecurity, accessing government systems, or connecting with social support networks. In some cases, aggressive or violent behaviour may reflect an underlying need for human connection, albeit expressed in harmful ways. Conversely, participation in programs such as children's Storytime or adult learning sessions represents a positive pursuit of connection. Both scenarios highlight the library's dual role as a site of community engagement and a frontline space for social support, placing significant emotional and occupational demands on staff.

The value of connection

Community behaviour within library spaces reinforces the centrality of connection to individual and collective wellbeing. Libraries function as critical connectors, offering inclusive environments where people engage, learn, and belong. The importance of this role often becomes most visible when connection is disrupted, such as when behavioural breaches necessitate exclusion from the space. These moments reveal the profound impact of disconnection and underscore the need for staff to understand the significance of fostering connection while maintaining safe and respectful environments.

Social prescribing and global parallels

Emerging practices such as social prescribing where libraries partner with health and community services to address social isolation and the flow on effect of health impacts, illustrate the potential for libraries to contribute to holistic wellbeing. Both Queensland initiatives and international examples demonstrate the value of embedding libraries within broader social infrastructure frameworks.

Depth of community crisis and staff impact

Rising cost-of-living pressures, growing social isolation, and increasing levels of personal crisis are becoming more visible within public libraries, where many community members seek support or respite. As staff encounter these complex situations more frequently, the emotional load of frontline work intensifies, elevating the risk of vicarious trauma. These challenges are often compounded by staff experiencing similar pressures in their own lives, creating a dual impact that underscores the need for robust, trauma-informed organisational support.

Value of partnership and collaboration

Case studies examined consistently highlight the importance of partnerships whether with local police, social service providers, youth services or health agencies in managing complex community needs. Collaborative models reduce the burden on library staff, reduce psychosocial safety risks and enhance service responsiveness to all sectors of the community.

The challenge of boundaries or lack thereof

An intriguing pattern emerged across nearly all case studies: library staff often feel compelled to say "yes," even when behaviour breaches established policy and procedures. This raises critical questions about why library staff assume responsibilities that other service providers decline. The challenge for library leaders and staff, is to set reasonable boundaries that consider the emotional labour of the role, while respecting service and training limitations.

Boundaries must therefore be clearly articulated and consistently applied:

- At the organisational level through policy and procedure.
- At the individual and team level through training and leadership support.

Telling the full story of libraries

Public libraries increasingly operate within complex social environments, yet the narratives communicated to stakeholders often highlight only successful program participation, visitation growth, and community partnerships, while obscuring the operational challenges staff encounter. Many library services hesitate to report the full story involving the extent of aggression, distressing behaviour, or psychosocial harm due to concerns about jeopardising funding, damaging reputation, or being perceived as an organisational risk. This selective storytelling creates an incomplete picture of contemporary library work and limits the sector's ability to advocate effectively for resources and support.

A transparent account of both achievements and challenges is essential for informed governance and sustainable practice. By documenting the realities of frontline work, libraries equip executives and managers with a comprehensive understanding of staff experiences and operational pressures. This enables effective responses to significant incidents, strengthens compliance with psychosocial safety legislation, and supports resource allocation aligned with actual need.

Equally, telling the full story validates staff experiences and frames them as systemic issues rather than isolated events. This narrative shift fosters the support of and development of trauma-informed policies, targeted training, and cross-sector collaboration. Ultimately, transparency does not undermine credibility; it enhances trust, strengthens organisational resilience, and ensures libraries can continue to serve communities safely and sustainably.

Aligning security measures with workplace health and safety principles

Case studies highlight the importance of distinguishing between security measures and broader Workplace Health and Safety (WPH&S) responsibilities. While security focuses on managing immediate risks such as disruptive behaviour or physical incidents, WPH&S takes a more holistic approach that includes staff wellbeing, mental health support, and trauma-informed practice.

The use of security guards in public libraries has become an important strategy for addressing both physical and psychosocial risks. Security personnel can help de-escalate tense situations, deter aggressive behaviour, and support staff during incidents involving violence or mental health crises. Their presence enhances staff perceptions of safety, and deployment must align with library values of inclusivity and community care. This requires guards to receive training in trauma-informed approaches, cultural sensitivity, and de-escalation techniques so their work complements WPH&S goals.

Not all libraries, particularly small or rural libraries have access to security personnel. In these contexts, alternative strategies such as staff training in conflict resolution, clear incident protocols, duress alarms, and community partnerships can be equally effective in maintaining a safe environment.

Despite the value security personnel bring, tensions arise when security practices are not well aligned with WPH&S or psychosocial safety principles. Enforcement-focused responses can conflict with preventive, trauma-informed approaches, leading to confusion or escalation. Integrating security operations within a broader WPH&S framework requires joint training, shared protocols, and ongoing communication between WPH&S officers, library leadership, and contracted providers.

Equipping leaders: building capacity for complex community engagement

Leadership capability emerged as a critical determinant of staff resilience, service quality, and organisational adaptability across all case studies. Libraries are no longer operating solely as repositories of information; they have become dynamic social spaces where staff navigate complex human needs, heightened emotional labour, and escalating behavioural challenges. In this context, leadership needs to be relational, strategic, and deeply human-centered.

Strong leadership matters

Effective leaders set the tone for organisational culture, influence staff confidence, and shape responses to community challenges. When leaders demonstrate empathy, clarity, and integrity, they foster trust and psychological safety conditions essential for staff wellbeing and performance. Conversely, leadership gaps exacerbate stress, increase turnover, and compromise service delivery.

Core competencies for library leaders

A common thread across the case studies is the growing need for library leaders to adopt a more adaptive and human-centred approach. As public libraries increasingly operate at the intersection of community need and social support, leaders must move beyond traditional management models to navigate complex interpersonal and organisational challenges. This shift highlights the importance of trauma-informed awareness, emotional intelligence, and clear, values-driven communication, alongside the ability to manage conflict and make ethically grounded decisions.

Together, these competencies reflect an evolving leadership model centred on supporting both staff wellbeing and equitable community access.

Building on this, the case studies consistently indicated that leadership capability does not develop at a single point in time, but rather through continuous, structured, and inclusive learning across the career lifecycle. From foundational professional preparation to early career support and ongoing development, leadership skills are strengthened through both formal training and practical experience. Importantly, this development extends beyond designated leadership roles, reflecting a shared expectation that all staff enact leadership in their daily practice. This reinforces the need for sustained organisation-wide investment in leadership development to support confident and capable teams in increasingly complex service environments.

Extending this further, the case studies highlight that leadership development must be both intentional and embedded within organisational systems and values. Libraries are prioritising structured approaches such as formal leadership programs, peer learning networks, and coaching models to build capability and support future leadership pipelines. Equally important is alignment between policy, practice, and leadership expectations, particularly in maintaining clear boundaries and supporting staff wellbeing. Underpinning these efforts is a shared commitment to trauma-informed practice and psychosocial safety, positioning these as foundational to developing leaders who can sustain safe, inclusive, and resilient library services.

Social work models

Public library social work has developed through several recognised models, each reflecting different priorities and local needs. The most visible model is the embedded or in-house social worker, where a qualified professional is based within the library to provide direct assistance to customers experiencing homelessness, mental health distress, family violence, substance use, or acute social need. While this model has proven effective in reducing crisis incidents and improving referrals, it can drift toward staff support and behavioural management if the scope is not clearly defined. Other approaches include consultative or capacity-building models, where social workers focus on training staff in trauma-informed practice, de-escalation, and referral pathways, as well as partnership-based models that rely on visiting services rather than a dedicated library-based role.

Given this range of approaches, strategic planning and meaningful consultation are essential when considering the application of social work within an individual library service, as social workers may not always be the best fit for every community. Decisions should be informed by local demographics, identified service gaps, existing partnerships, staff capability, and the library's intended role, ensuring any model adopted is clearly scoped, sustainable, and aligned with place-based needs rather than assumed as a universal solution.

For libraries seeking to prioritise community outcomes rather than staff support, a community-focused social work model is the strongest option. In this approach, the social worker's core role is outward-facing building relationships with local service providers, understanding community-level need, and connecting customers to external supports rather than acting as an internal problem solver. The role involves significant time spent on outreach, warm referrals, case coordination, and community mapping, positioning the library as a safe access point rather than a place where social issues are "contained" or managed. This aligns strongly with public libraries' mission as inclusive civic spaces and avoids positioning social workers in roles focused on enforcement or staff protection.

A community-centred model also supports place-based and equity-focused practice. By analysing patterns of disadvantage emerging through library use, the social worker can advocate for service gaps, co-design programs with community organisations, and support preventative initiatives such as housing pathways, digital inclusion, and social connection programs. While staff benefit indirectly through clearer referral pathways and reduced escalation of complex situations, accountability remains centred on community wellbeing rather than workforce resilience an important distinction for maintaining customer trust and reinforcing the library's role as a non-clinical, welcoming space.

Overall, while staff training and support remain important, a community-focused library social work model offers the greatest long-term value. It centres customer dignity, strengthens local service systems, and allows library staff to focus on their professional roles without becoming de facto social responders. When clearly scoped and well-resourced, this model positions the library as a critical connector in the community ecosystem rather than a frontline crisis service for social issues beyond its core mandate.

Key lessons applicable for Queensland Public Libraries

Drawing on insights from international, national, and study tour case studies, the following lessons reflect patterns observed across diverse public library contexts and are relevant to the Queensland public library environment.

Evidence from all case studies indicate that effective, equitable, and safe service delivery is contingent upon an integrated organisational response encompassing: (i) trauma-informed, community-centred practice; (ii) proportionate safety and governance mechanisms; (iii) purposeful, cross-sector partnerships and outreach; and (iv) sustained investment in staff capability, psychological safety, and workforce sustainability. The lessons below consolidate transferable practices to inform policy, operational decision-making, and workforce development across the sector.

1. Customer service framework: trauma-informed and community-centred practice

A trauma-informed, community-centred framework provides a coherent foundation for consistent service quality in high-demand environments. Operationalisation entails (a) structured training in de-escalation, conflict resolution, and legal thresholds for intervention; (b) cultural capability with explicit attention to First Nations cultural safety; (c) codified tools (e.g., decision trees, scripts, and escalation pathways) that reduce cognitive load in complex interactions; and (d) reflective practice approaches that support learning and calibration over time. Such a framework recognises the social determinants shaping patron behaviour and positions libraries as inclusive public spaces that uphold dignity, fairness, and accessibility while maintaining clear behavioural expectations and support for staff.

A strong example of this approach is Pima County Public Library, which has embedded a customer service framework grounded in trauma-informed, community-centred practice. Importantly, this example recognises the social determinants influencing patron behaviour and positions libraries as inclusive spaces that uphold dignity and accessibility, while maintaining clear expectations and supporting staff.

2. Integrating social work expertise through scalable models

Social work capability within library settings can strengthen responses to complex need, improve referral quality, and reduce staff burden. Given the resource diversity across Queensland, scalable arrangements such as partnerships, rotating placements, and on-site clinics are preferable to a single reliance on directly employed roles. Conditions for effectiveness include (i) clear and defined role scope and boundaries, (ii) manageable caseloads and workload controls, (iii) access to clinical supervision and reflective practice, and (iv) clear communication to library teams to prevent role drift and unrealistic expectations. Where services have experienced challenges, these have typically arisen from insufficient governance, unclear remit, or inadequate safeguards against burnout; addressing these factors increases program viability and staff confidence.

The Free Library of Philadelphia and Queens Public Library offer strong examples of integrating social work expertise through scalable models. Both services use partnerships and flexible delivery approaches to respond to complex community needs without relying solely on embedded roles. Their success highlights the importance of clear role boundaries, appropriate supports such as supervision, and strong communication, ensuring social work capability enhances service delivery while remaining sustainable for staff and organisations.

3. Balancing security with library values

Security arrangements should be proportionate, respectful, and aligned with trauma-informed principles, thereby supporting rather than displacing library values of inclusivity, dignity, and respect. Where security personnel are engaged, joint induction, shared protocols, and continuing professional development are essential to ensure coherent practice with library staff. In smaller or resource-constrained sites, a layered risk-mitigation approach combining targeted training, mobile duress systems, environmental design considerations, peer support, and intentional community engagement can achieve comparable outcomes. Across all settings, the emphasis remains on enabling safe, welcoming environments while meeting Work Health and Safety (WHS) obligations.

Multiple case studies, including Queens Public Libraries, Merri-bek Libraries, and Toronto Public Libraries, demonstrate how security can be balanced with core library values. These services implement proportionate, trauma-informed approaches supported by clear protocols, joint training, and strong communication. In resource-constrained settings, layered strategies such as staff training, environmental design, and community engagement—help maintain safe, welcoming environments while meeting WHS obligations.

4. Safety and organisational governance

Systematic governance is central to preventing and responding to workplace violence and psychosocial hazards. Establishing a dedicated safety or wellbeing committee (or equivalent working group) enables routine incident review, trend analysis, and iterative improvement consistent with WHS risk-management cycles (identify, assess, control, monitor/review). Council-wide behavioural standards, consistently applied across public-facing services, provide clarity for patrons and staff, reduce interpretive ambiguity in co-located precincts, and enhance legal defensibility. Operational flexibility such as time-bound access options or temporary closure where risk is elevated should be evidence-based, proportionate, and transparently communicated to sustain public trust and service legitimacy.

Pima County Public Library, Los Angeles Public Libraries and Newcastle Libraries provide strong examples of effective safety and organisational governance. Both demonstrate how structured approaches such as dedicated safety committees, clear behavioural standards, and routine incident review support consistent and proactive management of workplace risk. Their models highlight the value of evidence-based, proportionate responses and transparent communication, ensuring staff safety while maintaining public trust and service integrity.

5. Partnerships and strategic outreach

Cross-sector collaboration creates a multiplier effect that significantly expands an organisation's capacity to deliver trauma-informed customer service. When libraries partner with police, youth and family services, neighbourhood centres, housing and health providers, and elected representatives, the combined expertise and shared resources amplify what any service can achieve alone. Formalised partnerships clarify roles, streamline referral pathways, and enable coordinated responses tailored to local conditions reducing duplication and ensuring that patrons receive the right support at the right time.

Strategic outreach whether through co-delivered programs in parks and public spaces or embedded activities with community organisations further strengthens this multiplier effect. By meeting people where they are, partnerships reduce barriers to access and build trust, particularly among patrons experiencing loneliness, stigma, or social isolation.

Case evidence indicates that visible, relationship-based engagement correlates with reductions in intrinsic tension and perceived aggression within library environments. This demonstrates a clear link between collaborative, inclusive practice and psychosocial hazard reduction, improving both user and staff experience. In essence, partnerships don't merely add capacity, they multiply it.

This approach is effectively demonstrated by Queens Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library through their emphasis on partnerships and strategic outreach. Through collaboration with community organisations, health and social services, and local stakeholders, these libraries extend their capacity and deliver more coordinated, responsive support. Their work shows how formal partnerships and visible, relationship-based outreach reduce barriers to access, strengthen trust, and contribute to safer, more inclusive library environments for both patrons and staff.

6. Staff capability, psychological safety, and organisation culture

Leadership practice is pivotal to establishing professional boundaries, cultivating psychological safety, and shaping team culture. Library staff may themselves be affected by cost-of-living pressures, racism, trauma histories, and community-based stressors particularly where they live locally may require comprehensive organisational support to be able to perform their role. Two-way engagement mechanisms such as regular feedback loops, collaborative problem-solving, and transparent decision-rationales strengthen trust and resilience.

Workforce sustainability demands deliberate and anticipatory design, including the integration where possible of specialist roles (e.g., social workers, outreach practitioners), clearly articulated progression pathways, and systematic protections against moral injury and burnout. Capability development is most effective when it is context-specific and cumulative; evidence indicates that scenario-based training, structured scripting for high-risk interactions, enhanced legal literacy (including application of the "reasonable person" test), and factual, non-emotive incident reporting are associated with increased staff confidence and reduced emotional load.

An integrated policy anchored in council frameworks on managing unreasonable behaviour and operationalised through library-specific standard operating procedures supports consistency across in-person, telephone, and digital service channels. Purpose-designed emotional debriefing mechanisms (e.g., agenda-free pulse checks) complement operational debriefs by providing psychologically safe environments for meaning-making; evidence links these practices to reduced absenteeism, strengthened team cohesion, and improved workplace morale.

Crucially, wellbeing should be embedded rather than sporadically mentioned. While initiatives such as EAP access and ambassador programs are valuable, sustainable impact arises when emotional labour, administrative load, rostering, and post-incident communication are addressed systemically. Visible leadership at executive and branch levels signals shared responsibility for psychosocial safety and reinforces a culture where compassion, professionalism, and accountability are jointly upheld. Where conditions of entry and authorised-person provisions are paired with emotional literacy and leadership advocacy, branches have transitioned from crisis-defined identities to cultures characterised by resilience, reliability, and community trust.

Redland, Philadelphia, Pima County and Logan Libraries demonstrate this in practice. Leadership is key to setting clear boundaries, fostering psychological safety, and shaping team culture. Staff may also experience local social and

economic pressures, requiring strong organisational support. Regular feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and transparent decisions build trust and resilience.

Implementation considerations

Taken collectively, the findings across the case studies support the view that Queensland public libraries are operating within an increasingly complex service environment, characterised by heightened community need, intensifying psychosocial demands, and expanding expectations placed on frontline staff patterns also evident in library services globally. Addressing these conditions effectively requires an integrated organisational response that embeds trauma-informed and community-centred practice, strengthens governance and safety frameworks, leverages cross-sector partnerships, and systematically prioritises workforce capability and psychological safety.

When these elements are aligned, libraries are better positioned to mitigate risk, support staff wellbeing, and sustain their role as safe, inclusive, and trusted community spaces. The insights drawn from this analysis provide a strong evidentiary foundation for future policy development, operational design, and sector-wide collaboration aimed at maintaining resilient, adaptive, and equitable library services in the face of evolving community needs.

Study tour case studies: Brooklyn, Queens and Philadelphia Libraries

Brooklyn Public Libraries: Info Commons

Study tour: Meeting with Melissa Morrone Supervising Librarian on Monday 09 March 2026 at Brooklyn Public Libraries: Central Library – Info Commons.

Thank you, Melissa, for your time, your candour, and your leadership. Your insights into the realities facing Brooklyn Public Libraries and the compassion, clarity, and strength you bring to navigating them has been invaluable. Your commitment to supporting staff, strengthening practice, and shaping a safer, more responsive library environment is deeply appreciated. 2026.

Brooklyn Public Library is one of the largest library systems in the United States, with 61 branches serving a borough of 2.7 million residents. As one of New York City's leading civic, cultural, and educational institutions, the library holds a collection of over four million items and welcomes nearly nine million visitors annually (Brooklyn Public Library, n.d.).

Over the past 15 years, the Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) Central Library has faced a profound shift in community needs, with frontline staff increasingly absorbing the social, emotional, and behavioural pressures of a rapidly changing urban population. Melissa Moorone, a senior leader at BPL, provided insights into the operational, cultural, and human challenges that arise when public libraries become de facto frontline community service hubs.

The changing nature of library work

Antidotally, fifteen years ago, approximately 30% of local EMS callouts were related to mental health crises; today, that figure has risen to around 70%. This dramatic increase is mirrored within the library environment and the experiences of library staff.

Melissa notes that the library now regularly supports people experiencing:

- Housing instability and homelessness
- Inequitable access to social services
- Escalating cost-of-living pressures
- Untreated or under-treated mental health conditions
- Substance use and self-medication
- Significant decline in community mental health resilience

Public libraries, particularly large urban ones like BPL Central, have become some of the most accessible public spaces left, as they have long opening hours, are free and inclusive while staffed by welcoming people. As a result, societal strain is evident inside libraries daily. Melissa highlighted that libraries remain one of the only public places with zero cost and zero barriers to entry a stark contrast to the subway, where even a single trip now costs $3.00. More people are choosing to rest, sleep and recharge in public libraries as the cost to access the subway is by comparison high.

Boundary-Setting: What is a library issue vs. a societal issue?

A significant leadership shift for Melissa and her team involved developing a clear framework for boundary-setting recognising the difference between challenges the library can reasonably address and those that stem from broader societal systems. This distinction has become essential for staff wellbeing and organisational clarity.

Within this framework, library-specific issues are those that can be influenced through policies, practices, or staff capability for example, refining behaviour guidelines, strengthening incident responses, or improving communication. In contrast, broader societal issues such as homelessness, untreated mental illness, housing shortages, and substance use fall outside the library's control. While these pressures affect daily operations, they require system-level interventions from external agencies rather than solutions the library can provide alone. This thinking directly links to the sphere of influence and control leadership theory.

This reframing over time has helped prevent mission creep and reduces the emotional load placed on frontline staff, who often feel responsible for solving problems far beyond the scope of library services.

Examples of BPL-specific issues:

- Creating clear behaviour guidelines

- Ensuring staff receive de-escalation training
- Improving communication and reporting pathways
- Strengthening internal safety systems
- Addressing operational gaps in responses to incidents

Examples of societal issues:

- Mental health crises
- Housing shortages
- Income inequality
- Substance use disorders
- Barriers to accessing medical or social services

By distinguishing the two, Melissa helps staff set and maintain healthy professional boundaries while still delivering empathetic, trauma-informed service to all.

Use of security

At BPL, public safety officers are full library staff and members of the same union as other employees. While their presence is intended to ensure the safety of staff and the community, it can sometimes create tension rather than alleviate it.

Key issues identified:

- Security staff visually resemble police officers, creating a sense of surveillance rather than support.
- Security officers operate in a peacekeeping capacity, which includes the legal authority to effect an arrest.
- They are trained to take stewardship of the space, but this sometimes translates into over-policing behaviours that are better off being managed through de-escalation and trauma informed care rather than enforcement.
- Frontline library staff often feel caught between community needs and security enforcement, with neither side feeling fully supported.
- Some library staff feel that contracted security personnel do not always align with customer-experience or trauma-informed approaches, in part due to limited library-specific training. At the same time, many staff wish to see increased security coverage and view uniformed public safety officers as an effective response to patron behavioural challenges, while also recognizing that some security officers already engage with the public in empathetic, trauma-informed ways.

To counterbalance this, panic buttons and immediate response tools are in place, but these do not address the root challenges of trust, training, or shared purpose.

Community Justice Action committee

In response to escalating incidents and increasing staff fatigue, the library service established an internal Community Justice Action committee, which is a peer-driven forum designed to foster collective learning, mutual support, and shared ownership of safety practices.

The committee serves several key functions:

- Sharing and analysing recent incidents, including what occurred and how staff responded
- Reflecting on alternative strategies, identifying what could be done differently in future situations
- Exchanging practical skills and knowledge, from de-escalation tools to communication techniques
- Building cross-team support networks, ensuring that no staff member feels isolated when managing challenging behaviours.

Though participation is currently optional, early engagement has demonstrated the committee's value. It has quickly become an influential mechanism for:

- Developing de-escalation competence and confidence
- Reducing staff isolation through shared understanding and peer solidarity

Melissa believes that if more staff were regularly involved, the committee could become a cornerstone of organisational culture change. One outcome of this committee is a de-escalation skills share workbook, that all staff are encouraged to work through.

The Brooklyn Public Library Central Library reflects a broader trend seen in public libraries across major urban centres: they are increasingly positioned on the frontline of mental health, housing instability, and social inequity. Melissa

Moorone's work demonstrates that while libraries cannot solve systemic social issues, they can build internal structures that support staff, increase communication, and improve safety.

Her leadership approach centred on boundary-setting, shared knowledge, and community-building offers a model for other public libraries navigating similar pressures.

Key Takeaways for Queensland Libraries

1. Library work is rapidly expanding into social-complexity space

Frontline staff now regularly support people facing homelessness, mental health crises, substance use, and unmet social service needs. Libraries have become one of the last accessible public indoor spaces, making societal pressures highly visible within library walls.

2. Clear boundary-setting protects staff and prevents mission creep

A deliberate framework distinguishes library issues (e.g., behaviour guidelines, training, communication systems) from societal issues (e.g., housing shortages, untreated mental illness). This clarity reduces staff overwhelm and establishes realistic expectations of what libraries can—and cannot—solve.

3. Contract security can create tension without library-specific training

Security staff often resemble policing rather than support. Misalignment in training, expectations, and customer-experience standards leads to friction between library staff, security contractors, and patrons.

4. Peer-led safety and learning structures strengthen staff capability

The Community Justice Action committee provides a safe space for incident reflection, skill sharing, pattern identification, and cross-team support. It is emerging as a grassroots mechanism for cultural change and confidence in de-escalation.

5. Shared knowledge improves safety and reduces isolation

Tools such as the de-escalation skills-share workbook, provided during onboarding, ensure consistent messaging and create a collective understanding of safe practice across staff.

6. Libraries cannot solve systemic problems, but they can strengthen internal resilience

Melissa's leadership demonstrates that while libraries are increasingly positioned at the intersection of social inequity and public service, internal structures, communication pathways, staff training, peer networks, and boundary clarity—can significantly improve safety, capability, and wellbeing.

Brooklyn Public Libraries: Justice Initiative

Study tour: Meeting with Michael Carey, Coordinator of Justice Initiatives at Brooklyn Public Library and his team on Wednesday 11 March 2026 at Brooklyn Public Libraries: Williamsburg Library.

Sincere thanks to Michael, Coordinator of Justice Initiatives at Brooklyn Public Library, and your team for your time and the generous sharing of your knowledge, experience, and leadership. Your insights into trauma informed library service and community engagement are deeply appreciated. The work you lead is both inspiring and impactful, and your insight has provided valuable guidance for libraries navigating complex social and systemic challenges. 2026.

Among its many outreach efforts, the Justice Initiatives program stands out for its commitment to serving some of the community's most vulnerable populations those who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, or have loved ones impacted by the justice system. Operated through the library's Outreach Services department, the program takes a four-pronged approach: Jail and Prison Services, TeleStory, Re-entry Services, and public programming.

Staff working within the Justice Initiative face complex and emotionally demanding situations on a daily basis, with a high level of exposure to psychosocial hazards. These risks may stem from direct experiences or from witnessing traumatic events. Despite these challenges, the 12-member team has cultivated a strong internal culture grounded in shared values and mutual support. While they are part of the broader Brooklyn Public Library workforce, their unique experiences have fostered a distinct internal support network one that reflects the intensity and specificity of their work and provides a vital source of resilience and solidarity.

The Justice Initiative often finds itself navigating layers of bureaucracy, advocating persistently for both its programs and the staff who deliver them. Funding remains a source of both frustration and celebration grants arrive with relief and gratitude, yet the shifting landscape of local and national politics frequently complicates long-term planning. Despite these pressures, the team leans into its strengths: sharing meals, supporting one another, and staying

grounded in the work that matters most. Their collective commitment to community service acts as a stabilizing force amid uncertainty.

Job security and access to health care remain limited, adding another layer of tension to already demanding roles. A persistent gap exists between institutional perspectives on what library-based justice work should look like and the lived realities of front-line service. Staff bridge this divide through trauma-informed practice, where every detail matters choice of words, body language, when to stand or sit, how to de-escalate with empathy. Their everyday actions demonstrate a profound understanding: where meaningful service requires presence, care, and connection even when systems around them fall short.

Here are some ways the Justice Initiative, supports staff and builds a resilient team culture.

Funding for training and professional development:

Following the library's reopening after COVID-19, BPL engaged Corporate Counselling Associates (CCA) to provide staff counselling, including facilitated group sessions. These were of limited value for the specialised team, reflecting a broader challenge with corporate wellness programs that are often too general to meet the needs of justice-focused work.

The Justice Initiative team developed partnerships with the Darkness Rising Project and the Liberation Healing Clinic. These partners specialise in trauma-informed, culturally responsive support for justice-involved and formerly incarcerated communities, providing staff with relevant care aligned to the realities of outreach work—distinct from traditional branch library environments.

Access to this support is voluntary, yet the team has embraced it wholeheartedly regularly participating in group therapy sessions, mindfulness practices, and more. Notably, the support offered spans both traditional and non-traditional modalities, including therapy, social work, acupuncture, and yoga. This holistic approach goes well beyond standard HR offerings and speaks directly to the unique and often traumatic experiences faced by staff in this line of work.

A day off as a strategic reserve

As the Coordinator of Justice Initiatives, Michael holds the authority to grant staff members a restorative day off following a traumatic incident. This provision can only be activated by the team leader and allows affected staff to take time away from work without having the leave deducted from their standard entitlements. Within the Justice Initiative, this measure has been used sparingly and thoughtfully. On one occasion, staff operating the regular pop-up library at Rikers Island were exposed to a deeply traumatic situation. Although the incident did not involve them directly, the two staff members witnessed it and were significantly impacted. Recognizing the emotional toll, Michael exercised this discretionary support and offered each staff member a dedicated day off. This allowed them time to process the event, seek care, and recover without the added pressure of returning immediately to regular duties. The ability to provide this type of responsive, compassionate support reflects the Justice Initiative's commitment to staff wellbeing particularly in environments where trauma exposure is a real and ongoing risk.

In addition to this discretionary authority, a rotating roster has been implemented that ensures every staff member receives a scheduled break from attending Rikers Island every six weeks. This practice recognises the emotional intensity of working in a correctional environment and provides predictable relief from the cumulative stress of ongoing exposure. By building these pauses into the workflow, the team is better able to sustain their wellbeing, maintain professional boundaries, and continue delivering high-quality, trauma-informed library services with resilience and care.

Peer support:

The Justice Initiative is proud to have two dedicated Re-entry Navigators as part of the Welcome Home program. These staff members play a vital role in supporting individuals transitioning back into the community after incarceration. Both bring deep connections to the re-entry community and a strong commitment to restoring dignity and humanity to those they serve, working closely with each participant to help them achieve their personal goals.

Their lived experience and professional insight have significantly strengthened the team's capacity for internal support and strategic development. They regularly contribute valuable perspectives that enhance program planning and delivery. As a result, other team members have developed more effective ways of engaging with prison staff and communicating with both incarcerated individuals and those recently released fostering a more informed, compassionate, and impactful approach across the initiative.

Should the library be doing this? Social commons…

All of this raises an interesting question of “Should the library be doing this?”. Should the library be offering defacto social services? What funding is required? What capacity does the library service have and what social impact will programs that run outside the box produce?

Often there is resistance to change, especially when a new program is being introduced, this was the case with the Welcome Home program and the TeleStory program. Branch library staff were not keen at all to be filmed during story time, so incarcerated parents could link with their children over story time. Noting this was in 2016 prior to the pandemic. It took 6 months of engagement and advocating to get the program off the ground. Once the pandemic hit, and presenting and participating online became the new normal, the program went from strength to strength.

During my conversation with the team, it was clear that their work operates both within and far beyond the bounds of traditional library services. They provide a safe, high-quality library experiences to a community often overlooked, fostering connection within families and between families and providing programming opportunities for all. While the programming techniques themselves are familiar to libraries, their application in this context is driving generational change not only for children with incarcerated parents, but for those who are incarcerated or formally incarcerated. The positive outcomes emerging from this program demonstrate how libraries, as a vital part of a communities social infrastructure, generates meaningful social and economic impact that supports the growth of the community and beyond.

Importantly, the effectiveness of this work is not dependent on embedded clinical roles such as social workers. The team takes a trauma-informed approach which they apply, combined with thoughtful, appropriate referrals that ensures patrons receive the support they need. Staff are equipped to recognise distress, respond safely, and connect individuals with external services when additional assistance is required. In doing so, they provide a level of care that complements, rather than replaces, formal social services, delivering compassionate and holistic support within a library context.

Connection & engagement

Drawing from my conversations with Michael and the article *A Conversation with Brooklyn Public Library’s Justice Initiatives Program* (Flores, 2023), which features an interview with Diego Sandoval-Hernandez, Supervising Librarian for Jail and Prison Services, the vital role libraries play as community connectors becomes strikingly evident. Libraries emerge not only as access points for information and resources but also as spaces that foster meaningful engagement and human connection. Throughout the interview, Flores (2023) repeatedly emphasizes the theme of connection, particularly in the context of re-entry into society, where it serves as a cornerstone for successful reintegration. As Sandoval-Hernandez (2023) aptly summarizes, “The pandemic showed us that libraries are essential to our communities. We provide access to information, resources, and connection, and we will continue to do so even in the face of adversity.” For the whole article please refer to A Conversation with Brooklyn Public Library’s Justice Initiatives Program - PEN America.

The meeting with Michael Carey and the Justice Initiatives team at Brooklyn Public Libraries highlighted the depth, complexity, and humanity underpinning library-based justice outreach in a large urban system. The Justice Initiatives program operates at the intersection of library service, social support, and community resilience, delivering trauma-informed engagement to people who are incarcerated, recently released, or navigating the justice system.

Despite significant emotional demands and systemic constraints, the team has cultivated a strong, values-driven internal culture supported by holistic wellbeing practices, strategic use of flexible leave, and the integration of lived experience. Their work demonstrates how libraries can meaningfully serve communities facing severe social inequity while maintaining clear professional boundaries, robust internal support structures, and an unwavering commitment to connection, dignity, and care**.**

Context for Queensland, Australia

- What lived experiences could be harnessed within our teams to better support our teams through peer support?
- Throughout the recruitment process what skills / life experience should library leadership be looking for, to ensure our teams are growing to be resilient, community focused and relevant to serving the demographics that use the library service? What is the benefit of lived experience?
- How firm or open minded are our answers, when asked “Should the library be doing this?”

Key takeaways for Queensland Libraries

1. Trauma-informed work requires trauma-informed framework

Effective trauma-informed service is dependent on internal structures that support staff exposed to emotionally demanding situations. With out them, trauma informed services are not sustainable nor practical for staff to outwork.

2. Cohesive team culture provides essential stability

A strong, values-driven internal culture buffers staff from the pressures of high-intensity outreach work. The time and effort that is required to build team culture, is worth the cost, as the cost of not having a strong team is far greater.

3. Holistic, specialist wellbeing support Is crucial

Standard HR offerings can be insufficient; wellbeing must include specialised, context-aware supports delivered by partners who understand public library environments.

4. Restorative leave and predictable rotations reduce harm

Tools like the “Day Off as a Strategic Reserve”, rotating rosters and scheduled breaks from high-stress sites help prevent cumulative trauma.

5. Lived experience improves service quality

Staff with relevant lived experience strengthen program design, engagement, and internal peer support. These staff members needs to be included in the planning and development of service delivery models as they will provide valuable and practical insights.

6. Library roles are expanding beyond traditional boundaries

Initial resistance to programs like TeleStory shows the challenge and the value of libraries taking on socially impactful, non-traditional roles.

7. Libraries act as key connectors for reintegration

The Justice Initiatives program highlights libraries’ unique ability when they step out of the four walls, to provide connection, stability, and access to all areas of community.

8. Generic training does not meet complex community needs

Frontline work with vulnerable populations requires tailored, interdisciplinary training rather than off-the-shelf professional development.

Queens Public Libraries: Trauma-Informed Customer Service - supporting and equipping staff

A heartfelt thank you to Jill Anderson from Queens Public Libraries for so generously sharing your time, insights, and expertise. Your openness and commitment to knowledge-sharing are deeply appreciated. The perspectives you offered have enriched our understanding and inspired new ways of thinking about inclusive, community-focused library service. I appreciate the day you spent with me introducing me to many members of your leadership team, across programming, social work and security. Likewise, the visit to two of your libraries and an adult learning centre was greatly appreciated. 2026

Queens Public Library operates across 66 locations and circulates more than 7.7 million items and welcomes over 5.6 million visitors per year, serving one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the United States. Its collections span more than 200 languages, reflecting the borough’s extraordinary diversity and QPL’s long-standing commitment to equitable, multilingual, community-centred public library service.

Queens Library has adopted a trauma-informed approach to customer service, recognising the complex needs of its diverse patron base, including individuals experiencing homelessness, intoxication, and adolescents in crises.

Staff training and support

Visiting the Long Island City branch home to one of Queens Public Library’s Teen Centres underscored the essential role these spaces play within the community. Located amid a dense concentration of public housing and within walking distance of six shelters, the library functions as a critical safe haven for young people and other vulnerable residents. Despite the challenges that come with serving a high-need neighbourhood, Abigail, the supervising librarian,

emphasises the genuine “joy” and sense of purpose her team finds in their work. She reminds her staff that the library belongs to the community first and foremost, noting that *“it is their library”* and that the building will continue to serve future generations long after the current staff have moved on.

To support staff in navigating the complex needs of their community, QPL provides twice-weekly trauma-informed training, including modules on adolescent brain development, de-escalation techniques, and empathetic response strategies. These sessions strengthen staff confidence and capability when assisting patrons in distress. The library also employs teen staff, who help build rapport with younger patrons, cultivate belonging, and reduce disruptive behaviour. In addition, all staff have access to Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), ensuring support for their mental health and wellbeing.

Security through a trauma-informed lens

Adding another layer to Queens Public Library’s trauma-informed customer service, the presence of security officers in library spaces is viewed by staff as supportive backup and by patrons as a gentle, non-threatening presence—an experience I observed firsthand during my visits to both Queens Central Library and the Long Island City branch. During these visits, I met with Richard (Rick) Lowe, QPL’s new Vice President of Security, who emphasised a clear expectation for his team: security officers must operate as partners in trauma-informed care, not as enforcers of authority. This marks a deliberate cultural shift away from traditional law-enforcement-style security toward an approach rooted in community engagement, empathy, and collaborative safety. Rick explained that officers with backgrounds in community affairs, social services, or youth work are far better suited to the library environment than those coming solely from policing a hiring pattern that had previously shaped the security team.

This shift also raises an important question: *if social workers embedded in libraries are expected to work with compassion and trauma-awareness, why shouldn’t security be trained to the same standard?* Rick argues that they should be. Security in his opinion must operate as a seamless part of the trauma-informed ecosystem, supporting both frontline library staff and social workers in responding to patrons in crisis. Training security officers in de-escalation, emotional regulation, and non-threatening communication is essential to building a library environment grounded in dignity and predictability.

With that said, the security landscape at QPL is complex. There have been no pay rises for security officers in five years, creating retention challenges that undermine continuity, consistency, and team cohesion. Compounding this, security cannot be deployed at every library, and it falls to Rick to allocate limited resources across a vast and diverse system. Some branches perceive themselves as “high-risk,” yet when compared with the system’s most acute environments, they are not. Helping staff understand what *genuine* high-risk situations look like in a library context is an ongoing challenge and a critical part of Rick’s educational role.

Interestingly, local police departments (PD) are often shocked by the nature and frequency of incidents occurring in libraries an insight that has helped build stronger relationships between QPL and the NYPD, grounded in shared awareness and mutual respect. By strengthening these connections and reframing security as a trauma-informed partner rather than an enforcer, QPL aims to foster a safer, more predictable environment where security, staff, social workers, and community members all operate as part of a coordinated, compassionate safety network.

Programming services

Queens Public Library (QPL) delivers one of the most comprehensive public programming portfolios in the United States, designed to meet the informational, educational, and social needs of an exceptionally diverse population. Across the borough, six dedicated Adult Learning Centres operate alongside more than 60 community library branches, offering free, accessible pathways for adults to build skills, pursue education, and engage in lifelong learning. These centres provide ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), adult basic education, high school equivalency preparation, job readiness training, digital literacy programs, and citizenship assistance—ensuring that adults from all backgrounds can access meaningful learning opportunities.

Branch-based programming further complements these services, delivering a wide spectrum of community-responsive offerings. These include immigration support, employment and interview preparation, social service referrals, and multilingual resources. Increasingly, programs also focus on coping skills such as parenting support, mental health literacy, health information sessions, and practical life skills which help patrons navigate complex personal and social challenges. QPL intentionally creates the time, space, and relational environment for these conversations to occur safely, recognising the essential role libraries play in community wellbeing.

QPL’s commitment to cultural and linguistic inclusion is longstanding. In the early 1970s, the library established its pioneering New Americans Program, formalising a promise that every resident regardless of language, culture, or migration experience would be served equitably. This program catalysed the expansion of multilingual collections and multicultural services, leading to the library’s now iconic slogan, “We Speak Your Language.” Today, QPL maintains materials in more than 200 languages, reflecting the borough’s extraordinary demographic diversity and upholding the belief that library services must evolve in step with the communities they serve.

The system also extends its reach through an outreach bus, which brings library services, programming, and resources to residents who cannot easily access a physical branch such as older adults, individuals experiencing mobility barriers, or communities located far from library facilities. For staff, QPL provides ongoing professional development such as health webinars, recognising that supporting complex community needs requires informed, well-equipped employees.

As programming increasingly intersects with social care addressing health, housing, immigration, crisis navigation, and wellbeing QPL continues to grapple with an important question: Are we a library, or are we becoming a social service?

While the boundaries between library work and social care are increasingly blurred, the library embraces this complexity with clarity of purpose. QPL's trauma-informed, multilingual, community-centred programming demonstrates that libraries can remain true to their mission while adapting to the emerging needs of modern urban life providing equitable access not only to information, but also to connection, support, and opportunity. Importantly, effective programming also reduces pressure on frontline staff by offering structured spaces where individuals in crisis can participate, stabilise, and find support, rather than relying solely on one-to-one staff interactions.

Social Work integration

In 2026, Queens Public Libraries are expanding their social work team from five to ten social workers across four sites, supported through funding from the not-for-profit Breaking Ground. These social workers are primarily field-based and focus on developing policies, procedures, and outreach strategies rather than providing direct, on-demand support to staff. Their presence helps reduce the burden on frontline teams when responding to patrons experiencing intoxication, homelessness, or behavioural crises among teens. QPL's partnership with Breaking Ground reflects an understanding that libraries are increasingly relied upon as safe, accessible spaces for vulnerable populations, with long-term plans to transition to a fully library-funded model.

While this trauma-informed, social-work-supported approach has improved customer service and strengthened community engagement, several challenges persist:

1. Social worker burnout

Field-based social work in library settings is emotionally taxing, with frequent exposure to patrons in crisis. Limited opportunities for decompression or peer reflection contribute to burnout, affecting retention and consistency of support.

2. Inconsistent patron experience

Patrons often move between branches based on where they feel more respected or understood. Differences in staff empathy, communication style, and confidence create uneven service experiences for vulnerable individuals.

3. Boundary management

Staff vary widely in their responses to crisis situations—some over-identify and become emotionally entangled, while others enforce boundaries too rigidly. This inconsistency highlights the need for clearer guidance on emotional regulation and professional limits.

4. Gaps in managerial preparedness

Many managers lack sufficient training in de-escalation and trauma-informed practice, leaving them ill-equipped to support staff during difficult interactions and increasing frontline emotional load.

5. Varied experience and leadership among librarians

Some librarians enter the role without prior experience in customer service or crisis management, making it difficult to navigate complex patron needs or support colleagues effectively.

6. Role clarity challenges

Although social workers alleviate pressure, their policy-focused role means they are not always available during immediate crises. Uncertainty about who should respond can limit the effectiveness of the trauma-informed model.

7. Engagement vs. enforcement tensions

QPL emphasises engagement over punitive approaches, especially with teens and individuals experiencing homelessness. While progressive, this approach requires high levels of skill and patience; without adequate training, staff may default to enforcement behaviours that contradict trauma-informed values.

Overall, Queens Public Library's trauma-informed customer service model represents a compassionate, forward-thinking response to the realities of urban public service. By integrating social work, enhancing staff capability, and centring empathy, QPL is redefining what it means for libraries to serve as safe, supportive, and responsive community anchors.

Queens Public Library demonstrates how a large, multicultural library system can remain deeply community-centred while adapting to increasing social complexity through trauma-informed practice, multilingual programming, and integrated social care partnerships. Its commitment to staff capability, empathetic service, and safe, welcoming spaces offers a powerful model for how public libraries can uphold their mission while responding to the evolving needs of the communities they serve.

Key takeaways for all Queensland Libraries

1. **Establish a statewide trauma informed framework for public libraries**

A shared trauma informed framework across Queensland libraries would create consistent expectations, language and practice. This helps ensure that staff across all councils are working toward aligned standards of safety, empathy, predictability and dignity.

2. **Centralise specialist training through QPLA, SLQ and ALIA**

Partnership-based, statewide training reduces duplication, costs, and fragmentation. Centralised modules delivered regularly rather than as one off events would build capability at scale and support library services with limited resources.

3. **Embed shared language and principles across library and council teams**

Standard terms such as boundaries, predictability, empathy and psychological safety create culture cohesion. Consistent language also reduces staff confusion and strengthens cross team responses to complex situations.

4. **Build strategic partnerships to expand social care capacity**

Queensland libraries could explore partnerships with not-for-profits, universities, and health services mirroring QPL's model with Breaking Ground to introduce social workers or social work students into library spaces. Partnerships increase the library's capacity without shifting its core mandate.

5. **Replace one off workshops with ongoing practical learning**

Short, repeatable, scenario-based learning is more impactful than annual training events. Focus areas many include:

- Trauma-informed communication
- Emotional regulation for staff
- Teen brain development theory
- Early intervention and de-escalation
- Recognising distress and making safe referrals

6. **Recognise that trauma informed libraries are safer for everyone**

Trauma informed practice is not limited to high need communities. It improves trust, reduces conflict and strengthens relationships with all patrons making the library environment more stable and predictable for everyone.

7. **Position trauma informed practice as a trust building strategy not a crisis response**

Trauma informed approaches build community trust, reduce escalation, and create more positive patron experiences. This mindset then shifts from 'responding to crisis' to 'building safety and belonging' while supporting healthier long-term outcome for both staff and patrons.

8. **Clarify boundaries: what is library work and what is not?**

As QPL's experience shows, the line between library service and social service is increasingly blurred. Queensland public libraries should proactively articulate:

- What falls within library services scope?
- What requires referral and;
- How staff can maintain healthy professional boundaries

This prevents role creep, protects staff wellbeing and reduces the emotional burden.

Free Library of Philadelphia: Trauma- Informed customer service approach: harm reduction to resilience

Thank you to Joel Nichols and Veronica Britto, from the Free Library of Philadelphia for generously sharing your time and insights. Your leadership in guiding teams through complex challenges with a trauma-informed lens is truly commendable. There is much to learn from your integration of a harm reduction model with a resilience-building framework an approach that offers valuable lessons for libraries everywhere.2026

The Free Library of Philadelphia, comprising 52 neighbourhood branches, one Central Library, and one Library of Accessibility for Pennsylvanians across the city, has emerged as a leading model for how public libraries can respond to increasingly complex social issues through a trauma-informed, community-centred lens. Under the direction of Joel Nichols, Chief of the Neighbourhood Library Services Division, the library has developed an informed customer service model that prioritises *empathy, equity, harm reduction,* and *staff safety* in frontline service delivery.

Trauma-Informed and harm reduction frameworks in library service

The Free Library's approach is grounded in an understanding of the intersections between homelessness, substance use, mental health, and longstanding structural inequities. To support patrons with complex needs, the library employs three rotating social workers who provide in-branch assistance to individuals experiencing housing instability, substance use disorders, or mental health challenges. Social workers are available to support staff who are having difficulties with patrons in the neighbourhood branches. The library's human resources team refers staff to professional development sessions and relevant trainings.

A key component of these trainings focus on:

- Effective interpersonal communication
- De-escalation techniques
- Boundary setting and staff safety
- Understanding trauma responses
- Culturally responsive and anti-bias practices

To address the ongoing opioid crisis, the library has implemented a harm reduction strategy involving paid bathroom monitors who help ensure patron wellbeing. This approach aligns with public health practices that emphasise dignity, safety, and non-criminalisation, recognising that supportive environments can materially reduce risk for vulnerable community members.

In addition, the library sustains strong partnerships with community organisations, extending outreach into public parks and other outdoor environments. This work reduces barriers to access and fosters stronger relationships between the library and its surrounding communities.

Strengthening organisational safety and culture

In response to increasing incidents of workplace violence and aggression, the library established a Safety Committee that meets monthly to review incidents, identify trends, and recommend improvements. This committee includes representatives from Human Resources and the staff unions, ensuring that both organisational and employee perspectives are considered. The committee's work has led to practical changes in policy and practice, with a focus on relationship-building with the community as a proactive strategy to reduce conflict and foster mutual respect.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified community needs, particularly as many families lost access to government support payments that had kept them just above the poverty line. As a result, library usage increased, especially among those seeking social services, internet access, and safe spaces. Staff, many of whom live in the same communities they serve and face economic hardship themselves, often bring their own lived experiences of trauma into the workplace. This reality, combined with exposure to racism, unconscious bias, and systemic inequities, has significant implications for psychological safety within the workforce.

To meet growing demand, the library is working to expand its social worker program, aiming to ensure that all high-need branches often referred to as "hot spots" have regular access to professional support. However, recruiting and retaining social workers has proven challenging, with high turnover and burnout reflecting the emotional intensity of the role. Despite these challenges, the Free Library of Philadelphia remains committed to evolving its services and internal culture, recognising that staff wellbeing, community trust, and equitable access are deeply interconnected.

Social Services: Social worker program in libraries

Thank you to Veronica for your time and for gathering your team together. The experience, knowledge and practical advice shared around the table is truly valuable and will be applied. I appreciate your honesty, your amazing laugh and

the joy you bring when discussing challenges and successes. The Free Library of Philadelphia, and the community it serves benefits greatly because you are there doing what you do so brilliantly.

The Free Library of Philadelphia has developed a growing Social Services team in response to increasing community need across its system. As of 2024, the library formally added three full-time social workers to its Social Services roster, alongside a team manager who oversees program coordination and system-wide service delivery. These staff provide open office hours in more than 30 neighbourhood libraries, offering direct support, referrals, resource navigation, and community programming.

The service spans the library's large geographic footprint, and spans eight regional divisions, allowing the social services team to work collaboratively with regional leadership and frontline staff. Despite being a relatively small team, demand has grown rapidly across the system, prompting ongoing planning for expansion so that all regions and eventually all branches can access routine social work support. This need for scaling is mirrored in the high and consistent community uptake of the service, with the social work team supporting patrons experiencing challenges related to housing stability, benefits access, mental health, and community agency navigation.

The team's success is reinforced by their extensive experience in both social services and community engagement. Staff support a broad and diverse demographic, reflecting Philadelphia's complex social landscape. Their work is grounded in purposeful community connection: outreach events, resource fairs, "coffee chats," and partnerships with agencies sharing the library's mission strengthen local networks and improve access to services. Their presence also enhances frontline library operations by providing training, consultation, and support for staff who routinely interact with patrons experiencing social and economic hardship.

A distinctive component of the library's model is its Prison and Re-entry Services program, which operates in close collaboration with the social services team. The Prison and Re-entry Services program is just one part of the larger Languages and Learning Department. A dedicated librarian develops programs and services created to support individuals who are currently incarcerated or returning to the community after incarceration.

The Prison and Re-entry Services, under the Languages & Learning Department, provides patrons with:

- Adult education and English Language Learning (ESL) programs
- Job search support for returning citizens
- Mailed reference services for individuals who are currently incarcerated
- A resource guide for returning citizens [bridges-reentry-guide.pdf]
- Information literacy and life skills training

This multidisciplinary approach bridges literacy, rehabilitation, and social support, reinforcing the library's commitment to equity, inclusion, and community reintegration. The impact of this integrated approach is most clearly measured in the number of people served, a metric regularly used by the team and highlighted through their public event calendars and open office hour reporting. As demand continues to rise, the Free Library is actively exploring expansion pathways to ensure that social services become a consistent, embedded part of public library practice across the entire system.

The organisation's ongoing work demonstrates that staff wellbeing, community trust, service equity, and trauma-informed practice are interdependent elements of sustainable public library service. The Free Library's integration of harm reduction with resilience-oriented practice provides a compelling model for libraries seeking to strengthen their role as inclusive, responsive, and socially engaged public institutions.

Key Takeaways for Queensland Libraries

1. Trauma-informed service delivery must be intentional and system-wide

The Free Library of Philadelphia demonstrates that trauma-informed practice must extend beyond the frontline, requiring organisational commitment, consistent training, and policies that prioritise empathy, equity, and safety. For Queensland libraries, this highlights the importance of embedding trauma-informed principles across service design, management, incident response, and staff wellbeing frameworks, rather than treating them as optional or values-based initiatives.

2. Social work expertise strengthens library practice

Embedding qualified social workers provides essential support for patrons experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, substance use, or systemic disadvantage. By complementing librarian expertise, social workers act as referral points, build staff capability, and support de-escalation, reducing pressure on frontline staff to manage complex social

issues outside their scope. For Queensland libraries, this supports regional, rotational, or shared social work models in high-need branches, rather than expecting library staff to fulfil these roles alone.

3. Role clarity and realistic resourcing are essential

The Free Library of Philadelphia experience highlights the risks of overly aspirational role descriptions that combine direct public service, staff training, and strategic advisory functions without sufficient resourcing, leading to burnout and program fragility. This underscores the importance of clearly defining the purpose and scope of specialist roles. For Queensland libraries, it also highlights the need to align expectations with funding and workforce capacity and to scale programs incrementally rather than system-wide by default.

4. Harm reduction approaches improve safety and dignity

The Free Library of Philadelphia's harm reduction strategies, including bathroom monitoring during the opioid crisis, show that non-punitive, public health–informed responses enhance patron safety, reduce preventable harm, and improve staff confidence and consistency. For Queensland libraries, this offers a strong evidence base to explore locally appropriate harm reduction approaches aligned with Australian public health frameworks and community partnerships.

5. Partnerships extend reach and reduce access barriers

The Free Library of Philadelphia's outreach into parks and public spaces shows the value of meeting communities where they are, rather than relying on formal service environments during crisis. For Queensland libraries, this highlights the importance of deepening cross-sector partnerships, co-designing outreach and referral pathways, and reducing service silos for shared community clients.

6. Staff safety and wellbeing must be treated as organisational priorities

The Free Library of Philadelphia's Safety Committee model demonstrates the importance of regular incident review, union and HR involvement, and data-informed policy change. For Queensland libraries, this underscores the value of formal safety governance and psychological safety supports, rather than ad-hoc responses to increasing aggression and community stress.

7. Staff bring lived experience

The Free Library of Philadelphia recognises that many staff live in the communities they serve and may carry their own trauma histories, requiring trauma-informed practice to be applied internally as well as to patrons. For Queensland libraries, this highlights the need to normalise reflective practice and supervision, address secondary trauma and moral distress, and avoid "hero culture" expectations during periods of social strain.

8. Scaling social work programs requires sustainability planning

The Free Library of Philadelphia's experience shows that high demand, burnout, and recruitment challenges mean expansion must be supported by workforce investment, strong management, and clear success measures beyond service volume alone. For Queensland libraries, this highlights the importance of long-term funding, realistic coverage expectations, and retention strategies, particularly in regional and remote settings.

9. Integrated, multidisciplinary models create deeper community impact

The Free Library of Philadelphia's Re-entry Services Program demonstrates the impact of integrating literacy, information access, social support, and community reintegration. For Queensland libraries, it offers a strong model for cross-disciplinary roles and service integration, particularly in justice engagement, digital inclusion, and lifelong learning.

10. Staff wellbeing, community trust, and equity are inseparable

A key transferable lesson is that sustainable public library services depend on recognising that staff safety underpins service quality, trust reduces conflict, and equity requires structural responses rather than goodwill alone. This strongly aligns with Queensland library values and provides a credible international model to support advocacy for investment in resourcing, specialist roles, and trauma-informed reform across the sector.

Context for Queensland, Australia: from Brooklyn, Queens & Philadelphia Libraries

Queensland public libraries operate within a legislative and policy environment that places a strong emphasis on psychosocial safety, community wellbeing, and customer-centred service delivery. With the introduction of enforceable Work Health and Safety (WHS) obligations relating to psychosocial hazards, councils are required to manage risks arising from customer aggression, traumatic incidents, emotional labour, and exposure to vulnerable community groups. This regulatory landscape means that Queensland libraries must not only provide equitable access to information and community connection, but also ensure staff can deliver these services safely, confidently, and sustainably.

Libraries across Queensland increasingly serve as frontline community contact points, where staff regularly support individuals experiencing homelessness, financial distress, mental health challenges, domestic violence, intergenerational trauma, or digital exclusion. Yet unlike human services environments, most public libraries do not have dedicated clinical or social service staff on site. This creates a growing need for trauma-informed practice, de-escalation skills, and clear pathways for referral, especially in regional or high-need branches.

At the same time, Queensland libraries continue to uphold their strong tradition of community-centred programming, literacy development, early years initiatives, and inclusive service design. The challenge now is to integrate these strengths with emerging safety, wellbeing, and complexity-of-need considerations. In this context, learning from international models—such as the Free Library of Philadelphia, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Public Library—provides valuable insights into how large urban systems respond to high levels of community complexity, embed social service practices, and develop workforce capabilities that can be adapted to Queensland's unique legislative and regional conditions.

Free Library of Philadelphia: Embedded social services and trauma-informed culture

The Free Library of Philadelphia offers a leading example of integrating social-service practices into a public library environment. Their model demonstrates the value of embedding social workers, peer specialists, and community navigators within branches to support patrons experiencing homelessness, addiction, mental health crises, or trauma. For Queensland where libraries face similar presentations without clinical staffing Philadelphia provides a roadmap for building partnerships with local support agencies, improving referral pathways, and introducing practical trauma-informed approaches to everyday customer interactions. Their focus on staff wellbeing, reflective practice, and on-the-ground coaching can inform Queensland's efforts to strengthen frontline confidence and psychosocial safety.

Brooklyn Public Library: Public safety alternatives and conflict de-escalation

Brooklyn Public Library offers strategies highly relevant for Queensland's Workplace Health and Safety context, especially in relation to customer aggression and behavioural complexity. Brooklyn's approach to conflict resolution focusing on preventative engagement, situational awareness, and trained public safety officers who prioritise de-escalation over enforcement aligns closely with Queensland's psychosocial hazard obligations. Their investment in continuous workforce training, safety-conscious space design, and coordinated incident response structures provides practical models for Queensland councils seeking to meet WHS requirements while maintaining an open, welcoming environment. Additionally, Brooklyn's innovative use of partnerships with youth justice, outreach teams, and community mediators demonstrates how libraries can reduce workplace risks without adopting punitive models that conflict with library values.

Queens Public Library: Community navigation, multilingual support, and large-scale inclusion

Queens Public Library operates within the most linguistically and culturally diverse county in the United States, offering Queensland valuable insights into inclusive service delivery within highly varied communities. Their community-navigation model where staff are trained to connect patrons with housing, legal, employment, and immigration resources offers a scalable, non-clinical approach that Queensland libraries can adapt, particularly in areas experiencing high migration or complex social need. Queens' extensive staff training in cultural safety, mental health first aid, and proactive customer engagement complements Queensland's commitment to equitable access, while their approach to balancing community-centred programming with safety protocols provides relevant frameworks for regional and metropolitan branches alike.

Together, these international case studies illustrate practical, adaptable models that can support Queensland libraries as they navigate rising psychosocial risk, increased complexity of customer need, and heightened expectations for staff capability. While each operates in a distinct context, their shared emphasis on trauma-informed service delivery, cross-sector collaboration, safety-conscious workforce development, and community-led engagement aligns closely with Queensland's evolving library environment. By drawing from these approaches, Queensland libraries can strengthen staff wellbeing, enhance customer experience, and build service models that remain both safe and deeply community-centred.

Trauma-Informed and community-centred practice: Lessons from Brooklyn, Queens & Philadelphia Libraries

Synthesis of Learnings from Queens, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia applicable for Queensland Public Libraries.

While the case study libraries are much larger, their approaches can be effectively adapted for Queensland's rural and regional settings.

1. Establish a statewide trauma-informed framework for public libraries

A unified, Queensland-wide trauma-informed framework would set clear expectations, define shared principles, and provide consistent guidance for all councils. Aligning around concepts such as *safety, empathy, dignity, boundaries,* and *predictability* promotes equitable experiences for patrons and supports psychological safety for staff.

2. Centralise specialist training and build capability

Training should be developed and delivered collaboratively through QPLA, SLQ, and ALIA to avoid duplication and ensure accessibility for rural, regional, and metropolitan library services. Regular, centralised training rather than ad hoc sessions will build capability at scale. Priority areas include:

- Trauma-informed communication
- Emotional regulation and staff wellbeing
- Teen brain development
- Early intervention and de-escalation
- Recognising distress and making safe referrals

Generic, off-the-shelf training does not meet the complexity of contemporary library work.

3. Embed shared language and principles across councils and library teams

Using consistent language across all levels of the organisation supports culture cohesion and improves cross-team responses to complex scenarios. Terms such as *boundaries, predictability, empathy, psychological safety,* and *restorative practice* should be embedded into policy, procedures, and staff development.

4. Strengthen internal structures that support staff wellbeing and safety

Trauma-informed service requires trauma-informed staff systems. Libraries should invest in:

- Peer-led safety structures and reflective practice groups
- Tools such as skills-share guides and onboarding resources
- Clear communication pathways for incident reporting and support
- Internal networks that reduce staff isolation
- Predictable rotation or relief for staff working in high intensity branches

Libraries cannot remove all stressors, but strong internal scaffolding helps staff manage them safely.

5. Build strategic partnerships to expand social care capacity

Partnerships with not-for-profits, universities, housing providers, health services, and justice-sector organisations can extend the library's capacity without shifting its core mandate. Examples include:

- Embedded social workers or social work students
- Outreach workers
- Youth specialists
- Health navigators

These partnerships lighten the load on library staff and ensure patrons receive the right support at the right level.

6. Recognise that library work Is expanding into social complexity

Frontline staff are increasingly supporting patrons experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, substance use, poverty, or social isolation. Libraries remain one of the few free, barrier-free public spaces, making societal pressures highly visible. Acknowledging this shift is critical for planning workforce development and safety strategies.

7. Clarify Boundaries: define what Is library work and what requires referral

To prevent role creep and staff overwhelm, libraries must clearly articulate:

- What responsibilities belong to library staff
- What responsibilities belong to social/health services
- When referrals should be made
- How staff can maintain healthy professional boundaries

Boundary clarity protects staff wellbeing and ensures ethical, sustainable practice.

8. Foster trauma-informed, community-engaged security approaches

Security practices must align with the library's trauma-informed philosophy. This includes:

- Recruiting security officers with backgrounds in community engagement rather than enforcement
- Providing library-specific and trauma-informed training
- Clarifying expectations around "high-risk" behaviour
- Building strong relationships with local police (e.g., QPS) for coordinated incident response

Security should operate as supportive colleagues—not enforcers—working alongside staff to create safe, dignified environments.

9. Prioritise tools that reduces cumulative trauma and support staff resilience

Learnings from Brooklyn highlight the importance of:

- Restorative leave options after traumatic events
- Predictable rotation away from high-stress duties
- Holistic wellbeing supports (e.g., therapy partnerships, mindfulness, acupuncture, culturally relevant healing practices)

These mechanisms help sustain staff capacity in emotionally demanding roles.

10. Value lived experience as a strength in recruitment and program design

Lived experience particularly in areas such as youth work, justice involvement, housing instability, or multicultural communities provides valuable insight that enhances empathy, builds trust, and strengthens program effectiveness. Staff with lived experience contribute nuanced understanding that improves peer support, informs engagement strategies, and enriches the design of inclusive, community-responsive services.

11. Position trauma-informed practice as a trust-building strategy

Trauma-informed library service is fundamentally about building belonging, connection, and predictability—not just responding to crisis. This approach strengthens community trust, reduces escalation, and contributes to safer, more inclusive public spaces.

12. Accept that libraries cannot solve systemic problems, but can strengthen internal resilience

While libraries cannot fix homelessness, untreated mental illness, or social inequity, they *can*:

- Strengthen internal systems,
- Build capability and confidence,

- Create safer staff environments, and
- Offer predictable, compassionate support to patrons within their remit.

This clarity helps manage expectations and prevents burnout.

13. Trauma-Informed environmental and space design

In addition to strengthening internal systems and staff capability, physical environments also play a critical role in trauma-informed practice. Integrate trauma-responsive elements into library space design—such as clear sightlines, calming zones, visibility for staff, and predictable layouts to support psychological safety for both patrons and staff **14.**

14. Use data to guide practice and planning

Leverage the data collected from incident trends, patron needs, and community demographics to inform training priorities, shape partnerships, and guide staffing and resource allocation.

Across all sites visited, the message was consistent: the future of public libraries relies on trauma-informed culture, strong internal structures, high-quality training, and community partnerships. Queensland libraries that invest in these foundations will be better positioned to support their communities, safeguard staff wellbeing, and uphold the essential role of libraries as safe, trusted, and equitable public spaces.

Global case studies

This section presents international case studies that illustrate how public library systems are responding to increasing psychosocial complexity and implementing trauma-informed approaches in diverse contexts.

Case Study: Los Angeles Public Library Service

Thank you to Jacqueline Welsh for your time, insights and wisdom on this topic. Your openness, honesty and humour is very much appreciated. You're on the ground experience, leadership and people skills hold you in good stead as you grow the new customer experience office, train such a diverse group of staff and lead them through the challenges presented every day. (2026)

Building a Trauma-Informed, Safety-Centred library experience at scale

The Los Angeles Public Library Service (LAPL) operates a vast network of 73 branches that serve an extraordinarily diverse community amid intensifying social pressures, rising costs of living, unemployment, political polarization, racial inequities, mental health crises, and homelessness. In response, LAPL has established a Library Experience Office under Jacqueline Walsh, integrating Social Work, Security, Training, Incident Management, and Accessibility into a cohesive function. This office is advancing a trauma-informed approach as a continuum, not a checklist, recognizing that practice matures over time and through feedback, reflection, and shared learning.

Key pillars include intentional incident training, a strengths-based response, communication and teamwork, attention to staff trauma, consistent debriefing practices, and the goal of having personal safety plans individualized to staff needs. An eight-person social work team supports both public and staff, with a special emphasis on boundary setting and post-incident debriefs, while Community Service Representatives (CSRs) with lived experience add valuable perspective yet need structured support to prevent re- traumatisation and boundary challenges. Security including contracted officers and LAPD overtime assignments falls under the new office, with a current emphasis on realigning practices from zero-tolerance tendencies toward library-appropriate safety grounded in dignity, prevention, and proportionality.

Across this complex ecosystem, LAPL is pursuing top-down manager training (including Crisis Prevention Centre training), collaborative training for all staff, and weekly optional 45-minute peer sessions with active consideration of making these sessions required to strengthen shared practice. Persistent tensions include limited time for debriefs while libraries remain open, perception gaps between management and frontline realities, fatigue from frequent incidents, and the ethical challenge of upholding open access (e.g., people who are unhoused wishing to read quietly) while maintaining staff safety and operational continuity.

LAPL's mission is to provide open, equitable access to information and space intersects daily with profound social challenges that play out on library floors. Staff routinely navigate:

- Public health and mental health crises, often with limited external support in the moment.
- Economic and housing instability, with patrons using libraries as essential safe daytime spaces.
- Community tensions around race and politics, amplifying conflict dynamics.
- Operational constraints (busy facilities that must remain open) that compress or postpone debriefing and recovery after incidents.

The cumulative effect is strain on staff resilience and, in some locations, a drift toward exclusionary instincts born from burnout: "who can and cannot come into library spaces." Leadership recognises that such drift breaches fundamental library values and that the remedy is systemic support, not moralizing individual staff.

The Library Experience Office: Integrated design for complex problems

Under Jacqueline Walsh, LAPL centralized five critical functions into the Library Experience Office:

- Social Work: An eight-person team supports patrons and staff, facilitating resource connections, debriefs, and boundary coaching.
- Security: Managing a blend of contracted security and LAPD overtime assignments, while working to recalibrate definitions of "safety" in a library context.
- Training & Development: Delivering intentional incident training, strengths-based approaches, communication, teamwork, and trauma-informed practice.

- Incident Management: Coordinating response and reporting, with a push toward consistent after-action learning.
- Accessibility: Ensuring inclusive design and equitable access for people with disabilities across all branches.

This structure acknowledges that safety and service are inseparable. It also recognises that trauma affects staff as well as patrons, and that organisational practices must reflect this reality.

Trauma-Informed as a continuum

For LAPL, trauma-informed is a continuum, not a tick and flick achievement. The office emphasizes:

- A goal of having Personal Safety Plans: Grounded in the question, “What makes *you* feel safe?”, these plans invite self-awareness and actionable strategies (e.g., preferred positioning, check-in signals, known triggers, de-escalation phrases). Plans are living documents, integrated into supervision and team huddles.
- Circle of Control, Circle of Influence: Staff clarity about what they can control (e.g., tone, boundaries, de-escalation steps) and what they can influence (e.g., team norms, escalation pathways), versus what lies outside their control (e.g., systems-level inequities). This framing reduces helplessness and focuses energy on meaningful action.
- Boundary Setting: Codifying what healthy boundaries look like by role and normalizing that saying “no” to unsafe or unreasonable demands is a professional competency.
- Feedback Culture After Incidents: Staff are encouraged to both give and receive feedback; however, receptivity remains a challenge especially under stress. The team is iterating on scripts, peer coaching, and supervisory modelling to make feedback feel fair, specific, and safe.

LAPL launched top-down training for all managers, including sessions delivered by a Crisis Prevention Centre. Outcomes were mixed. Positively, staff show greater willingness to be trained when expectations are clearly set and backed by leadership. At the same time, some managers initially lacked visibility into frontline realities, producing disconnects in policy and practice.

To bridge this, the office champions a collaborative approach that blends top-down clarity with peer-to-peer learning:

- Weekly 45-minute sessions (currently optional) where staff share experiences, analyse scenarios, and brainstorm responses. These sessions are working—and there is consideration of making them not optional to build shared practice and reduce variability across branches.
- Cross-functional exposure: Managers participate in scenario walkthroughs with frontline staff; social workers co-facilitate debriefs and help translate trauma-informed principles into concrete behaviours.
- Role-relevant tracks: Because half of the team is not library-educated or trained, LAPL is differentiating learning pathways (lived-experience roles, security, circulation/frontline, supervisors) while keeping a common core of values, safety, and customer service.

People and Roles: Social Work, community service representatives and security

The Social Work Team (8 staff) is pivotal but spread thin across 73 locations. They assist the public directly and coach staff on boundaries, especially in emotionally charged interactions. They also facilitate debriefs and have identified a need for more training in debriefing for both them and managers to standardise practice.

Social workers are highly visible in library spaces**,** roving floors to engage patrons and staff. They also maintain private spaces within libraries for confidential conversations. Their toolkit includes snacks, hygiene packs, socks, and second-hand clothing, enabling immediate, practical support.

The guiding principle**:** “Do everything possible within capacity.” Social workers model a mindset of supporting community equally**,** and more staff are adopting this perspective. Importantly, LAPL does not expect staff to become social workers that is the social workers’ role. Staff remain focused on core library functions**,** such as reference interviews, even when patrons present complex needs.

For example, if a patron asks for help navigating a food stamp website, staff do not need to redirect them to a branch with a social worker. Instead, they provide basic digital literacy support answering one or two questions before escalating if necessary. This approach prevents unnecessary transfers and reinforces the library’s role as an information access point**.**

A persistent tension: community expectations around “helping” people who are unhoused versus honouring their autonomy. Staff sometimes perceive that social workers are intervening where a patron simply wants to sit and read a newspaper like anyone else. The office is reframing “help” as consent-based support and “safety” as dignity plus predictability not surveillance or control.

Community Service Representatives (CSRs) bring lived experience that often improves understanding and empathy in difficult moments. However, CSRs may lack library or city workplace experience, and because of their high levels of care can experience boundary challenges or re - traumatisation. The office is developing structured onboarding, boundary mentorship, and wellness supports to retain the power of lived experience while protecting staff wellbeing.

Security falls under the Library Experience Office, including contracted security and LAPD officers working overtime who can take library shifts. The remit includes redefining safety in a library context:

- Current State: Contracted security sometimes skews heavy-handed or zero-tolerance, occasionally influenced by prior knowledge of a person of interest. Preventative measures are growing, but practice still leans toward enforcement rather than engagement.
- Structural Limitations: Some non-LAPD guards are contracted via LAPD, which reduces the library’s direct control over personnel and standards. The low barrier to security certification can introduce unsuitable candidates for the nuanced library environment. Guards may also be reassigned due to personal crises or mental health concerns, compounding instability.

Strategic Direction: The office is investing in library-specific security training, scenario-based practice, and clarifying the thresholds for intervention that align with library values. The goal is to build a proportionate, consistent, and prevention-oriented safety posture while also recognizing the wellbeing needs of guards themselves.

Operational constraints: debriefs while staying open

One of LAPL’s sharpest challenges is time. Libraries typically remain open during and after incidents. Staff must continue serving customers, often without protected time to process, reset, or learn. This reality:

- Erodes the quality and frequency of debriefs.
- Fuels fatigue and frustration, driving some staff toward exclusionary instincts.
- Increases variability in incident handling across branches.

The office is advancing micro-debriefs (brief huddles), scheduled follow-ups, and logs to fit reality while preserving the learning loop.

Even without formal metrics presented here, LAPL is seeing movement:

- Higher willingness to train under top-down expectations paired with collaborative formats.
- Increased language consistency around boundaries, safety, and trauma-informed practice.
- Greater visibility of manager-frontline gaps, creating opportunities for joint problem-solving.

At the same time, tensions persist:

- Staff receptivity to feedback post-incident varies widely.
- Social worker capacity is outpaced by demand.
- Security posture remains uneven, with enforcement instincts sometimes overshadowing prevention.
- The ethical imperative to protect open access coexists with hotspot fatigue in branches absorbing a high incident load.

The Los Angeles Public Library Service is demonstrating how a large, complex system can operationalize trauma-informed practice as a continuum not a label. By anchoring staff in their circle of control and influence, normalizing boundaries and feedback, and with the aim of empowering teams with personal safety plans, LAPL is rebuilding confidence and coherence in the face of high community need.

The Library Experience Office creates the right architecture: social work, security, training, incident management, and accessibility working in concert. Real progress depends on protected time to debrief, role-specific boundary guidance, right-sized social work coverage, security aligned to library values, and shared learning rhythms (the weekly sessions) that are predictable and inclusive. The ethical centre remains clear: protect open, equitable access including for people

who are unhoused who simply wish to read the newspaper like everyone else—while delivering practical safety for staff and patrons.

In short, LAPL is moving from incident-driven reaction to a learning system one that balances care and consistency, access and safety, individual dignity and organisational resilience. That balance is not a destination; it is a practice, strengthened each time a team debriefs honestly, adjusts with humility, and shows up for one another the next day.

Context for Queensland Libraries:

- How would a personal safety plan as a concept integrate with and support current psychological safety laws? What would the broader WPH&S and privacy implications be?
- Learning needs to be continuous for all levels of staff.
- Have higher order controls been considered at every library site, to form a strong foundation of support for library staff?

Application for Queensland Public Libraries

1) Make "Trauma-Informed, Safety-Centred" Business-as-Usual

- Adopt a library-specific incident management procedure: prevention cues, de-escalation steps, thresholds for assistance, and proportionate exclusions. Include scripts and plain-English prompts.
- Build a common language for boundaries, consent-based support, and proportionality. Tie these two role expectations to reduce ambiguity and "zero-tolerance drift."
- Use crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) and layout adjustments (sightlines, safe retreat paths, duress points) as higher-order controls before relying on training alone.

2) Standardise debriefing within operational realities

- Adopt micro-debriefs (3–5 minutes) immediately post-incident, with scheduled follow-ups and an asynchronous log where time-poor. Track themes to inform controls and training.
- Provide role-relevant debrief guidance for supervisors and any social-work partners to keep tone fair, specific and safe.

3) Layered training pathway (top-down + peer-to-peer)

- Set manager baseline (e.g., psychosocial hazard duties; proportionate responses; feedback culture).
- Provide de-escalation and prevention-first training for all frontline roles; supplement for higher-risk sites with scenario-based practice
- Run weekly peer huddles (incident reflections, scripts, boundary practice). Consider minimum participation expectations to build shared practice.

4) Calibrate security & partnerships to library values

- Provide library-context security briefings and joint scenarios (guards + staff), clarifying engagement thresholds and de-escalation expectations.
- Where using social workers/CSRs, ensure structured onboarding, boundary mentoring, and wellness supports to reduce re-traumatisation risks.

5) Embed in policy, standards and reporting

- Reference PSPs, debrief processes and training in your Library Operations Manual and WHS procedures to meet documentation expectations.
- Monitor leading indicators (training completion, huddles held, PSP review rates) and lag indicators (incident trends), per WHS risk management cycles.

Case study: Pima County Public Library: Trauma Informed Care: equipping staff

With sincere appreciation, I extend my gratitude to Linde Furman for the generous sharing of your extensive knowledge and professional experience. Your ability to apply a deep skillset to an area of significant need is both commendable and impactful. The leadership you demonstrate is fostering meaningful change, enhancing safety, and supporting the growth and resilience of library staff across your network and beyond. 2025

Since 2021, Linde Furman has led a strategic initiative to establish a trauma-informed care team within the Pima County Public Library located in Tucson, Arizona. The primary objective of this project has been to equip staff with the knowledge and tools necessary to deliver trauma-informed services to the community, while simultaneously building internal capacity to support staff wellbeing in the face of increasingly complex public interactions.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, library staff across the region experienced a significant shift in community engagement. Libraries, traditionally viewed as safe and inclusive public spaces, began to see a rise in users presenting in crisis. Staff were frequently called upon to assist individuals with needs extending far beyond the scope of library services, including support with housing, navigating government systems, and accessing community networks. This shift placed considerable emotional and psychological pressure on frontline staff, many of whom reported symptoms of burnout, compassion fatigue, and a growing sense of disconnection between their lived experiences and the level of support provided by administration.

Initial assessments revealed several systemic challenges. Incident tracking was inconsistent, and there was a noticeable escalation in violent and aggressive behaviour among library users. Staff expressed concern that administrative responses were often moderate and non-committal, with decisions at times prioritising public access over staff safety. This contributed to a workplace culture in which staff wellbeing was perceived as secondary, and safety concerns were not always addressed with the seriousness they warranted.

In response, the library service engaged consultant Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, founder of the Trauma Stewardship Institute, to guide the development of a trauma-informed care framework. Lipsky's concept of "trauma stewardship" provided a philosophical foundation for the initiative, emphasising sustainable, justice-rooted care for those who support others. Her involvement helped shape the project as a long-term cultural transformation rather than a short-term intervention.

The initiative was collaborative in nature, involving staff at all levels, administrative leadership, social workers, and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers. Staff engagement was prioritised through surveys and focus groups conducted across 27 library locations, with approximately one-third of staff actively participating. This engagement informed the development of a roadmap for implementation, ensuring that the framework was grounded in the realities of frontline service delivery.

A significant outcome of the project was the creation of a comprehensive internal website dedicated to staff wellbeing and trauma-informed practice. This platform provides direct access to EAP booking services, resources for leading through trauma, and training materials tailored to working with diverse community groups, including individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ+ patrons, refugees, migrants, and those experiencing mental health challenges. Online courses, such as Mental Health First Aid, have also been made available to support ongoing staff education and resilience.

Culturally, the initiative has fostered a more informed and empowered workforce. Branch managers have adopted a more collaborative and consistent approach to staff support, and service-wide behavioural boundaries and safety guidelines have been established. While the banning of library users remains a serious and last-resort measure, it is now governed by clear principles that prioritise the safety of staff and other users. The inherent tension between maintaining public access and ensuring safety continues to exist, but safety is now the decisive factor in all such decisions.

To support staff in locations where the most serious incidents occur, off-duty police officers have been engaged to provide security services. This approach has proven effective in offering staff a sense of safety and support. However, this level of support is not uniformly available across all branches. In other locations, third-party security contractors are employed, many of whom are underpaid and lack the necessary experience to manage complex situations. This has, in some cases, led to the escalation rather than de-escalation of incidents.

Restorative practices have also been introduced, particularly for younger users. Teenagers who exhibit aggressive behaviour are often offered restorative conversations and second chances, facilitated by a team of specialists. This approach reflects the library's commitment to balancing accountability with compassion and maintaining access for students and young people seeking connection and support.

Despite the progress made, several challenges remain. Resistance to trauma-informed practices persists among a small number of library managers, resulting in inconsistencies that affect frontline staff. Disagreements over what

constitutes unacceptable behaviour and who should be banned continue to create tension. Additionally, while sick leave usage has increased, this is viewed positively. Staff now feel empowered to take leave when needed, rather than continuing to work through trauma. This shift reflects a healthier organisational culture in which staff wellbeing is actively supported and encouraged.

This case study underscores the importance of aligning administrative support with the realities of frontline service delivery. Through the implementation of trauma-informed practices, meaningful staff engagement, and a clear prioritisation of safety, the library service has taken significant steps toward becoming a more resilient, responsive, and supportive workplace—better equipped to serve both its staff and the diverse communities it supports.

“Our world is both tumultuous and beautiful. We cannot train our eyes on only one or the other. The difficulty and paradox of trying to take it all in at once is that it can be overwhelming, and even heartbreaking. And so, we take it in one piece at a time. We want to uplift others from turmoil. We want to see others helping one another. We want to witness and generate more beauty and humanity.” Hope for the helpers | Pima County Public Library

Context for Queensland, Australia

- What collaborative boundaries would your library service set in support of front-line staff?
- As a leadership team how would you go about building/ re-building trust with your front-line staff?
- What areas could be identified for targeted education for staff? For example: Leading through trauma and trauma informed practices.
- How could the EAP be bet better leveraged to provide relevant support to library staff?

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. Trauma-informed transformation requires cultural and structural change

The initiative led by Linde Furman was not just a training program—it was a strategic cultural shift. By engaging staff at all levels and incorporating trauma stewardship principles, the library moved toward a sustainable, justice-rooted model of care. This included creating a dedicated internal wellbeing platform, establishing behavioural boundaries, and prioritizing staff safety in decision-making.

2. Staff wellbeing must be actively supported, not assumed

The post-pandemic rise in community crises placed emotional strain on frontline staff, exposing gaps in administrative support. The initiative responded by:

- Improving incident tracking and establishing clearer safety protocols.
- Empowering staff to take sick leave without stigma, reflecting a healthier workplace culture.
- Introducing restorative practices, especially for younger users, to balance accountability with compassion.

While some American library systems have engaged off-duty police officers to enhance staff safety, this model is neither common nor easily transferable to the Australian context. Instead, libraries can adopt restorative approaches such as facilitated conversations, supported behavioural agreements, and opportunities for genuine second chances to help challenging patrons re-engage constructively. This proactive, community-centred strategy prioritises learning, accountability, and relationship-building over enforcement, and better aligns with the values and capacities of Australian public libraries. These efforts reflect a shift toward valuing staff wellbeing as essential, not secondary, and highlight the importance of context-sensitive approaches to safety and support.

3. Meaningful engagement drives effective implementation

Staff participation through surveys and focus groups ensured the trauma-informed framework was grounded in real frontline experiences. This collaborative approach helped build trust, tailor resources to diverse community needs, and foster a more resilient and empowered workforce.

Implementation Impacts:

Sustained leadership and ownership are critical to the success of long-term initiatives of this nature; without a dedicated staff member driving the work overtime, the outcomes achieved would not have been possible. Ongoing support from senior administration, even when buy-in has been uneven, is equally essential, as it underpins staff psychosocial safety while clearly signalling acceptable standards of behaviour to the community. In addition, clearly articulated incident response and follow-up guidelines provide frontline staff with consistent, service-wide direction,

helping to moderate individual differences in judgement and ensuring responses strike an appropriate balance between compassion and boundary-setting.

Case Study: Toronto Public Library: Trauma Informed: Equipping staff

Toronto, Canada

This case study has been compiled by desk top research only.

In 2022, the Toronto Public Library (TPL) undertook a strategic initiative to embed trauma-informed principles into its service delivery model. This effort was driven by a growing recognition of the complex needs of patrons, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated social inequities, mental health challenges, and community disconnection. TPL's approach aimed to enhance staff capacity, improve safety and wellbeing, and foster inclusive, respectful environments across its branches.

Central to this initiative was the development of a trauma-informed framework that acknowledged the pervasive impact of trauma on individuals and communities. TPL sought to ensure that its services were not only accessible but also sensitive to the lived experiences of patrons, particularly those from equity-deserving groups. The library recognised that trauma-informed practice is essential to addressing barriers to access, including the digital divide and literacy gaps that were intensified during the pandemic.

A cornerstone of the initiative was staff training. TPL invested in equipping its workforce with the knowledge and skills necessary to respond effectively to patrons experiencing trauma. This included the introduction of Mental Health First Aid training, which provided staff with tools to identify and intervene in mental health and substance-use related crises. The training was designed to build confidence and competence in managing complex interactions, while also promoting empathy and de-escalation.

To further support staff and enhance public safety, TPL introduced a new role: Library Safety Specialists (LSSs)**.** These specialists work alongside library staff and contracted security personnel to engage directly with patrons, explain and enforce library rules, and de-escalate potentially volatile situations. The creation of this role was informed by a benchmarking review of best practices in North American libraries, which highlighted the need for dedicated personnel trained in trauma-informed engagement and conflict resolution.

In addition to individual training and staffing enhancements, TPL implemented system-wide initiatives aimed at creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces. These initiatives addressed workplace health and safety, mental health awareness, and public safety concerns. The library's commitment to these principles was reflected in its internal policies, physical space design, and community engagement strategies.

TPL also prioritised data-informed decision-making**.** A comprehensive report detailing incidents across library branches from 2014 to 2021 was presented to the library board. This report provided critical insights into patterns of disruptive behaviour and informed the development of targeted interventions. By grounding its approach in empirical evidence, TPL was able to align its safety strategies with actual service needs.

Collaboration was another key element of the trauma-informed initiative. TPL engaged in ongoing dialogue with staff, community members, and external experts to better understand the impact of trauma and to co-develop responsive strategies. These conversations helped shape a shared understanding of trauma-informed care and reinforced the library's role as a community anchor.

Through these efforts, TPL demonstrated a commitment to building a trauma-informed culture that supports both staff and patrons. The initiative reflects a broader shift in public library practice—one that recognises the library as not only a place of learning and access but also a space of healing, connection, and social support. By embedding trauma-informed principles into its operations, TPL has positioned itself as a leader in inclusive and responsive public service.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. Trauma-informed practice is both essential and achievable

The Toronto model demonstrates that trauma-informed approaches improve safety, trust, and service responsiveness. While Queensland libraries may not replicate Toronto's scale or specialised roles, the core principles of safety, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural humility are fully applicable and adaptable.

2. Staff support must be system-wide, not incidental

TPL's investment in training highlights the value of equipping all staff, not just frontline workers. Queensland libraries can similarly embed this training practice in the areas of mental health first aid, de-escalation skills, trauma-informed communication and reflective practice. This builds confidence, reduces burnout, and improves staff wellbeing at all levels.

3. Clear boundaries and expectations reduce harm

TPL's model reinforces the importance of consistent rules, explained with empathy. For Queensland, boundary-setting should be embedded through:

- Local policies
- Team-wide consistency
- Leadership modelling
- Clear incident response pathways

This supports both staff safety and customer respect.

4. Data strengthens advocacy

Data turns "experience" into "impact" which is essential for funding and strategic positioning.

TPL used incident reporting data to inform decisions and secure support. Queensland libraries can do the same by improving incident reporting cultures, analysing patterns of behaviour, identifying high-risk branches or times, using evidence to advocate for resources, design changes, or staffing adjustments.

5. Libraries are critical social infrastructure

Both Toronto and Queensland libraries function as safe, accessible, non-commercial community spaces. Trauma-informed practice reinforces libraries' role as community connectors, learning hubs, protective factors against social isolation and places for digital and social inclusion. This strengthens the case for investment in libraries as essential services, not optional amenities.

6. Collaboration enhances outcomes

TPL's partnership approach mirrors what Queensland libraries can do with partnerships and collaborations with local health services, youth services, community centres, cultural organisations, council safety officers. Collaboration broadens support and shares responsibility for complex community challenges.

7. Trauma-informed practice supports reconciliation

By embedding culturally safe approaches, libraries strengthen relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and align with national reconciliation priorities.

Implementation Impacts:

The Toronto case study is most valuable not as a blueprint to be replicated, but as evidence of what becomes achievable when trauma-informed practice is embedded across an entire system. For Queensland libraries, it provides a compelling reference point to support implementation conversations and advocate for increased investment in workforce training, stronger safety and wellbeing frameworks, and service models informed by community lived experience. It also reinforces the importance of clear, consistent incident protocols to support frontline staff decision-making, alongside dedicated funding for culturally safe and trauma-informed initiatives that respond meaningfully to local need. Taken together, these impacts highlight how systemic commitment—not isolated interventions can strengthen both staff safety and community trust.

Case Study: The social impact of Canadian Public Libraries through a trauma-informed customer service (TICS) Lens

This case study has been compiled by desk top research only.
(The impact of Canadian public libraries, Bruun, Holm Thøgersen, & Andreasen, 2026)

In 2025 the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) completed the largest national study to date on the social impact of Canadian urban libraries. Drawing on 18,315 responses from 53 systems, the study quantified outcomes across four "impact compass" dimensions: Emotional, Social, Intellectual and Creative, establishing a national baseline for how libraries advance well-being, knowledge, connection, and creative engagement. Findings show a robust overall impact

profile of 3.3/5, with peaks in Knowledge (3.7) and well-being (3.6), and particularly high impact for Programs (3.6) despite lower participation rates than Collections, Spaces, or Staff interactions. [Social-Imp...ish-2026-2 | PDF]

Why a trauma-informed lens matters

Public libraries operate as radically open civic spaces where residents routinely navigate stressors such as housing precarity, mental health challenges, language and settlement barriers, and the lingering effects of individual and collective traumas. A trauma-informed approach does not turn library workers into clinicians; rather, it reshapes policies, spaces, staff practice, and community partnerships so interactions are safer, more predictable, and less likely to re-traumatize patrons or staff. SAMHSA's six guiding principles—Safety; Trustworthiness & Transparency; Peer Support; Collaboration & Mutuality; Empowerment, Voice & Choice; and Cultural, Historical & Gender Responsiveness provide a globally recognised framework for service organisations, including libraries. [samhsa.gov], [samhsa.gov]

In Canada, higher-education and public-health resources reinforce this stance: trauma-informed practices acknowledge links between violence/trauma and health outcomes, aim to minimize harm, and help libraries design emotionally and physically safe environments while staying within the library's scope. [ikblc.ubc.ca]

Key National Findings, Reinterpreted Through TICS Lens

The CULC national study demonstrates that Canadian public libraries generate substantial emotional, social, intellectual, and creative impact, with particularly strong outcomes in well-being (3.6) and knowledge (3.7) across services. When viewed through a Trauma-Informed Customer Service (TICS) lens, these findings highlight how libraries already function as trauma-responsive community spaces—and how formal TICS frameworks can deepen this impact. [rccp.cornell.edu]

1. Libraries as trauma-sensitive environments

The study shows that library spaces score highly for well-being (3.6) and are widely used as safe, calm, and welcoming environments—especially for youth, newcomers, parents, and First Nations, Inuit & Métis users. These groups often experience higher exposure to trauma, whether through displacement, colonisation impacts, family stress, or cultural marginalisation. [rccp.cornell.edu]

Trauma-informed practice emphasises physical and emotional safety, predictability, and clear communication, principles articulated by SAMHSA's trauma-informed care framework (Safety; Trust; Peer Support; Collaboration; Empowerment; Cultural, Historical, Gender Issues).
The evidence clearly shows Canadian libraries already meet many of these safety expectations—users describe libraries as places where they can *"step back from the busyness of the outside world"* or simply *"be"* without cost or judgement. [resilientn...rolina.org], [kh-cdc.ca] [rccp.cornell.edu]

Thus, Canadian libraries naturally align with TICS by functioning as low-barrier, stabilising environments that support emotional regulation and community connection.

2. Programs as high-impact trauma-informed interventions

Programs scored the highest overall impact (3.6) of all service pillars, especially for social impact (Community, Empathy, Relations). Users report strong relational benefits—including bonding with family, meeting peers, and developing new skills. [rccp.cornell.edu]

This directly parallels trauma-informed practice, which emphasises:

- Co-regulation through relationships
- Skill-building as a pathway to healing and empowerment
- Community as a protective factor against re-traumatization

TICS teaches staff to provide choice, consistency, and empowerment—and these elements appear naturally in Canadian library programs, which patrons describe as fun, supportive, and confidence-building for children and adults alike. [rccp.cornell.edu]

3. Staff interactions as trauma-informed gateways

While Staff have lower overall impact (avg. 3.1), they rate highly for providing Knowledge (3.5) and well-being (3.3) two core trauma-responsive outcomes. Patrons consistently highlight the kindness, attentiveness, and problem-solving offered by staff, including helping with lost items, technology, and navigating systems. [rccp.cornell.edu]

These skills align closely with trauma-informed communication, which emphasises:

- Clear, predictable explanations
- Compassion and non-judgement
- Empowering the patron with options
- Recognising stress behaviours as adaptations

The Public Library Association's trauma-informed de-escalation guide reinforces this approach, emphasising micro-skills such as patient listening, regulated tone, and transparent boundaries. [ikblc.ubc.ca]

Canadian libraries are already practicing TICS principles though often informally by providing consistent, calm, respectful service to patrons navigating stress, confusion, or crisis.

4. Community partnerships as trauma-responsive infrastructure

The study's findings reveal that newcomers, Indigenous communities, and parents rely heavily on Spaces, Staff, and Programs services that become even more impactful when paired with community partnerships. For newcomers specifically, libraries help with documents, navigation, and adapting to Canadian society, generating the highest impact of all user groups (avg. 3.6). [rccp.cornell.edu]

Trauma-informed customer service frameworks (like those used in libraries and schools) emphasise:

- Warm referrals rather than enforcement
- Partnerships that extend care beyond the library's scope
- Trust-building through collaborative service delivery

Canadian libraries applying TICS principles mirror the approach recommended in trauma-informed models such as TCIS (Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Schools), which focus on system-wide safety, prevention, and post-crisis support, and are used across Canada. [urbanlibra...sunite.org]

By strengthening partnerships with housing, legal aid, Indigenous organisations, and newcomer agencies, libraries reduce staff burden and increase service safety—core tenets of trauma-informed practice.

5. High-impact user segments show why TICS matters

The study identifies five segments experiencing above-average benefit:

- Newcomers (highest overall impact: 3.6)
- First Nations, Inuit & Métis (3.5)
- Youth (3.4)
- Parents (3.4)
- Seniors (3.1)

All groups exhibit life-stage or systemic risk factors that increase vulnerability to trauma. TICS provides strategies to support these populations through:

- Cultural responsiveness
- Predictable processes
- Respectful communication
- Empowerment and choice
- Environmental safety [rccp.cornell.edu]

Thus, the Canadian case study demonstrates that trauma-informed approaches are not an add-on—they directly reinforce what libraries already do best.

The Canadian Social Impact Study provides strong evidence that libraries significantly support well-being, intellectual growth, community building, and emotional resilience. When interpreted through a trauma-informed lens, these findings show that:

- Libraries are already practising TICS principles, even without naming them as such.
- TICS provides the framework to formalise, strengthen, and scale this impact.
- Adopting TICS would enhance staff confidence, patron safety, and community wellbeing—precisely the

Key takeaways for all Queensland Libraries

1. **Strengthen trauma-informed care and service (TICS) across the whole organisation**

   Trauma-informed practice must be embedded at leadership, policy, and systems levels to ensure consistent decision-making and sustainable cultural change.

2. **Protect and invest in collections that foster empathy, representation, and wellbeing**

   Inclusive and wellbeing-focused collections play a critical role in reducing stigma, supporting identity, and enabling libraries to act as low-barrier supports for diverse communities.

3. **Elevate programs as the highest-impact service, designed through co-creation**

   Programs developed with, rather than for, communities are more responsive, equitable, and effective in addressing social connection and unmet needs.

4. **Design psychologically safe, predictable, and welcoming spaces**

   Thoughtful spatial design can reduce behavioural escalation, improve accessibility, and support both customer comfort and staff safety.

5. **Support staff with trauma-aware communication, boundaries, and de-escalation training**

Ongoing, practical training equips staff to respond confidently and consistently while maintaining their own wellbeing and professional boundaries.

6. **Build robust community partnerships to avoid role creep and improve access to services**

Strong referral pathways enable libraries to remain connectors rather than crisis responders, ensuring customers receive appropriate specialist support.

7. **Tailor services for high-impact groups: First Nations peoples, youth, newcomers, families, and seniors**

Place-based, culturally informed approaches are essential to addressing inequity and ensuring services reflect local community priorities.

8. **Use evidence for advocacy to secure resourcing and recognition**

Data, lived experience, and practice-based research strengthen the case for sustained investment in staff wellbeing, safety, and trauma-informed service models.

National case studies

This section presents national case studies from Australian public library services, examining how trauma-informed approaches and organisational responses are being implemented within the specific legislative and community context of Queensland.

Case Study: Creating space for equipping staff at Logan Central Library

Logan, Queensland, Australia. 2025

Equipping staff: building emotional resilience

Logan Central Library, one of the busiest and most complex branches in the Logan Libraries network, has long faced frequent and challenging incidents that significantly impact staff safety and wellbeing. Prior to 2024, team meetings were largely operational in nature focused on procedures and WHS reminders. While incident debriefs occurred, when necessary, staff often felt pressure to return to duties quickly, without the opportunity to process the emotional toll of their experiences. This contributed to rising burnout, increased sick leave, and a culture of emotional fatigue. Over time, Logan Central developed a reputation as a branch staff were reluctant or even afraid to work at, with the stories of incidents amplifying its challenges.

In mid-2024, a transformative initiative was introduced: a weekly, half-hour pulse check meeting dedicated solely to emotional debriefing. Unlike incident-specific WHS debriefs, these agenda-free sessions are open to all staff and designed to foster open conversation, emotional support, and collaborative reflection. Over time, these meetings evolved into a trusted space where staff explore emotional intelligence literacy, share insights, and support one another through the complexities of front-line service work.

A pivotal moment in this cultural shift was the team's engagement with *Atlas of the Heart* by Brené Brown. This exploration of language given to emotion and the value of human connection deepened staff understanding of interpersonal dynamics and enriched their approach to customer service and team collaboration. The result has been a marked reduction in sick leave, improved morale, and a stronger sense of team cohesion. Staff report feeling more equipped, supported, and resilient highlighting the transformative power of creating intentional emotional space in high-impact environments.

This shift has been supported by clearer procedures outlining conditions of entry, prohibited behaviours, and the responsibilities of authorised persons. For those unfamiliar with the term, Logan Libraries staff (and other Logan City Council staff) who have completed the required training may exercise authorised person powers. These powers enable certain Council officers to direct individuals to leave or to exclude them from Council property when a local law has been breached. Importantly, these powers are governed by a rigorous process designed to ensure natural justice is upheld. As a result, staff must be fully familiar with all relevant policies, procedures, and guidelines before exercising their authority

A new confidence grew within the team giving them confidence to make decisions in the moment knowing they would be supported, even if outcomes were later reviewed. This has fostered a culture of trust and psychological safety, that is not only lead by those in leadership positions, but the team as a collective.

The strength of the team has also been reinforced through visible support from leadership at multiple levels. During a period of increased incidents, concerns were escalated, resulting in senior leadership taking decisive action in consultation with relevant teams to address behaviours that posed ongoing risks. Clear and appropriate measures were implemented to help manage these situations safely and consistently. This response sent a strong message to staff that their safety and wellbeing are a priority, and that they are supported in managing challenging interactions.

Exploring code lavender for the library profession

Originally developed in healthcare as a rapid-response protocol for acute emotional distress, Code Lavender provides immediate psychological first aid and holistic support to staff, patients, and families following traumatic or high-stress events. In its simplest form allows staff who feel overwhelmed by a traumatic situation, to call "Code Lavender" which essentially alerts to the team, that that particular person needs a mental health break. Its purpose is to offer timely emotional stabilization through supportive presence, debriefing, and wellness interventions such as guided reflection, spiritual care, and calming sensory strategies.

As libraries increasingly find themselves on the frontline of social challenges responding to crises involving mental health episodes, aggressive behaviour, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue there is growing interest in whether Code Lavender could be adapted for public library settings. Translating this model into libraries would involve creating

a structured, rapid-response process that allows individual staff, multiple staff or a whole team to pause, regroup, and receive emotional support immediately after confronting distressing incidents.

A library-specific Code Lavender could be facilitated by trained staff, social workers, wellbeing teams, or external partners, providing brief debriefing, grounding techniques, and access to follow-up support. This approach aligns with trauma-informed practice and acknowledges that library workers, like healthcare providers, face cumulative emotional load and benefit from systems that proactively support psychological safety and recovery.

The team at Logan Central library have been exploring this option, due to a particularly difficult series of events, which lead to the library being locked down three times in one week, and many staff not mentally coping with the series of incidents and level of distress each one caused. Although an extreme case, this highlighted the need for preparedness for when or if, this level of distress is caused again.

While this option is at the extreme end of the continuum of trauma informed service, it provides a safety measure for staff and provides meaningful psychosocial safety hazard reduction.

Today, Logan Central Library is no longer defined by its challenges, but by the strength, compassion, and resilience of its team. The team exemplifies how emotional resilience, supported by clear policy and strong leadership, can foster a positive workplace culture and enable staff to feel confident and capable in even the most challenging environments.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. Emotional debriefing builds resilience and reduces burnout

The introduction of weekly, agenda-free pulse check meetings created a safe space for staff to process the emotional impact of frontline service. This intentional focus on emotional wellbeing, distinct from operational debriefs has led to reduced sick leave, improved morale, and stronger team cohesion, demonstrating the value of embedding emotional literacy into workplace culture.

2. Leadership support at all levels is critical to staff confidence

A visible and decisive response from leadership to support staff safety reinforced that staff are not alone in managing difficult situations. This top-down support of and connection with staff, combined with empowered site leadership, has helped rebuild trust and confidence, showing that psychosocial safety is a shared responsibility.

3. Culture change requires both policy and practice

The transformation at Logan Central Library was not just cultural, it was also procedural. Clear conditions of entry defined prohibited behaviours, and the role of authorised persons provided the policy backbone. When paired with emotional support and leadership advocacy, these measures helped shift the teams identity from one defined by challenges to one defined by compassion, strength, and resilience.

Case Study: Redlands Libraries

Thank you, Kim and Megan, for your generosity of time and information and well-balanced perspective. You have given wonderful insight into the mindset of your leadership and how you prepare your teams and lead during challenging situations. 2025

Council-wide approach to behavioural expectations in libraries

"If patrons do not behave like customers, I am not going to treat them like a customer".

With over two decades of experience in public libraries, Kim English has also held operational roles across various Council departments. Upon returning to libraries, she posed a critical question: *If inappropriate behaviour is not tolerated in other Council areas, why are libraries expected manage or accept inappropriate behaviour?*

Kim highlighted the importance of clearly defined duty of care boundaries. Library staff including librarians and team leaders are not social workers or counsellors. Their core responsibility is to deliver a safe, accessible, and professional service to the community. While some staff come from social work backgrounds and view community needs through that lens, this perspective, though understandable, does not align with the operational expectations of the library service.

Libraries are known for their inclusive and empathetic culture, but this must not come at the expense of staff wellbeing or safety. Kim was particularly surprised to learn that in other Council contexts such as parks any form of inappropriate behaviour toward staff or property results in immediate action, including bans. In contrast, similar behaviour in libraries has historically been met with tolerance or managed more leniently. This inconsistency prompted a recommendation for a unified, Council-wide approach: inappropriate behaviour should not be acceptable in any setting.

The library team has since embraced this mindset and worked diligently to establish firm boundaries. This cultural shift has been challenging, particularly for staff who are deeply empathetic and community focused. However, substantial effort has gone into:

- Scenario-based training
- Staff scripting and communication tools
- Personal boundary-setting strategies
- Understanding legal rights and obligations

A cornerstone of this shift has been the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy. Staff are now empowered to respond consistently to incidents: engage appropriately, activate the duress alarm, and contact Police. This approach removes the burden of managing high-risk situations from library staff and places it in the hands of trained authorities, ensuring a safer environment for both staff and patrons.

The concept of de-escalation has also been reconsidered. Staff are encouraged to respond in ways that protect their safety without stepping into roles that resemble de-escalation professionals. This protective mechanism integrates training, scripting, and legal awareness to support both individual and team safety.

Outcomes of this mindset shift include:

- A more equipped and confident team
- Incident reporting that is factual rather than emotive
- Staff applying the "reasonable person" test to guide their actions
- More meaningful and objective debriefs
- A clearer understanding of the cost-benefit of engagement

While these approaches are still in development, progress is underway. Library policies and procedures are being updated, and the question *"Do our customers understand our expectations?"* is being actively addressed.

Shift in understanding of what Libraries experience.

An interesting situation arose following the relocation of one library from a stand-alone site into a shopping centre. The shopping centre operates under a layered security framework, which includes a list of individuals banned from the premises due to prior behavioural issues. Once the library became part of the shopping centre, these bans automatically extended to the library space as well.

Previously, when the library was located independently, individuals banned from the shopping centre were not automatically banned from the library. Behaviour often varied between the two environments, and library staff had discretion in managing access. However, after the move, the community engagement team requested that exceptions be made for certain individuals who were banned from the shopping centre but wished to access the library.

While the request was well-intentioned and aimed at promoting inclusivity, library staff raised concerns. From their perspective, if an individual's behaviour is deemed inappropriate for the shopping centre, it stands to reason that such behaviour would also be unsuitable for the library, especially now that it shares the same physical and operational space.

This shift in location had important implications for staff safety and operational consistency. The library now benefits from the shopping centre's security protocols and behavioural charter. All incidents within the library fall under the jurisdiction of shopping centre security, relieving library staff of sole responsibility for managing disruptive behaviour. This arrangement ensures a consistent standard of conduct across the entire site and provides all visitors with a safer and more secure environment.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. **Leadership mindset shapes cultural boundaries**

The importance of clearly defining the role of library staff and setting boundaries around acceptable behaviour. By reinforcing that library staff are not social workers, but professionals delivering a public service, the team was empowered to shift from tolerance of inappropriate behaviour to a zero-tolerance mindset—aligning libraries with broader Council expectations.

2. A unified council-wide approach enhances safety and consistency

The push for a Council-wide behavioural standard ensures that inappropriate behaviour is addressed consistently across all public-facing services. This alignment has strengthened staff confidence, clarified legal rights, and reduced ambiguity in incident response particularly in shared spaces like shopping centres where external security protocols now support library operations.

3. Equipping staff with tools and training builds confidence and reduces risk

Through scenario-based training, scripting, and legal awareness, staff are now better equipped to manage challenging interactions without compromising their safety. The shift from emotive to factual incident reporting, and the use of the "reasonable person" test, has led to more objective debriefs and a clearer understanding of when engagement is appropriate reducing emotional burden and potential risk.

Implementation impacts:

Firm boundaries within individuals and teams are often missing. Agreed terms of engagement with patrons is something for library leadership to consider. When all staff are working within the same boundaries there is less room for discrepancies and members of the community seeking ways to take advantage of team weakness.

Case Study: A Queensland metropolitan library service: Strengthening safety, service, and community connection through operational adaptation

Thank you to the Operations Manager of a Queensland metropolitan library service for generously sharing your insights and experiences that informed this case study. Your leadership and strategic approach to safety, staff wellbeing, and community engagement offer a valuable model for libraries navigating complex service environments (2025).

A Queensland metropolitan library service has experienced a notable shift in the nature of incidents across its network both in depth and complexity. This trend has prompted a strategic operational response led by the Operations Manager, who identified key gaps in staff training and consistency in incident management. In response, the library service has taken a multi-layered approach to improving safety, staff support, and community engagement.

One of the most significant changes includes increase in security presence pending the need through an external agency at high-risk libraries during times of increased incidents. While this has increased on-site presence, challenges remain around consistency and continuity, as agency staff often rotate. To support a more structured and consistent approach, the Council who operates the library service introduced a council-wide policy for managing unreasonable behaviour, which now underpins a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for libraries in that service. This SOP has proven invaluable, providing clear guidance for staff on how to respond to incidents across all service channels in person, by phone, and online and reinforcing the library's Conditions of Entry and Engagement.

Further enhancing safety and incident response, team leaders have direct access to CCTV footage to be able to assess situations, take appropriate action and learn from incidents. This has streamlined post-incident reviews and supports a culture of learning and continuous improvement. The visibility of these practices has also extended to ward staff, who work in the community and benefit from a clearer understanding of the library's safety protocols.

Recognising that many patrons present with loneliness, disconnection, or unmet social needs, this library service has shifted focus toward programming that builds connection and community belonging. This includes outreach in public spaces and a review of how staff are deployed, with current efforts exploring more flexible staffing models beyond single-site assignments. Some examples include situational awareness training for staff, partnerships with organisations such as Autism Queensland, installation of bathroom vaping sensors, and small but effective proven design changes, such as placing chess tables in high-congregation areas to positively influence behaviour. Together, these initiatives demonstrate a holistic, proactive approach to creating safer, more inclusive library environments that support both community wellbeing and staff safety.

This evolving model reflects a broader commitment to psychosocial safety, operational consistency, and community responsiveness. By embedding clear policies, investing in staff capability, and fostering partnerships, this library service is building a safer, more connected environment for both staff and the communities they serve.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. Clear policies and consistent procedures enhance safety and confidence

The implementation of a council-wide policy on managing unreasonable behaviour, supported by a tailored Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for libraries, has provided staff with a clear and consistent framework for responding to incidents. This umbrella approach covering in-person, phone, and online interactions has proven invaluable in reducing ambiguity, improving staff confidence, and ensuring equitable service delivery.

2. Proactive training and partnerships build staff capability

Identifying training gaps led to the development of an ongoing staff training program. These initiatives are equipping staff with the skills to provide informed, inclusive customer service. Exploring new areas like how to better support carers and visitation groups, demonstrates a commitment to continuous learning and responsive service design.

3. Community connection is central to reducing risk and enhancing engagement

Recognising that many patrons present with loneliness or disconnection, this library service is focusing on programming that builds social connection. Outreach efforts, such as using public parks and increasing staff visibility in the community, are helping to reduce aggression and foster trust. This shift reflects a broader understanding that psychosocial safety hazard reduction is linked to engagement and inclusion of all within libraries.

Case Study: Strengthening frontlines with Moreton Bay Libraries

Thank you to Laney Robinson and Mylee Joseph for your time, insights and big picture thinking. I appreciate your many, many years of experience and honour the work you have already done in this space and continue to do. (2026)

City of Moreton Bay Libraries (CMB) is proactively strengthening its organisational approach to psychosocial safety in response to increasing behavioural complexity, greater customer diversity, and the development of a council-wide Venue Banning Procedure and exclusion framework. As frontline interactions evolve, CMB Libraries has prioritised initiatives that clarify behavioural thresholds, promote procedural consistency, and equip staff to manage both acute and cumulative forms of psychosocial risk with confidence. The library service is stood up during extreme weather events as official Places of Refuge across the city, playing a key role in Council's disaster management response. This further underscore the value of a capable, well-supported workforce. Collectively, these developments highlight the importance of building readiness, maintaining reliable escalation pathways, and sustaining a comprehensive and adaptable staff capability model.

A key area of focus has been supporting staff to develop a shared understanding of psychosocial risk, including the cumulative impacts of repeated exposure to verbally aggressive, intimidating, or distressed behaviours. While staff bring varied experiences and professional backgrounds to their roles, CMB Libraries has approached this diversity as an asset providing opportunities to build collective competence through shared learning, reflective practice, and targeted training. Clarifying expectations around documentation, escalation, and evidence collection within the emerging banning and exclusion process has further strengthened staff confidence. Efforts to increase clarity regarding behavioural thresholds, communication responsibilities, and the maintenance of restrictions have contributed to a more predictable and coordinated operational environment. These improvements have been complemented by enhanced leader coaching and mentoring, reinforcing the organisation's commitment to consistent, supportive, and high-quality incident management across the network. Working in close collaboration with Council's Occupational Health and Safety team is critical.

CMB Libraries has also implemented several interventions designed to embed safe, consistent, and customer-centred practice. The behavioural offence matrix provides a transparent framework for classifying behaviours and determining appropriate responses, supporting equitable decision-making and forming a foundation for scenario-based learning. Parallel work to refine the banning and exclusion workflow has improved procedural visibility and ensured that staff understand their roles within the process. Leadership capability and continuous improvement of safe frontline

management practices is ongoing, including through updated library rostering practices, engaging expert internal and external staff training on managing challenging customer behaviours and effective deescalation techniques. Informal peer-support structures among team leaders have further strengthened confidence and consistency, enabling leaders to learn from one another and share emerging best practice.

Additional supports have been introduced to assist staff during challenging customer interactions. Standardised scripts help reduce cognitive load, build communication confidence, and ensure alignment with organisational processes. Practical wellbeing mechanisms—including the staff wellbeing basket and the “Tag for 10” supported break—provide structured opportunities for immediate regulation and recovery, reinforcing CMB Libraries commitment to staff safety and resilience. Incident reporting has been reframed as a vital component of organisational learning and safety advocacy, supporting evidence-based improvements in training, environmental design, and program and service design

These developments have also highlighted the value of cultivating a continuous learning culture. CMB Libraries uses industry research, incident reporting data, staff feedback, and branch-level observations to inform policy refinement and training and professional development needs. This iterative, practice-informed approach ensures that interventions remain responsive to emerging community needs and frontline realities.

The evolving nature of library service delivery has further encouraged reflection on workforce design and recruitment. As customer needs become more varied and complex, MBL recognises the opportunity to enhance recruitment, induction, and capability-building processes to ensure teams are well prepared for contemporary public library work. Rather than limiting opportunities, this approach aims to ensure that future workforce planning aligns with the library’s values, service model, and commitment to providing safe and welcoming environments for all.

Finally, MBL’s work illustrates the importance of situating library safety practices within broader organisational and community frameworks. As libraries increasingly function as accessible community refuges, there is growing recognition of the need for coherent disaster-readiness training, clear interagency coordination, and well-defined operational boundaries. MBL’s proactive approach demonstrates how public libraries can simultaneously strengthen staff capability, support community resilience, and uphold the core values of equitable access and public service.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. **Process maturity requires operational clarity.**

   Effective behavioural management frameworks depend on clear workflows, practical decision-support tools, and consistent leader reinforcement, rather than policy documentation alone.

2. **Cumulative psychosocial harm must be explicitly recognised.**

   Understanding the compounding impact of repeated low-level or distressing behaviours is essential to designing and implementing comprehensive staff safety strategies.

3. **Leader capability is the central determinant of consistency and safety.**

   Skilled, confident leaders are critical to ensuring reliable escalation, safe boundary-setting, and a psychologically safe environment for frontline staff.

4. **Structured recovery mechanisms reduce risk and support resilience.**

   Practical tools that facilitate immediate post-incident regulation improve staff wellbeing and enable safer, more sustainable return to frontline duties.

5. **Refuge-related functions require integrated disaster-readiness training.**

   As libraries increasingly operate as informal community refuges, behavioural safety training must incorporate disaster-readiness and crisis-response competencies.

Case Study: Responding to safety challenges at Newcastle Libraries

Thank you, Annette, for your generosity of time, knowledge and well-balanced perspective, have given great insight into the social issues Wallsend Library finds itself positioned in. What an opportunity to make a difference in community with well supported and educated staff. (2026)

Supporting staff safety: Wallsend Library conditions of entry

In recent years, Newcastle Libraries has faced increasing challenges related to youth violence and antisocial behaviour within its network, with Wallsend Library emerging as a focal point for these concerns. In response to a sustained rise in disruptive incidents, the service implemented enhanced safety protocols beginning in early 2025. One of the key measures introduced was restricting access to Wallsend Library after 3pm to members only. This decision was made to safeguard both staff and library users, and to preserve the library's role as a safe, inclusive, and welcoming public space.

The situation escalated further on 1 July 2025, when Wallsend Library was temporarily closed following a series of violent and disruptive events in and around the premises. These incidents rendered the site unsafe for operation, prompting the deployment of police and contracted security personnel to mitigate risk and restore order. The decision to close the library for one week was not taken lightly. It reflected a careful balancing of operational necessity with the recognition of the library's vital role in fostering community connection, learning, and social inclusion.

Despite these disruptions, Newcastle Libraries has maintained a commitment to a proactive and solutions-focused approach. Recognising the library's significance as a cornerstone of community life, the service has intensified efforts to build stronger partnerships with youth services, local organisations, and community leaders. These collaborations aim to address the underlying causes of antisocial behaviour and to re-establish Wallsend Library as a safe and vibrant space for all members of the community.

Conversations with staff have revealed a complex landscape of psychosocial safety concerns. While a range of initiatives are currently in place to support staff wellbeing, questions remain regarding their long-term sustainability and effectiveness. Among the most prominent supports are the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which is widely promoted and accessible to all staff; the Mental Health Ambassadors program, which equips selected staff with peer support and coping strategies; and monthly customer service meetings that incorporate training and physical safety awareness. These initiatives contribute to a broader culture of care, though their impact is still being evaluated.

Newcastle Libraries also maintains ongoing engagement with local police and elected officials, fostering a collaborative approach to community safety. While measurable outcomes from these partnerships are still emerging, the library service remains committed to deepening these relationships to ensure the safety of both staff and users across the network.

The temporary closure of Wallsend Library has also brought to light several operational gaps in staff safety protocols. One such issue is the frequent movement of staff across the 10 library sites, a practice designed to reduce prolonged exposure to high-risk environments. While this rotating roster has proven effective in mitigating risk, it has also created challenges in communication. Staff arriving at a site following an incident often lack timely access to relevant information, raising concerns about preparedness and situational awareness. The tension between sharing sufficient information and protecting privacy remains a persistent challenge.

Another concern relates to the incident reporting process. Staff have expressed frustration with the administrative burden associated with documenting incidents, noting that it consumes significant time and emotional energy. Many feel that their core responsibilities such as community engagement, programming, and literacy support—are being overshadowed by the demands of incident management. This has contributed to a sense of fatigue and disengagement among some staff members.

Resilience has also been identified by staff as an area requiring further development. While many demonstrate remarkable commitment and adaptability, there is a growing recognition that resilience must be actively cultivated and supported through training, peer support, and organisational culture. Additionally, staff have voiced concerns that the realities of library work particularly the emotional labour and complexity involved are not fully understood by the public or, at times, by management. This disconnect underscores the need for greater visibility and advocacy around the evolving role of public libraries.

Wallsend Library continues to experience the highest frequency of incidents within the Newcastle Libraries network. The rotating roster system, although not new, remains a key strategy for risk mitigation. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon robust communication and support mechanisms, which are still under development. The lack of consistent post-incident communication has emerged as a critical issue, particularly for staff who are not present during an incident but are scheduled to work at the affected site shortly thereafter.

In conclusion, the temporary closure of Wallsend Library serves as a stark illustration of the challenges facing public libraries in the current social climate. It highlights the urgent need for comprehensive safety strategies, trauma-informed practices, and sustained investment in staff wellbeing. Newcastle Libraries' response reflects a commitment to continuous improvement, community collaboration, and the preservation of libraries as safe, inclusive, and essential public institutions.

Update April 2026:

Over the past six months, conditions at Wallsend Library have shown a modest but noticeable improvement. The introduction of Open+ access, alongside the presence of more consistent on-site security, has played a significant role in stabilising the environment. Several of the most problematic young people appear to have moved on, and while there has been some early “testing of boundaries” by the current cohort, this behaviour has not been as persistent or relentless as that experienced over the previous two years.

Consistent deployment of security guards has been especially beneficial. Regular guards are more likely to recognise individuals with a history of disruptive behaviour and to understand which behaviours can and cannot be tolerated within the library setting. This continuity supports firmer, more confident boundary enforcement and contributes to a greater sense of safety for both staff and patrons.

Key takeaways for all Queensland libraries

1. **Tell the full library story.**

   Libraries face increasingly complex challenges alongside significant community benefits. Clear, consistent communication with Councils, elected officials, police, and partners is essential to build understanding, enable informed decision-making, and secure appropriate support.

2. **Strengthen internal communication.**

   Staff working across multiple sites need timely, factual information about incidents to feel prepared and safe—without creating anxiety or alarm. Trauma-aware, consistent communication builds confidence and trust.

3. **Be prepared to adapt service models.**

   Safety measures such as restricted access, temporary closures, or alternative service delivery models demonstrate the need for flexibility. Traditional expectations of open access must sometimes evolve to protect staff and communities.

4. **Move beyond short-term wellbeing supports**.

   Programs like EAP and training are valuable, but staff wellbeing requires sustained, systemic approaches that recognise emotional labour, incident fatigue, and administrative burden.

5. **Consistency improves safety.**

   Regular security staff and clear, shared expectations around behaviour reduce escalation and improve outcomes. Inconsistency in enforcement undermines staff confidence and safety.

6. **Reimagine libraries for modern realities.**

   Queensland libraries increasingly operate within complex social environments. Bold, values-based innovation is needed to ensure staff safety while maintaining inclusive, community-focused services.

Case Study: Trauma informed safety at Merri-Bek Public Libraries, Victoria

Thank you, Georgina Earl, for so generously sharing your time, insights, and experience on this topic. The care with which you lead your team, and the respect and compassion you extend to library users, is truly inspiring. Your work demonstrates the power of values-led leadership in creating libraries that are safe, welcoming, and responsive. Ie grateful for your generosity in sharing learnings that will continue to inform and strengthen library practice more broadly. 2026.

Georgina Earl, Unit Manager Library Services - Merri-Bek Public Libraries, views libraries as inherently *beautiful places:* welcoming, inclusive civic environments that are uniquely positioned to support community wellbeing. This approach underpins the service’s strong alignment with social work practice and trauma-informed service delivery. The service recognises that many library users face increased risk due to systemic barriers, particularly low levels of digital literacy. This is most visible in interactions with essential services such as Centrelink, housing systems, and health and legal support, which increasingly require online access and digital confidence. Digital exclusion is understood not merely as a lack of skills, but as a risk factor that can heighten vulnerability, frustration, and distress.

The guiding question embedded in Merri-Bek’s service design is consistent and deliberate: “What is the barrier, why does it exist, and what do we need to do to remove it?” This question is considered through a trauma-informed lens,

recognising that behaviours often reflect unmet needs, previous harm, or systemic exclusion. Rather than expecting users to adapt to rigid systems, the library adapts its spaces, staffing models, and partnerships to reduce friction and create environments that feel safe, predictable, and respectful.

Trauma-Informed Workforce: staff, security, and social workers

Merri-Bek has taken a whole-of-workforce approach to trauma-informed practice. All staff including the security team respond in a trauma informed manner (although no formal training has been provided), ensuring shared language, consistent responses, and aligned values across roles.

Key features include:

- Ongoing and regular training, rather than one-off sessions
- A focus on understanding trauma responses, regulation, and respectful engagement
- Reinforcement of skills that support calm, confident interactions

This shared foundation enables natural de-escalation, particularly when library staff, security providers, and social workers are working together. Situations are less likely to escalate when all parties understand trauma impacts, communicate consistently, and respond early and proportionately.

Security had been identified as important for some time but was not formally embedded into library services until more recently. When implemented, Merri-Bek intentionally rejected traditional, authoritative security models. Security staff do not wear uniforms, consciously signalling safety and support rather than control or enforcement.

The libraries employ a contractor-based security model that is integrated into library operations:

- Security staff can be directed by library staff to undertake a variety of tasks, rather than operating independently.
- The contractor workforce is highly diverse, reflecting the local community; many guards speak multiple languages and support communication through informal translation support.
- Security is positioned as a value-adding, community-focused role, not just a response mechanism.

Security staff regularly:

- Provide calm presence during periods of distress
- Observe behaviour and intervene early where aggression may emerge

Community comfort and dignity remain central to this approach.

This security model intentionally dovetails with the library's social work service. Security staff are supported to make referrals to social workers when unmet needs are identified, and to observe and respond appropriately if risks escalate. The combined presence of trauma-informed staff, social workers, and security enables a layered response that emphasises early intervention, de-escalation, and support, rather than enforcement. The social work model at Merri-Bek has been refined over time. The service openly recognises that there are many possible models, and that success depends on selecting what works within:

- The political and local government context
- Library service priorities and capacity
- Available resources

An early lesson was that the initial role description was overly aspirational. Expectations encompassed public-facing service delivery, staff training, and advisory responsibilities to management on trauma-informed practice. This scope proved too broad and, without adequate resourcing, unrealistic in its breadth, increasing the risk of unsuccessful implementation. This experience highlighted the importance of clarity of scope and the risk of over-reliance on a single position to address complex, system-wide issues. It also reinforced the need for shared responsibility across teams rather than positioning the social worker as the sole solution.

The model has since shifted to a staff referral–based approach, where:

- Library staff refer complex matters to the social worker
- Social workers primarily support staff capacity, decision-making, and response pathways

Merri-Bek Public Libraries demonstrate how trauma-informed practice, when embedded across staff, security, and social work roles, can create safe, inclusive civic spaces that prioritise dignity and welcome. By focusing on barrier removal, clear boundaries, and realistic resourcing, the service has strengthened staff confidence and improved responses to complex situations. Through continued investment in workforce capability, partnerships, and collaborative approaches to safety, Merri-Bek offers a sustainable and transferable model for libraries responding to the evolving needs of their communities.

Boundaries, training, and expectations

While staff training remains essential, it is now largely coordinated through external providers, ensuring realistic expectations and sustainability. A strong emphasis is placed on:

- Teaching personal and professional boundaries
- Helping staff understand what sits within the library's role and what does not
- Preventing role creep and staff burnout

Clear boundaries are established between staff, social workers, and security to protect all roles and maintain effectiveness.

Partnerships that reduce barriers

Rather than absorbing additional responsibilities, Merri-Bek focuses on strong partnerships to remove barriers for users. External organisations are invited to provide services onsite, including:

- Form filling and application support
- Specialist or culturally appropriate services

This approach reinforces the library's role as a connector, supporting staff while improving access for community members.

Looking Ahead: building capability for the future

Looking forward, Merri-Bek's focus is on equipping staff rather than expanding roles beyond capacity. Future priorities include:

- Recruiting staff with additional skills, such as security training or aligned experience
- Continuing to build trauma-informed capability across all roles
- Strengthening integrated, team-based approaches to safety and care

By investing in staff capability and maintaining strong partnerships, the library service aims to sustain a model where safety, welcome, and dignity coexist.

Key Takeaways for Queensland Public Libraries

Queensland public libraries can draw the following key learnings from the Merri-Bek approach:

- Trauma-informed practice is most effective when embedded across the entire workforce, including frontline staff, leadership, security providers, and partner roles, rather than sitting with one specialist position alone.
- Security models work best when aligned with library values, focusing on safety, dignity, and community connection rather than authority and enforcement.
- Social work roles in libraries must be clearly defined, realistically scoped, and adequately resourced to be sustainable and effective within local government environments.
- Natural de-escalation is strengthened through collaboration, when staff, security, and social workers share a common trauma-informed framework and communicate consistently.
- Asking "what is the barrier, and how can we remove it?" provides a practical, values-based lens for responding to complex situations, improving access to services, and supporting staff wellbeing.

By adopting whole-of-service, trauma-informed approaches that prioritise collaboration, clear boundaries, and community-centred practice, Queensland public libraries can continue to position themselves as safe, welcoming civic spaces that support both community members and staff.

From insight to action: tools for your team

Building on the findings and analysis presented in the previous section, this section introduces a practical toolkit to support trauma-informed practice in public library contexts.

This toolkit applies trauma-informed principles by translating them into clear, actionable practices that can be integrated into daily frontline work. It is designed for rapid uptake within library environments, providing structured pathways for responding to situations of escalating risk. The framework is intentionally adaptable and suitable for application across diverse service contexts, including small regional libraries, large multi-branch systems, and outreach programs.

Recognising variation in organisational cultures ranging from risk-averse to more risk-tolerant settings this toolkit employs a modular design that enables selective adoption of strategies according to local needs and capacity. This structure supports a consistent conceptual foundation while allowing procedural flexibility, ensuring that teams of any size or configuration can implement trauma-informed approaches confidently and effectively.

The overarching aim is to provide a resource that is both relevant and scalable across the Queensland public library network. By emphasising consistent principles alongside adaptable practice, the toolkit seeks to enhance organisational preparedness and promote safe, timely, and contextually appropriate responses to complex patron interactions.

Organisation of toolkit

This section is structured to first outline the role of formal education in building foundational capability, followed by the introduction of a practical matrix of action that translates these principles into applied practice. It then details the key elements of the matrix, providing guidance on how each component supports the implementation of trauma-informed approaches within frontline library contexts.

Formal education and the foundation of trauma-informed library practice

Before sector-wide workplace reforms can be effectively implemented, library and information science (LIS) education programs must embed comprehensive learning on trauma-informed practice, contemporary public library conditions, and the realities of frontline service delivery. Although not all LIS graduates will work in public libraries, the increasing complexity of community behaviours and expectations affects library workers across all contexts with customer-facing roles. As such, trauma-informed competence can no longer be considered optional or context-specific; it is a foundational requirement for the profession.

Formal academic learning should provide a robust theoretical grounding in trauma, community complexity, psychosocial safety, and behavioural drivers. This foundation must be complemented by structured opportunities for applied skill development, including supervised placements, scenario-based simulations, reflective practice, and facilitated debriefing. Together, these approaches support the integration of conceptual knowledge with professional realities, strengthening practitioner readiness for high-pressure and unpredictable service environments.

One such learning framework suited to the library context is the 70–20–10 model, which integrates experiential, social, and formal learning, recognising that capability is developed primarily through applied practice. Derived from observational studies of managerial development, it is best understood as a guiding framework rather than a fixed ratio (McCall et al., 1988; Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996). While experiential learning is dominant, social and formal elements play critical roles in reinforcing knowledge and shaping professional judgement.

In this context, formal education represents the foundational “10%”: the structured, curriculum-driven component that prepares practitioners for the emotional, behavioural, and social demands of library work. Embedding trauma-informed principles early in the educational pipeline helps ensure graduates enter the workforce prepared, confident, and capable of navigating complex customer interactions.

Trauma-informed education must also be accessible across the full professional lifecycle, with development opportunities that evolve alongside role expectations. Entry-level staff require foundational skills in trauma-aware communication and customer complexity. Practitioners moving into supervisory roles benefit from training in trauma-informed leadership, decision-making under pressure, and staff wellbeing. Senior leaders require advanced capability in organisational culture, governance, and psychologically safe systems. Flexible delivery models, such as micro-credentials and online learning, support continuous development across these stages.

This approach enables a structured, career-spanning learning pathway:

- **Entry-level staff:** Trauma-informed service fundamentals; customer-centred practice
- **Intermediate staff:** Applied learning; scenario-based training; community partner awareness
- **Emerging leaders:** Supervision; incident leadership; staff wellbeing strategies
- **Senior leaders:** Strategic leadership; organisational resilience; community complexity

By aligning formal education with the 70–20–10 framework and embedding trauma-informed principles across the professional continuum, the sector can develop a workforce equipped with both the theoretical foundations and the practical capabilities required to respond to community needs.

Matrix of action

A Matrix of Action *(refer to table 2: Matrix of Action),* has been developed based on the learnings of the case studies, to offer a conceptual framework that articulates the spectrum of strategies available to support trauma-informed customer service within public library environments. It positions these strategies along a continuum, beginning with preventative measures designed to cultivate safe, predictable, and psychologically secure conditions. From there, the framework incorporates responsive interventions that assist staff in managing emerging challenges, followed by escalation-oriented actions appropriate for situations involving elevated risk or safety-critical concerns.

Trauma-informed practice, by its nature, encompasses complexity, variability, and situational nuances. As such, no single intervention can adequately address the diverse presentations of customer need or the range of pressures experienced by staff. Instead, effective implementation depends on the coordinated and complementary use of multiple tools across different stages of interaction. By visually presenting this continuum of practice, the matrix highlights the necessity of a layered and adaptable approach, one that can adjust dynamically as staff and customer needs evolve and as community expectations and wants shift within the service environment.

The purpose of this matrix is to strengthen organisational resilience by equipping staff with a structured method for proactive engagement, appropriate intervention, and consistent decision-making, even under conditions of uncertainty or heightened emotional demand. In doing so, it seeks to shift teams away from reactive or stress-driven responses and toward intentional, principled practice grounded in trauma-informed values. Ultimately, the matrix aims to promote both staff wellbeing and positive patron experiences through improved clarity, confidence, and alignment with evidence-informed approaches.

It is important to recognise that many additional approaches exist to support hazard identification, risk mitigation, and overall service safety. The matrix presented here draws on findings from research, insights learned through identified case studies and applied research activities. It does not attempt to account for the specific methodologies, protocols, or established practices currently in use within any individual library service. Instead, it offers a flexible conceptual tool that can be adapted and refined to suit the unique context, needs, and operational realities of each library service.

Table 2: Matrix of Action:

Level of Impact	Fostering connection	Equipping leaders & staff	Grow collaborative partnerships	Strengthening org support
1: Foundational	Developing a culture of care	Equipping staff	Strategic goals and desired outcomes	Support continuous development
2: Moderate	Code Lavender	Personal boundary setting	Sustainability	Establish Consistent Debriefing, Feedback, and Wellbeing Structures
3: Significant	Micro – Regulation Interventions	Staff: Personal Safety Plan Concept	Safety net: Workplace Health and Safety and Security	Embed Trauma-Informed Principles in All Policies and Procedures
4: Transformational	Structured reflective practice mechanisms	Developing core leadership capacity-trauma informed	Partnerships with purpose	Lead With Visibility and Connection

Fostering Connection:

Developing a culture of care:

In trauma-informed customer service, staff resilience is fundamentally grounded in a strong sense of connection to their leadership team. Fostering connection begins with creating a culture of care that honours the diverse lived experiences that both patrons and staff bring into the library space. When teams feel genuinely connected, they communicate more openly, anticipate one another's needs, and share the emotional load of challenging interactions. A culture of care combines proactive practices such as empathy, predictability, and clear communication with responsive tools that support staff during moments of distress or escalation. This sense of collective support reduces re-traumatisation, strengthens trust, and weaves resilience through the entire team. As staff become more resilient together, the library becomes a more stable, welcoming environment where every person feels seen, valued, and supported, reinforcing the library's role as a safe and responsive community space.

Responsive tools

Code lavender

This practical tool is currently under consideration within a metropolitan library as a potential approach to staff support; however, no observed examples of its application are available at this stage.

In healthcare settings, Code Lavender is a rapid-response protocol designed to provide immediate emotional support to staff experiencing acute stress or trauma. It signals that staff wellbeing is a priority and mobilises resources such as counselling, mindfulness interventions, and peer support to enable recovery and a safe return to work.

This concept translates effectively to library environments, where staff are increasingly exposed to high-stress situations, including mental health crises, aggressive behaviour, and complex community dynamics. As frontline community spaces, libraries place staff in roles where they often absorb significant emotional strain while continuing to deliver inclusive and responsive services. A library-based Code Lavender model could operate as an internal alert mechanism, activated following a critical incident such as a violent outburst, a traumatic patron interaction, or cumulative exposure to distressing situations. The response would prioritise psychological first aid rather than operational continuity, ensuring that staff wellbeing is addressed promptly and appropriately.

This approach is intentionally centred on individual support, recognising the importance of targeted, immediate care in strengthening overall staff resilience.

Key components might include:

- Immediate Peer Support: A designated colleague or social worker checks in within minutes of the incident.
- Micro-Debrief: A short, structured conversation to validate feelings and assess needs.
- Resource Activation: Access to wellness tools quiet space, hydration, snacks, or mindfulness exercises similar to medical Code Lavender kits.
- Follow-Up: Scheduling a formal debrief within 48 hours and remind staff member of EAP access and the like.

Importantly, Code Lavender in libraries reinforces a culture of care: acknowledging that emotional wellbeing is essential for sustainable service. It signals to staff that their experiences matter and that recovery is not optional, it's part of professional practice. By adapting this model, libraries can reduce burnout, strengthen resilience, and uphold their mission of equitable access without sacrificing staff safety or mental health.

Applying code lavender to library services

Refer to Code Lavender framework guide for leaders in Appendix B.

Code Lavender provides a trauma-informed, structured response tailored to the frontline environment of public libraries. While the core principles remain consistent, its application within library services focuses on ensuring immediate, individualised wellbeing support following critical incidents. Activated by any staff member and led by a supervisor response, it incorporates an emotional check-in, access to a quiet space, and a brief micro-debrief to assess impact and readiness to return to public-facing duties.

Beyond immediate response, the protocol strengthens longer-term resilience and organisational learning. A follow-up debrief within 48 hours enables reflective conversation and identification of ongoing support needs, including referral to EAP or other wellbeing services. Documenting incidents supports continuous improvement in service procedures, environmental design, and staff capability.

By embedding Code Lavender into everyday practice, library services reinforce a culture of care, ensuring staff wellbeing is actively protected while maintaining safe, responsive, and sustainable service delivery.

Micro – Regulation interventions

Frontline libraries work increasingly involves managing complex social interactions, which can lead to cognitive overload and emotional fatigue. Research in occupational health emphasizes the value of micro-breaks short, intentional pauses that allow employees to disengage from stressors and restore attentional resources (Bennett et al., 2020). Implementing a structured 10-minute break protocol within library services aligns with evidence-based strategies for reducing burnout and enhancing resilience. Such breaks provide opportunities for physiological recovery, emotional regulation, and reflective practice, ultimately supporting sustained service quality. By embedding this concept into organisational culture it signals a commitment to staff wellbeing as a prerequisite for frontline customer-focused library environments.

Micro – Regulation interventions applied to your library context:

An example of this concept is embedded in operations City of Moreton Bay Libraries. Titled *Take 10*, this approach embeds the benefits of micro breaks into practice, signalling that staff wellbeing is foundational to trauma-informed, customer-focused service delivery. In practice, *Take 10* can be activated by: communicating availability to staff; placing a visual cue (see Figure 1 below), at service points; enabling staff to pass the cue to a colleague when needed; allowing the recipient to take the necessary pause; and ensuring supervisors are alerted so appropriate support measures can be implemented.

Figure 1: Micro Regulation intervention visual cue

Preventative tool

Structured reflective practice mechanisms

Regular team check-ins provide an essential structure for collective reflection, emotional processing, and continuous improvement in high-contact service environments. These sessions create a psychologically safe space where staff can debrief incidents, share coping strategies, and normalise emotional responses. By doing so, they help reduce the risk of burnout and compassion fatigue, both of which are prevalent in frontline community-facing roles. Reflective practices demonstrate that regular opportunities for dialogue strengthen emotional regulation, clarify role expectations, and support adaptive problem-solving, which are key components of trauma-informed service delivery.

Beyond incident management, check-ins play a critical role in fostering team cohesion and shared responsibility. They promote transparency and mutual support, enabling staff to identify emerging patterns in challenging interactions, co-develop strategies, define team boundaries and reinforce shared organisational values around safety, inclusivity, and respect. This collaborative approach builds trust and collective resilience, ensuring staff feel supported rather than isolated in the emotional demands of their work. Importantly, these conversations reposition wellbeing from an individual burden to an organisational priority, signalling a leadership commitment to sustainable practice.

Far from being optional, regular check-ins function as a strategic investment in staff wellbeing, service quality, and organisational culture. They directly mitigate psychosocial safety hazards by facilitating peer support, strengthening communication, improving connection and creating a shared language for boundaries, safety, and escalation. Over time, these sessions also reduce "knowledge silos," ensuring that emotional labour, situational expertise, and de-escalation skills do not rest on only a few individuals but are distributed across the team. This leads to a workforce that is more confident, resilient, and better equipped to serve the community with empathy and professionalism.

Pulse check applied to your library context:

The *Team Pulse Check Guide for Leaders* (Appendix C) supports library leaders to consistently implement structured reflective check-ins within their teams as part of everyday service delivery. This guide provides practical direction on how to facilitate effective pulse check conversations, including when to hold them, how to create psychologically safe spaces, and ways to guide discussion to support reflection, wellbeing, and continuous improvement. It ensures leaders have clear, accessible processes to embed regular team reflection in a consistent, trauma-informed manner, strengthening staff support, communication, and responsive service delivery.

Summary:

In trauma-informed customer service, connection is the foundation that enables staff to support patrons safely, confidently, and with compassion. Proactive tools focus on building this connection before challenges arise. These include establishing predictable routines, using clear and respectful communication, creating welcoming spaces, and fostering strong relationships with community partners such as social workers, behavioural specialists, and local support services. When staff feel connected to each other and to external supports, they develop shared confidence and a sense of collective resilience. These proactive strategies reduce the likelihood of escalation, strengthen psychological safety, and help patrons feel seen, valued, and grounded from the moment they enter the library.

Reactive tools come into play when distress, complexity, or unsafe behaviours emerge. Even in these moments, connection remains vital. Trauma-informed reactive responses centre on maintaining calm, offering choice, preserving dignity, and ensuring staff do not work in isolation. Effective reactive tools help staff navigate complexity without personalisation or panic, reinforcing trust between team members and ensuring patrons receive appropriate support. Together, proactive and reactive tools create a cohesive, relationship-driven approach that supports both staff wellbeing and customer safety, strengthening the library as an inclusive, connected, and trauma-aware community space.

Equipping leaders and staff

Equipping Leaders and Staff for Trauma-Informed Library Services

Leadership in trauma-informed library services extends beyond formal roles to include all staff who shape practice, particularly those working on the library floor. In emotionally demanding environments, leadership is demonstrated through calm escalation management, consistent boundary setting, and the ability to translate organisational values into clear, repeatable actions. Trauma-informed organisations intentionally seek to minimise re-traumatisation, requiring leaders to recognise when policies, processes, or interactions may unintentionally increase distress for staff or community members. This context demands a defined and evolving set of leadership capabilities.

Core Leadership Capabilities

Effective leadership in this space is underpinned by the following competencies:

- **Trauma-Informed Leadership:** Understanding the impact of trauma on both staff and community, and applying principles that prioritise safety, choice, and empowerment.
- **Conflict Resolution and De-escalation:** Guiding teams through high-stress situations and modelling calm, constructive responses.
- **Emotional Intelligence:** Recognising and managing both personal and team emotions to support resilience and cohesion. This includes:
    - Understanding influence and control: Distinguishing between what can be directly controlled (e.g. communication style, process clarity, staff support) and what can only be influenced (e.g. broader social conditions).
    - Boundary setting and emotional sustainability: Confidently establishing and maintaining clear behavioural expectations, while supporting staff following challenging interactions.
    - Reflective practice and resilience: Facilitating structured debriefing, encouraging learning without blame, and fostering psychological safety so staff can reflect openly on experiences.

    - Shared responsibility for practice: Promoting team-based approaches to safety and service delivery, supported through clear escalation pathways, role rotation, and peer support.
- **Strategic Communication:** Communicating expectations, boundaries, and organisational values consistently and clearly.
- **Ethical Decision-Making:** Balancing inclusive access with staff safety and navigating complex service tensions.

These capabilities must be actively developed and reinforced through structured learning and workplace practice.

Building capability through training and development

Training and supervision play a critical role in embedding trauma-informed practice. Priority areas include:

- recognising physiological signs of stress and overwhelm
- shifting from empathic absorption to compassionate, action-oriented responses
- applying consistent, team-based crisis response protocols
- accessing structured debriefing and support following high-intensity incidents

These approaches align with trauma-informed principles and evidence-informed strategies for reducing burnout, particularly those focused on restoring capacity, increasing predictability, and addressing systemic contributors to stress.

Leadership development must also be sustained across the career lifecycle. Foundational leadership and people management skills should be embedded within library and information science qualifications, equipping graduates with an understanding of organisational dynamics and frontline realities. Early career professionals benefit from structured mentoring, job shadowing, and supported leadership pathways that build confidence and practical capability. Ongoing professional learning remains essential to maintain currency in trauma-informed practice, cultural capability, de-escalation, and adaptive leadership approaches. Importantly, these opportunities must be inclusive of all staff, including those in paraprofessional roles, reflecting a shared expectation of leadership in everyday practice.

Embedding ongoing practice

Recruitment and onboarding processes are key mechanisms for reinforcing trauma-informed practice. Selection should prioritise candidates' capacity for emotional regulation, collaboration, and values-aligned decision-making. Early orientation to expectations around boundaries, escalation pathways, and team-based approaches to safety is critical. Scenario-based learning, shadowing, and explicit discussion of psychological safety help build confidence before staff encounter high-intensity situations.

However, individual capability alone is insufficient. Managing emotional demand in public libraries is a strategic issue shaped by structural conditions, ongoing interpersonal pressures, and the gap between service expectations and available resources. Supporting staff wellbeing requires strong organisational foundations, including manageable workloads, clear role expectations, professional autonomy, and alignment between stated values and daily practice. trauma-informed approaches reinforce the need for system-wide policies and workplace cultures that prioritise psychological safety for both staff and community.

Raising future leaders

Across the case studies, a consistent theme is that leadership development must be intentional and embedded at an organisational level. Libraries must invest in leadership capacity and future workforce pipelines as a strategic priority. This includes:

- Formal leadership programs tailored to public library contexts
- Peer learning networks that enable knowledge sharing across services
- Structured coaching models to support emerging leaders and model key capabilities such as emotional intelligence
- Policy alignment to ensure leaders are supported in maintaining boundaries and prioritising staff wellbeing

Effective organisational supports further include regular reflective forums, psychologically safe supervision, consistent application of behavioural expectations, and partnerships with community and social services. In some contexts, collaboration with or integration of social work expertise strengthens service responses.

Equipping both leaders and staff through a trauma-informed, psychosocial safety lens is foundational to sustaining libraries as safe, inclusive, and future-focused community spaces. These approaches position the management of emotional demand not as an optional addition, but as a core element of modern library infrastructure necessary for resilient, equitable, and sustainable service delivery.

Equipping Staff: Leaders this is your job too

Managing emotional demands in public library services

This expansion of the library's social role, driven by evolving community expectations amplifies the emotional labour required to manage one's own feelings and display appropriate professional behaviours in challenging interpersonal contexts. These often occur under conditions of uncertainty and elevated risk. In occupational terms, these features resemble the high-contact "human service" environments in which burnout and stress injuries are most likely to emerge when demands are chronic and resources are insufficient. It is the responsibility of leaders to ensure teams are equipped with knowledge and tools, to support staff experiencing challenging interpersonal contexts.

From a trauma-informed perspective, these conditions matter because staff are routinely exposed to behavioural volatility and distress narratives that can trigger threat responses, compassion strain and cumulative stress. Trauma-informed organisational approaches emphasise the realisation of trauma prevalence, recognise its signs in patrons and staff, and respond by integrating knowledge into policy and practice while actively resisting re-traumatisation. In libraries, this implies moving beyond individual coping mechanisms and toward systemic support that align service expectations with staff safety and organisational capacity.

Continuous development

Individual workshops can raise awareness but rarely shift practice in emotionally demanding roles. Ongoing change requires repeated reinforcement, organisational alignment, and supportive supervision that alter the work environment not just staff knowledge. Training should be positioned as one component of a broader implementation strategy that also includes policy clarity, environmental design, escalation pathways, reflective opportunities, and supervisor coaching. This approach builds muscle memory for high-stress moments and reduces variability in practice.

An evidence-aligned approach uses iterative learning cycles (e.g., fortnightly or monthly) that combine:

1. Skills rehearsal
    - Scenario-based practice focused on de-escalation, boundary phrases, and incident leadership.
    - Micro-drills (3–5 minutes) embedded in team meetings to normalise practice under pressure.
2. Reflective learning
    - Structured debriefs after incidents using a consistent, blame-free protocol.
    - Short "learning notes" capturing learnings, skill shares, decisions, and improvements.
3. Feedback loops
    - Supervisor coaching with specific, observable behaviours and agreed follow-ups.
    - Team learning rounds that translate incidents into small, branch-level changes.

This ongoing development model strengthens consistency across staff, reduces ambiguity for patrons, and supports equitable service responses.

To be effective, learning should be sequenced according to staff experience and exposure, ensuring capability is built progressively across the organisation. At the foundational level, all staff require core skills in de-escalation, boundary setting, conditions of entry, and clear escalation pathways. Advanced development for supervisors and team leaders should focus on incident command roles, structured decision-making for exclusion and re-entry, facilitation of psychologically safe debriefs, and data-informed follow-up. For staff working in outreach roles or high-complexity environments, specialised training is essential, including field safety, multi-agency coordination, referral protocols, and partnership activation.

This staged approach establishes a consistent baseline of capability and expectation across the workforce, reducing avoidable distress for both staff and patrons while promoting fair and confident service delivery.
To reinforce these capabilities, organisational values must be translated into visible and practical structures that guide everyday practice. A library-specific Customer Service Charter can complement council-wide frameworks by addressing the realities of high-incident environments, clearly articulating behaviour expectations and escalation norms in accessible language. Similarly, clearly defined and prominently displayed Conditions of Entry provide staff with a consistent reference point, reducing discretionary conflict and supporting confident enforcement.

Finally, policies, procedures, and leadership support must be designed for operational usability. When these frameworks are practical, consistently applied, and visibly endorsed by leadership, they strengthen staff confidence and ensure decision-making is both supported and sustainable.

Staff feel supported when "authorising conditions" are clear, fair, and consistently enforced. To be effective, these structures must be accessible at the point of need and consistently enacted in practice:

- Plain language policies readily available to staff.

- Visible signage aligned with conditions of entry.
- Supervisor-backed enforcement with predictable escalation pathways.
- Clear, transparent communication of decisions to patrons to maintain trust and fairness.

Together, these elements embed organisational values into everyday practice, strengthening staff confidence and enabling consistent, safe, and equitable service delivery.

Reframing wellbeing as a service quality and risk issue

Emotional support and reflective practice are not optional extras; they are risk controls that protect service quality, safety, retention, and community trust. Positioning wellbeing within operational governance reframes investment in training, debriefing, and supervision as core to reliable service and is not perceived as discretionary self-care.

Psychological safety as a mechanism for learning, consistency, and retention

Teams learn faster and perform more consistently when they can question, disclose, and report near-misses without fear of humiliation or reprisal. Psychological safety is produced by routine behaviours: leaders inviting input, responding appreciatively to feedback, sharing their own learning, and closing the loop on staff suggestions. This reduces isolation after difficult interactions and promotes standardised, equitable practice.

Team-building improves a sense of connection but does not replace structured reflection that supports the processing of emotional strain and strengthens judgement. Without formal headspace for debriefs, skill sharing, and incident reviews teams drift toward informal coping (avoidance, cynicism, inconsistency) that mirrors burnout patterns and undermines service quality. Participation in these forums is a professional responsibility that supports personal growth and collective capacity.

Supervisors set the tone for safety and learning. They need explicit capability to:

- Facilitate blame-free debriefs and convert insights into small system changes.
- Model boundary clarity and support staff through enforcement actions.
- Provide timely coaching on observable behaviours.
- Champion consistent application of processes during complaints or conflict.

In high-stress contexts, how a supervisor responds after an incident determines whether staff speak up or withdraw.

Boundary setting and emotional sustainability

Boundary clarity protects both patrons and staff. Emotional erosion occurs when workers feel obliged to solve problems beyond the library's remit without adequate resources or authority. Organisationally, boundaries require:

- Clear behavioural expectations for patrons.
- Shared decision rules for escalation, exclusion, and re-entry.
- Visible endorsement of staff authority to uphold policy and procedures.

These elements reduce unpredictability and prevent possible re-traumatisation through coercive or inconsistent responses. Reliable and sustainable customer service depends on the ability to decline requests that exceed role scope or compromise safety. Framing this as professional responsibility (rather than individual toughness) reduces moral injury and helps prevent the cynicism and reduced efficacy associated with burnout.

Libraries, social work interfaces, and role clarity

Strong boundary models do not reduce compassion; they clarify pathways. Embedded social work or referral partnerships provide patrons with appropriate support while avoiding role drift that positions library staff as de-facto clinicians or crisis responders. Clear interfaces reduce reliance on high-stakes security interventions, support staff safety, and improve outcomes for patrons experiencing complex needs.

Personal safety plans

Example from Los Angeles Public Libraries.

A Personal Safety Plan is a brief, individualised tool that helps staff identify triggers, early warning signs, boundary phrases, exit strategies, and support activation pathways. In public-facing environments with unpredictable behaviour, these plans function as micro-level safety systems aligned to broader trauma-informed goals. What constitutes a sense of safety is inherently subjective; the conditions that support one individual's perceived safety may not produce the

same effect for another. A personalised plan enables these differences to be recognised and accommodated, ensuring that each person's unique safety needs are considered within practice.

Benefits

- Empowering Autonomy and Control: Clarifies when and how staff act early in escalation.
- Reducing Emotional Fatigue: Normalises short regulation strategies (grounding, micro-breaks, handover cues).
- Improving Incident Response: Enables faster, coordinated team responses through shared signals.
- Advancing Trauma-Informed Culture: Turns abstract principles like "safety" and "empowerment" into concrete behaviours and shared expectations.

Implementation Considerations

- Integrate with conditions of entry, an escalation matrix, supervisor coaching, and incident response practices.
- Store plans accessibly, revisit during supervision conversations, and update after key incidents.
- Treat plans as a live document, that can be updated and modified according to conditions.

While Los Angeles Public Library has identified this as a goal, a published example of a personal safety plan is not yet available. This concept nonetheless illustrates how organisations can demonstrate practical commitment to staff safety

Implications for leadership

Leadership as the primary lever for embedding Trauma-Informed practice

Trauma-informed practice is fundamentally organisational. Leaders determine whether principles are translated into resourcing (time for drills and debriefs), risk governance (learning from incidents), and performance expectations (service quality with safety). Visible endorsement and consistent follow-through signal to staff that boundaries and wellbeing will be upheld under pressure.

Wellbeing metrics and learning systems

Integrate simple, meaningful indicators into routine governance to detect deterioration early and evaluate interventions over time. Examples include:

- Safety and workload: incident frequency/severity, time lost, overtime spikes.
- Capability and climate: staff confidence ratings, debrief completion rates, psychological safety pulse items.
- Retention and stability: turnover intent, actual turnover, vacancy lag time.
- Quality and equity: complaint themes, consistency of enforcement, referral utilisation.

Review in monthly/quarterly cycles, pair metrics with actions, and communicate what changed as a result of staff input.

Grow collaborative partnerships

Community partnerships are powerful amplifiers of trauma-informed customer service in public libraries. Many of the challenges staff encounter such as housing instability, mental health concerns, and unmet social needs sit outside the library's formal service scope. Collaborations with local agencies enable libraries to provide meaningful support without overextending staff or diluting core roles. Effective partnerships establish clear referral pathways, reduce pressure on frontline workers to resolve complex social issues, and ensure patrons are connected to appropriate expertise in a timely manner.

These collaborations also strengthen staff confidence by enabling access to consultation, shared problem-solving, and coordinated responses to complex situations. When partnerships are intentionally cultivated and embedded into daily operations, they become a core component of trauma-informed service delivery enhancing safety, reducing escalation risks, and supporting more equitable outcomes for the community.

Strategic goals and clear outcomes

A foundational element of developing collaborative partnerships is, as a library service, having clear strategic goals and outcomes. This clarity ensures partnerships are purposeful, aligned, and mutually beneficial, allowing all parties to understand their role and the collective impact they are working towards.

When libraries clearly articulate priorities such as community wellbeing, literacy development, or digital inclusion it becomes easier to identify complementary partners, coordinate efforts, and measure success. Well-defined goals also support consistent communication, strengthen accountability, and ensure shared resources are directed toward meaningful outcomes.

Importantly, strategic partnerships also play a key role in reducing psychological hazards for staff. They enable staff to respond more effectively in the moment through immediate referrals, booking individuals into appropriate services, or providing clear options when on demand assistance is not possible.

When partnerships are approached as a mechanism to support staff in serving the community, they generate meaningful benefits for both library teams and the people they assist. For example, Queens Public Library delivers services such as job interview practice, form-filling support, and translation assistance through volunteer-led programs. These initiatives were developed through deliberate partnerships that complement staff capabilities, easing the pressure to deliver specialised support outside their role or expertise. In doing so, partnerships expand service offerings while contributing to a more sustainable and supported working environment

Sustainability

Collaborative partnerships strengthen sustainability in libraries by enhancing their capacity to deliver services over the long term socially, economically, and organisationally. By working with community groups, volunteers, local government departments, and social services, libraries can share resources such as funding, skills, spaces, and networks. This reduces duplication and maximises the impact of limited resources.

This collective approach supports the continuity and expansion of programs such as literacy support, digital inclusion, and community wellbeing without placing unsustainable demands on staff or budgets.

Partnerships also enhance social sustainability by ensuring services remain responsive to community needs. For example, collaboration with social service agencies enables libraries to connect individuals with specialised support, while volunteer partnerships extend delivery in areas such as language assistance and job readiness. Internal partnerships across council teams further strengthen alignment and streamline access.

Together, these collaborations create more resilient systems where responsibility is shared, innovation is encouraged, and services can adapt to changing community needs ensuring libraries remain relevant, effective, and sustainable.

Workplace health and safety and security personnel

Improving trauma-informed customer service and reducing psychological hazards for staff relies on embedding this approach across key supporting functions, particularly workplace health and safety and security. When these teams adopt a trauma-informed lens, they are better equipped to recognise, respond to, and de-escalate interactions involving distressed or vulnerable community members. This promotes a safer, more consistent, and compassionate organisational response.

This approach operates in two complementary ways. Security personnel trained in trauma-informed practice can provide calm, appropriate interventions that reduce escalation while maintaining a visible but non-threatening presence. At the same time, workplace health and safety teams are better positioned to support staff who have experienced difficult incidents, offering informed follow-up care, guidance, and preventative strategies.

For services without an on-site security presence, this approach remains equally important. It requires stronger collaboration with workplace health and safety teams, local partners, and clearly defined internal protocols to ensure staff feel supported and equipped to respond safely.

Queens Public Library provides a strong example of this model. Security officers are viewed by staff as a supportive presence and by patrons as approachable and non-intimidating. They see themselves as partners in delivering trauma-informed care while maintaining the capability to manage escalated situations when required.

By recognising existing teams as active partners in delivering trauma-informed customer service, libraries can strengthen capacity, leverage expertise, and amplify positive outcomes. Clear strategic goals become central in this process transforming the shared aim of reducing psychological hazards from an aspiration into a coordinated and achievable outcome.

Partnerships with purpose: enhancing community outcomes, service delivery, and workforce capability

Developing effective partnerships begins with a clear understanding of shared goals, mutual benefit, and defined roles. Libraries can foster strong, purposeful collaborations by identifying organisations, teams, and community groups with complementary strengths and aligning efforts around common priorities such as literacy, inclusion, and community wellbeing. This ensures partnerships are not only meaningful but also strategically aligned with service objectives.

Open communication, trust, and ongoing relationship-building are essential to maintaining partnerships that remain responsive and effective over time. A deliberate and strategic approach enables libraries to maximise resources, reduce duplication of effort, and enhance overall service delivery. In doing so, partnerships contribute to more sustainable outcomes for both staff and the communities they serve.

Practical, purpose-driven partnerships further enable libraries to respond holistically to community needs by integrating specialist expertise into library environments. For example, collaboration with social workers can provide direct support for vulnerable community members, including assistance with housing referrals, crisis intervention, and access to social services. These partnerships reinforce the library's role as a safe, trusted space, while also equipping staff with appropriate pathways to support customers experiencing complex challenges, while reducing psychosocial safety hazards for library staff.

Similarly, partnerships with community-based professionals such as health nurses, dentists, animal management and other practitioners enhance the library's ability to deliver targeted community education. Through co-designed programming, including health literacy sessions, early childhood development workshops, oral health education, and broader wellbeing initiatives, libraries can support preventative care and informed decision-making. These collaborations extend the reach and impact of library services, strengthening their position as accessible hubs for learning, connection, and community wellbeing.

Importantly, these collaborations can help reduce psychosocial pressures on staff by ensuring that complex community needs are supported by appropriately qualified professionals. This allows library staff to focus on their core roles while maintaining a safe, supportive, and responsive service environment for both staff and customers.

Enabling strategic partnerships: frameworks and practical tools

This section outlines practical tools that support staff to build, implement, and sustain strategic partnerships aligned with service delivery and community outcomes.

A *Developing Collaborative Partnerships Guide* (See Appendix D, has been created to support staff to take a consistent and confident approach to partnership development by translating strategic intent into practical actions. It provides clear guidance on how to build relationships, establish effective processes, and maintain partnerships that are responsive to community needs, ensuring that collaboration is purposeful, sustainable, and embedded within everyday service delivery.

This guide provides a practical approach to establishing and sustaining collaborative partnerships within the public library context. It outlines key steps for identifying partners, aligning goals, and defining roles and responsibilities, while emphasising the importance of communication, trust, and continuous evaluation. By following this structured approach, library services can strengthen collaboration and deliver coordinated, meaningful outcomes.

The *Partnership Activation Guide* (Appendix E) supports staff to confidently implement and utilise established partnerships within day-to-day service delivery. Once partnerships are in place, this guide provides practical direction on how to engage partners effectively, including when and how to initiate referrals, coordinate joint activities, and integrate partner expertise into library programs and customer interactions. It ensures staff have clear, accessible processes to activate partnerships in a consistent, timely, and trauma-informed manner, enabling responsive support for customers while maintaining safe and effective service delivery.

Community partnerships strengthen trauma-informed customer service by connecting patrons to specialised support beyond the scope of library services. Clear referral pathways, visible community presence, and collaboration with social workers, behavioural specialists, and local agencies help reduce staff pressure, prevent escalation, and create safer, more connected library environments that promote wellbeing and equitable access for all.

Purposeful partnerships enable libraries to extend their impact by integrating specialist expertise, strengthening community connections, and responding effectively to complex needs. Through strategic alignment, clear processes, and practical tools, partnerships enhance service delivery, build staff capability, and support safer, more responsive, and sustainable library environments.

Strengthening organisational support

A trauma-informed customer service environment relies on organisational frameworks policies, procedures, incident-response pathways, and risk-management processes that prioritise staff safety, consistency, and wellbeing. Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping these frameworks, so they reflect trauma-informed principles rather than just operational requirements. Leaders are encouraged to ensure policies and procedures are predictable, clearly communicated, and accessible to all staff, reducing uncertainty in moments of stress. Incident-response protocols should emphasise psychological safety alongside physical safety, offering structured decision-making pathways, options for early intervention, and accessible support tools for frontline staff managing complex or distressing encounters. Embedding debriefing processes, reflective practice, and wellbeing resources into these systems demonstrates organisational commitment to preventing cumulative stress and supporting staff resilience.

To maintain a genuinely trauma-informed culture, leaders must remain closely connected to the lived experiences of frontline staff. This includes actively seeking out staff feedback, participating in floor-level observation or shadowing, and creating regular communication channels that enable staff to voice concerns, share emerging patterns, and reflect on the emotional impact of customer interactions. Leadership behaviour should model empathy, transparency, and responsiveness, ensuring staff feel heard and validated when navigating challenging situations. By grounding organisational frameworks in frontline realities, leaders strengthen trust, reinforce consistency in practice, and enable teams to feel confident and supported when activating policies or incident-response pathways. This intentional alignment between leadership actions and frontline experience upholds trauma-informed principles and cultivates a culture where staff safety, connection, and resilience are central to service delivery.

Leadership actions for Trauma-Informed practice

Lead with visibility and connection

Senior organisational leaders should sustain a consistent and meaningful presence within frontline work environments. Practices such as staff shadowing, workplace walkthroughs, and informal check-ins enable leaders to remain closely connected to the everyday realities of frontline employees. Such visibility not only enhances trust but also ensures that strategic and operational decisions remain grounded in the practical needs and lived experiences of staff.

This commitment to visibility should extend beyond library services to encompass broader areas of Council operations, including Workplace Health and Safety and other frontline service units. A coordinated, organisation-wide approach to understanding and supporting frontline conditions is essential for fostering a safe, connected, and well-aligned workforce. By strengthening cross-departmental relationships and maintaining a shared commitment to staff wellbeing, Councils are better positioned to establish clear expectations regarding acceptable behaviours and to uphold consistent standards for community conduct. A holistic, service-wide strategy that prioritises staff protection, psychological safety, and operational alignment will ultimately reinforce organisational trust and create a more resilient service environment.

Embed Trauma-Informed principles in all policies and procedures

Organisational policies and procedures should be systematically reviewed and refined to ensure they are firmly grounded in trauma-informed principles such as predictability, transparency, choice, and psychological safety. Embedding these principles supports both staff and community members by creating an environment where expectations are clear, interactions are respectful, and responses to challenging behaviour are consistent. This includes designing policies that articulate clear behavioural expectations, transparent decision-making processes, and consistent approaches to managing disruptions, thereby reducing ambiguity and the potential for unnecessary escalation. Ensuring that information is communicated in accessible and predictable ways also helps minimise anxiety for staff, particularly in high-stress environments.

In addition, operational documents should be updated to include practical supports, such as explicit conditions of entry, clearly defined incident-response pathways, and guidance for early intervention strategies that equip staff to recognise and address concerning behaviour before it escalates. Documentation requirements should be carefully considered to avoid creating unnecessary burden or inadvertently retraumatising staff through overly detailed or repetitive reporting requirements. Trauma-informed documentation frameworks prioritise staff wellbeing by focusing on key facts and safety-critical information, rather than requiring exhaustive narrative accounts. Collectively, these measures help strengthen psychological safety, ensure procedural fairness, and create a more supportive organisational culture.

Establish consistent debriefing, feedback, and wellbeing structures

Routine, structured debriefing processes should be implemented to support staff following challenging or complex interactions, ensuring employees have regular opportunities to process emotional impacts and reflect on their experiences in a safe and supported environment. This may include formal debriefings immediately following incidents, scheduled reflective supervision sessions, and team-based reflective practice activities. These processes help normalise emotional responses to difficult situations, reduce the likelihood of occupational stress or burnout, and contribute to a culture where seeking support is seen as a strength rather than a deficit. When integrated into everyday operations, debriefing becomes a predictable and valued component of workforce wellbeing.

Additionally, clear and consistent feedback loops should be established to ensure that staff insights and emerging patterns are communicated to leadership in a timely and meaningful way. Leaders have a responsibility to respond to these patterns by adjusting practices, offering targeted training, or addressing systemic contributors to stress and risk. Wellbeing supports including psychological services, peer support programs, and proactive early-intervention resources should be easily accessible, confidential, and promoted as a routine part of employment. Embedding these structures into organisational practice strengthens resilience, enhances trust, and demonstrates a sustained commitment to the health, safety, and professional growth of the workforce.

Support continuous development

As part of maintaining strong connection with teams, equipping staff, and establishing clear frameworks for support, leaders must also commit to their own ongoing development in trauma-informed practice. Leadership capability in this space is not static; it requires continuous learning, reflection, and adaptation to emerging community needs and workforce challenges. By modelling a commitment to growth, leaders set the tone for a learning culture that values curiosity, reflection, and professional development.

Equally important is the role of leaders in creating the conditions for their teams to learn, grow, and develop. This includes providing access to training, encouraging reflective practice, supporting skill development, and allowing space within workloads for learning to occur. When staff are empowered to build capability and confidence, they are better equipped to respond to complex situations in a safe, consistent, and trauma-informed manner. A leadership approach that prioritises continuous learning strengthens both individual and organisational resilience, ensuring the library service remains adaptive, supportive, and responsive to community needs and broader industry innovations.

A trauma-informed customer service environment depends on clear, compassionate organisational frameworks shaped by connected and visible leadership. When leaders prioritise psychological safety, consistent procedures, active frontline engagement, and meaningful debriefing structures, they build trust and resilience across teams, ensuring staff feel supported, confident, and empowered to deliver safe, equitable service.

A trauma-informed customer service environment is sustained through the deliberate alignment of organisational frameworks, leadership behaviours, and frontline practices that prioritise psychological safety, consistency, and staff wellbeing. By embedding these principles into everyday operations and maintaining strong, visible leadership connection, organisations can foster a resilient workforce capable of delivering safe, sustainable and responsive services.

Policy and practice recommendations:

To ensure long-term sustainability and staff wellbeing, public libraries must move from reactive, staff-dependent service delivery toward structured, trauma-informed systems supported by partnerships and clear boundaries. The following recommendations outline a coordinated approach to support this shift in practice.

1. Establish state-wide trauma-informed framework

Trauma-informed practice should form the foundation of all library operations, extending beyond frontline interactions into organisational culture, leadership, policy, and service design. A consistent, state-wide approach ensures that all staff operate within a shared understanding of safety, empathy, boundaries, predictability, and dignity, creating more stable and equitable experiences for both staff and patrons.

This requires the implementation of a structured framework, including targeted training in de-escalation and communication, alongside practical tools such as scripts, decision making models and escalation pathways to guide staff through complex interactions. Reflective practice and ongoing learning mechanisms should be embedded to support continuous development and adaptation.

Importantly, trauma-informed practice must align with Work Health and Safety (WHS) legislation and psychosocial safety obligations, positioning staff wellbeing as a core operational responsibility.

2. Strengthen capacity through partnerships

Libraries are neither designed nor resourced to absorb the full weight of increasing social complexities that present in libraries. Capacity must be expanded through structured, scalable partnerships that enable appropriate, specialist responses while maintaining the integrity of the library's core function.

Formal referral networks with social workers, health services, housing providers, and youth agencies ensure that patrons can access the support they need beyond the scope of library practice. Flexible delivery models such as rotating placements, outreach partnerships, and consultancy roles will allow services of varying size and resourcing to participate effectively.

Sustaining these partnerships requires clear role delineation, effective governance, and strong communication pathways. Without these structures, responsibilities can become blurred, placing staff in situations beyond their training and increasing psychosocial risk. Clearly defined strategic partnerships ensure that libraries operate as part of a broader service ecosystem within the social infrastructure of their location.

3. Clarify boundaries and protect staff wellbeing

Clear and consistently applied boundaries are essential to safe and sustainable library services. Libraries must define what falls within their scope of practice and what requires referral, ensuring staff can operate within appropriate professional limits without ambiguity.

This includes clearly articulating the distinction between library responsibilities and those of social or health services, alongside establishing consistent referral pathways for needs that fall outside the library's remit. Supporting policies such as conditions of entry, behavioural standards, and incident response procedures must be applied consistently to enable confident decision-making across teams.

Boundary-setting must also be embedded at both organisational and team levels. Leadership modelling, supported by training in emotional regulation and decision-making, reinforces these expectations in practice. Structured debriefing and wellbeing support further strengthens this approach by providing staff with opportunities to process challenging interactions and maintain professional resilience. Together, these elements contribute to a culture in which staff wellbeing is actively supported and safeguarded.

4.**Formal education as a system enabler**

Enabling this shift requires a corresponding evolution in how the workforce is equipped and supported. Formal education plays a critical role in underpinning this transition. As formal education sits as a critical enabler across all three previous recommendations, strengthening their implementation will ensure they are sustainable rather than reactive. It provides the foundation upon which trauma-informed practice, effective partnerships, and clear professional boundaries can consistently operate across the sector.

By embedding a trauma-informed framework, formal education establishes a shared baseline of knowledge prior to workforce entry. While library professionals are highly qualified, traditional training pathways have not consistently included exposure to trauma-informed principles, psychosocial safety, or the realities of complex public-facing work. Integrating these elements into LIS qualifications and early-career development ensures that staff begin their careers with an understanding of trauma, emotional labour, and behavioural responses. This reframes trauma-informed practice from a reactive skillset into a core professional capability.

Formal education also supports a partnership-based service model by reinforcing the boundaries of the library's role as a service. As community expectations expand, staff must be equipped to recognise when needs fall outside their expertise and require referral. Education that includes cross-sector awareness, referral pathways, and collaborative practice prepares staff to operate within a networked system of care. This ensures partnerships are activated strategically while reducing pressure on frontline staff.

Equally, formal education strengthens boundary-setting and staff wellbeing by shaping professional identity and personal perceptions of library work early. The tendency to over-extend in response to community need is often rooted in unclear expectations of the role. Embedding principles of professional practice, boundary-setting, and psychosocial safety reinforces that setting limits is a necessary condition for safe and sustainable practices. This also equips future leaders to model and reinforce these expectations, fostering organisational culture where wellbeing is systematically protected.

Formal education provides the structural foundation that enables these recommendations to function effectively. Without this upstream investment, organisations will continue to retrofit capability in response to increasing complexity, rather than building a next generation workforce equipped from the outset to operate safely, confidently, and sustainably.

Summary

Collectively, these recommendations establish a structured, trauma-informed approach that strengthens organisational resilience while maintaining the core values of public library service. By embedding consistent frameworks, leveraging partnerships, and reinforcing clear boundaries, libraries are better equipped to respond to increasing social complexities, reduce psychosocial risk, and create environments where both staff and community members feel safe, supported, and respected.

Cheryl Houghton scholarship information:

Activity:

Project activity funded by the $5000 scholarship (See financial statement) included:

- Travel to and from New York March 2026.
- Undertook a study tour of Brooklyn, Queens and Philadelphia Libraries
- Attendance at QPLA 2026 conference.

Professional Development:

Conference attendance:

- *The Australasian Public Library Conference 2025* was convened by the Charles Sturt University Libraries Research Group: 1-3 July 2025.
- *Local Councils Can Strengthen Workplace Culture and Reduce Psychosocial Hazards* - Webinar: Tuesday 22 July 2025 Hosted by Gallup Inc.
- *Amplify Youth Voices in Libraries* (June 2026): State Library of Queensland:

Professional development:

- *QPLA LEaD PD Series with Dr Beth Wahler*: Trauma-Informed library practices: organisational and individual strategies for reducing challenges and improving care for all. (May 2026)

Some of these training sessions were undertaken as part of my role at Logan Libraries between 2025 and 2026. These are relevant to this topic of research and provided foundational information and knowledge.

  - Change Management: Prosci (March 2025)
  - Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence (People Leaders)
  - People Leader Foundations
  - Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma
  - Mental Health Awareness for Leaders
  - Building psychological safety and trust
  - Hidden disabilities supporter training

- **Academic Mentor:** Dr Jane Garner

- **Networking:**
  - Queensland Police Service: Logan Central Station, Queensland
  - Queensland Police Service: Police Liaison Officers, Logan Central, Queensland
  - Rekon Youth Foundation, Logan, Queensland
  - Domestic and International Public Library Services
  - TAFE QLD Library Network

- Additional reading and research to support the project. (See Appendix F)

Financial statement

Date	Supplier	Expense Details	Total AUD from QPLA	Total AUD self-funded
06/03/26	Qantas	Flights	1647.48	0.00
26/02/26	ESTA	Visa ($40.50USD)	58.94	0.00
6/3/26 – 14/3/26:	The Box Hotel, Brooklyn	Accommodation	2314.40	540.52
25/02/2026	Amtrak	NYC to Philadelphia return ($68 USD)	75.45	0.00
28/02/2026	Ubigi	Data ($14 USD)	19.80	0.00
06/03/2026	Uber	From airport to hotel	143.62	0.00
Multi date	MTA	Subway: public transport	0.00	34.31
14/3/2026	Taxi	From hotel to airport ($70 USD)	0.00	100.00
Multi date	Various	Food	0.00	Self-Funded
14-16/10/2026	QPLA conference attendance 2026	QPLA Lead Conference ticket	630.00	0.00
15/10/2026	Grand Chancellor Hotel – Brisbane	1 x night accommodation	110.00	75.40
Total			$ 4999.69	$750.23 +

Appendix A: Short comparison of psychological safety standards – global perspective

Australia
Australia has emerged as a global leader in legislating psychosocial safety in the workplace. The 2023 amendments to the *Work Health and Safety Act 2011* introduced a positive duty for employers to identify, manage, and mitigate psychosocial hazards. This legislative advancement was further reinforced by the *Commonwealth Code of Practice: Managing Psychosocial Hazards at Work (2024)*, which provides detailed guidance on risk assessment, consultation, and control measures. The Code treats psychosocial risks—such as stress, burnout, bullying, and exposure to trauma—with the same level of seriousness as physical hazards, mandating their integration into daily operations, staff training, and leadership accountability. [www.comcare.gov.au]

United States
In contrast, the United States lacks comprehensive federal legislation addressing psychosocial safety. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) offers resources and guidance on workplace stress and mental health, including recognition of trauma and its effects. However, psychosocial safety is inconsistently addressed across states and is often framed around issues such as overwork, equity, and general mental wellness. There is no explicit federal mandate requiring employers to manage trauma-related risks or difficult interpersonal interactions. Nonetheless, initiatives such as the Network of the National Library of Medicine demonstrate growing interest and activity in this space. [www.osha.gov],

Canada
Canada has adopted the *CSA Standard Z1003-13 (R2018)*, a voluntary national framework for psychological health and safety in the workplace. This standard provides a structured approach to hazard identification, risk assessment, and staged implementation of psychosocial safety practices. While it offers comprehensive tools and guidance, its voluntary nature limits enforceability. The framework emphasizes shared responsibility, ethical data collection, and fostering a psychologically safe organisational culture. [scc-ccn.ca]

New Zealand
New Zealand incorporates psychosocial safety under the *Health and Safety at Work Act 2015*, which defines health to include both physical and mental wellbeing. Businesses are legally obligated to manage psychosocial risks, and WorkSafe New Zealand provides detailed guidelines on hazard recognition, consultation, and systematic risk management. The country is increasingly emphasizing mental wellbeing, with public sector agencies encouraged to create mentally healthy workplaces through proactive leadership and cultural change. [www.worksafe.govt.nz]

United Kingdom
The United Kingdom addresses psychosocial risks primarily through general health and safety legislation, notably the *Health and Safety at Work Act 1974* and the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999*. While employers have a legal duty to manage work-related stress, the approach is largely guided by non-statutory resources such as the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Management Standards. These standards offer practical tools for risk assessment and stress reduction but lack the enforceability of dedicated psychosocial legislation.
[workright....ign.gov.uk] [www.hse.gov.uk]

Summary

Australia's legislative framework stands out for its enforceability, clarity, and comprehensive integration of psychosocial safety into workplace health and safety obligations. Other jurisdictions—such as Canada and New Zealand—offer robust guidance and frameworks but often rely on voluntary compliance or general health and safety laws. The United States and United Kingdom provide valuable resources and support, yet lack cohesive, enforceable mandates specific to psychosocial hazards. Australia's model offers a compelling blueprint for nations seeking to embed mental health protections into workplace legislation and practice.

Appendix B: Code lavender

Code Lavender

To provide immediate and structured emotional support for staff following a stressful or traumatic incident, ensuring psychological safety and operational continuity.

1

Activation Criteria for Code Lavender:

- Aggressive or threatening patron behaviour
- Witnessing a mental health crisis or medical emergency
- Exposure to distressing events (e.g., overdose, violence)
- Accumulated emotional fatigue after multiple incidents

2

Who can activate Code Lavender

- All staff

3

Immediate response (first 10 - 15 mins)

- Activate Code Lavender: Supervisor or designated responder initiates protocol.
- Peer / Leader Check-In: Sample script: "How are you feeling right now? What do you need before returning to service?"
- Quiet Space Activation: Identify a calm area for staff to step away.
- Wellbeing Kit: Snacks, hydration, mindfulness cards, stress ball, hygiene items.
- Structured Micro-Debrief: Three Key Questions:
  - What happened?
  - How are you feeling?
  - What support do you need before returning to work? Can you return to the floor today?

4

Post-incident debrief (within 48 hours)

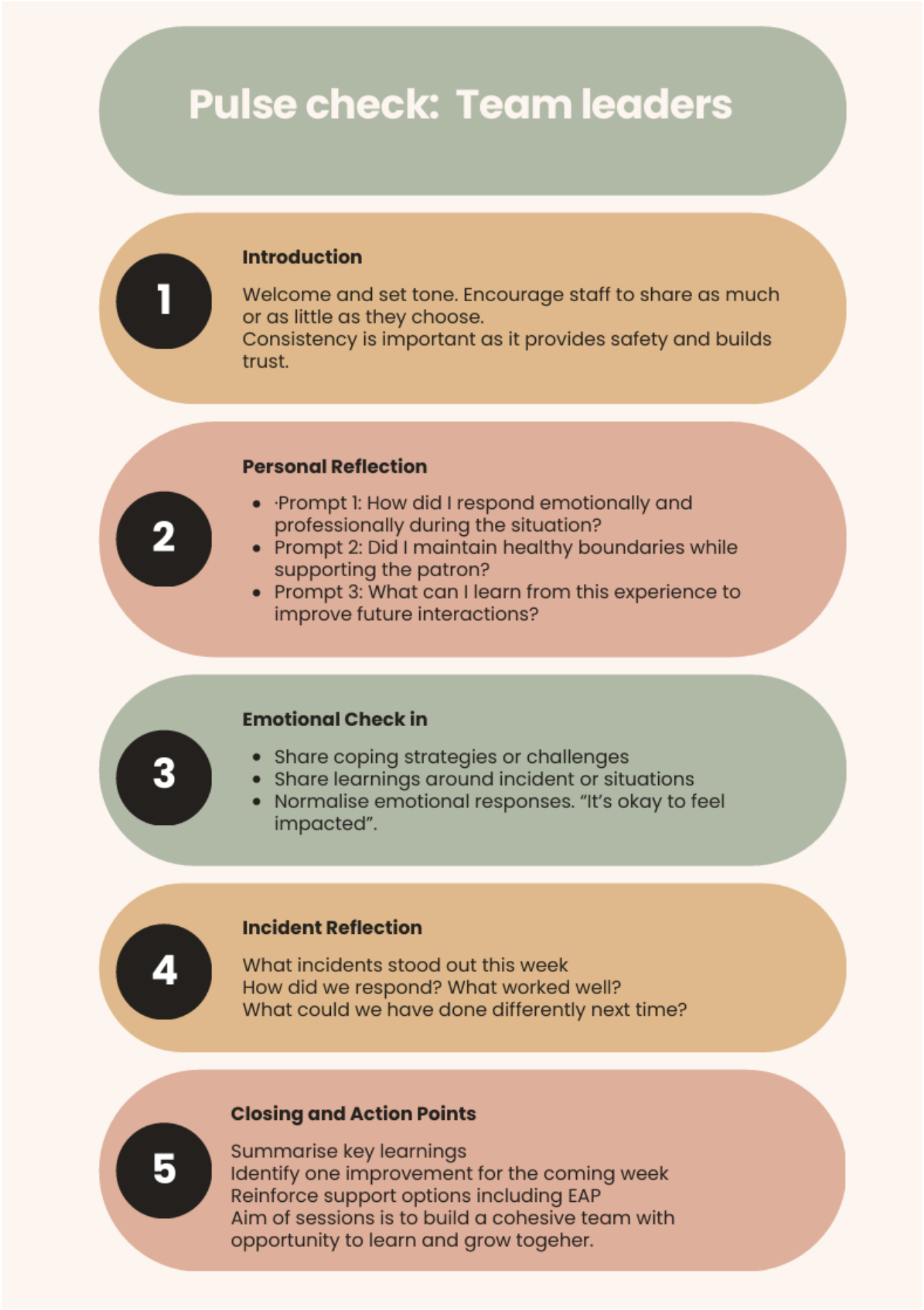
- Structured, reflective conversation
- Review impact, not blame
- Identify support needs and adjustments
- Capture organisational learnings - Learning component for staff and leaders, add to learning cycle
- Offer Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or counselling referral.

5

Follow up actions - when required

- Ongoing check-Ins or add to regular team pulse checks (1–4 weeks)
- Adjust duties or flexible scheduling for impacted staff (Short-Term)
- Review possible safety or environmental improvements based on learnings
- Review relevant policy, training, or skills development - frame incident as learning opportunity.
- Leadership Review & Continuous Improvement

Appendix C: Pulse check for leaders



Appendix D: Collaborative partnerships checklist

Quick Guide for Library Staff

Start with a shared purpose

☐ Have I identified a community need that needs addressing?
☐ Do I understand what the partner's strengths and expertise are?
☐ Does this partnership enhance customer safety, wellbeing, or access?
☐ Is the partnership aligned with library priorities?

Build relationships early

☐ Have I connected with the partner before needing referrals?
☐ Have I attended local network or interagency meetings?
☐ Have I invited the partner to visit or observe the library?
☐ Have I shared library priorities and community needs?
☐ Have I explored how we can support their work?

Clarify roles, expectations, and boundaries

☐ Do we understand what the partner can and cannot provide?
☐ Is there clarity on when and how to refer customers?
☐ Do staff understand what a "warm handoff" looks like?
☐ Have privacy, risk, and duty of care considerations been discussed?
☐ Are communication processes clear?
☐ Are agreements documented in simple, accessible terms?

Establish referral pathways

☐ Are referral processes clear and easy to follow?
☐ Do staff have up-to-date contact details (name, phone, email)?
☐ Are referral criteria or scenarios clearly defined?
☐ Do staff know how to offer referrals using trauma-informed language?
☐ Does the partner's preferred referral method align with our process?
☐ Is there a shared, current referral directory available to staff?

Make partnerships visible

☐ Are partners visible within library spaces or programs?
☐ Are we incorporating partners into everyday service delivery?
☐ Are customers aware of available support services?

Maintain and strengthen relationships

☐ Do we regularly communicate with partners?
☐ Are we sharing feedback and observations?
☐ Have we asked for advice or training when needed?
☐ Are partners invited to programs or events?
☐ Do we debrief (where appropriate) on complex situations?

Reflect and review

☐ Are referrals working effectively?
☐ Do staff feel supported by the partnership?
☐ Are customer needs being met?
☐ Should the partnership be expanded, adjusted, or concluded?

☐ Does this partnership improve service delivery?
☐ Does it support staff confidence and safety?
☐ Does it strengthen community connection and trust?

Appendix E: Partnership activation guide

Purpose
To support staff in safely and confidently connecting customers with appropriate community services, using trauma-informed principles that promote safety, choice, and dignity.

1. When to activate a partnership

Consider referring or involving a partner service when a customer:

- expresses needs beyond library scope (housing, safety, wellbeing, financial hardship)
- appears distressed and may benefit from specialist support
- requires follow-up that the library cannot provide
- requests help with issues related to family, mental health, behaviour, or crisis

Do not activate a referral if the situation is immediately unsafe follow emergency procedures.

2. Be aware of available partnerships (examples)

Staff should maintain awareness of the partnerships available within their local context, ensuring they can respond confidently and appropriately to customer needs as they arise. Partnerships will vary based on community priorities but commonly include:

- Social Workers – family support, crisis navigation, complex needs
- Behavioural Specialists – support with challenging behaviours, neurodiversity, escalation prevention
- Housing & Homelessness Services – emergency accommodation, advocacy, referrals
- Mental Health Outreach – wellbeing checks, counselling access, safety planning
- Youth Services – support for young people and families
- Financial Counselling / Emergency Relief – budgeting, hardship support
- Neighbourhood and Community Centres – wraparound social services
- Council or Community Programs – dental nurses, animal management, storm readiness teams, public health education

3. How to make a referral (quick steps)

- Engage with empathy: Use calm tone, offer choices, ensure the customer feels safe.
- Explain the purpose: “There’s a service that may support you more fully than we can here.”
- Seek consent: Always ask before sharing information or contacting a partner.
- Make a warm handoff: Call the partner with the customer, walk them over, or provide facilitated connection.
- Document according to guidelines: Keep details minimal and factual.
- Debrief if needed: Seek supervisor or peer support after the interaction.

4. Script examples for staff:

Offering help:
“Would you like me to connect you with someone who specialises in this kind of support?”

If the customer agrees:
“With your permission, I can call them now and introduce you, or I can share their details so you can contact them when you’re ready.”

Connecting with the partner:
“Hi, this is ___ from ___ Library. I’m with a customer seeking support and, with their consent, I’d like to introduce them to your service.”

If the customer declines:
“That’s absolutely fine. Here are their details if you’d like to reach out later.”

5. Examples of community presence in the library

Showcase services in low-pressure, everyday ways to normalise help-seeking:

- Social workers attending Storytime to connect gently with families
- Dental nurses offering pop-up oral health checks
- Animal management hosting responsible pet ownership sessions
- Local resilience teams running storm season preparedness workshops
- Neighbourhood centres providing drop-in advice at a regular stall

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Suggested Reading:

Atlas of the Heart by Brene Brown 2021

The Compassion Project: A case for hope and human kindness from the town that beat loneliness by Dr Julian Abel and Lindsay Clarke, 2020

The Librarians Guide to Homelessness: an empathy drive approach to solving problems, preventing conflict and serving everyone by Ryan J Dowd 2018

Trauma Stewardship by Laura van Dernoot Lipsky 2007

Appendix G: Artificial intelligence use statement

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, including Microsoft Copilot, were used in a limited capacity during the preparation of this report. These tools supported editing functions such as proofreading, refining sentence structure, and improving clarity of expression.

AI tools were not used to generate original research findings, analyse data, or develop conclusions. All insights, interpretations, and recommendations presented in this report are the author's own work and are grounded in primary research, case study analysis, and professional expertise.

All AI-assisted content was reviewed, verified, and edited by the author to ensure accuracy, relevance, and alignment with the intent of the research.