

Salt Lake City downtown library's new social worker has already helped thousands

Hired in December, the library's new social services coordinator helps connect people with resources.



A public library is one of the last few free places a person can go, and that means they often attract people who can't afford to go anywhere else.

That doesn't mean libraries are always best equipped to help the people who show up. And Salt Lake City Public Library staff, over the last several years, began to notice this gap.

That's where Nicole Campolucci comes in.

The library hired Campolucci in December as its first licensed clinical social worker, with the official title of social services coordinator. It's her job to assess what library patrons — especially those experiencing homelessness, or who have other psychosocial needs — want and need, as well as what staff needs, and help them get it.

So far she has made an impact.

In the last three months, the library has provided 2,144 services to people, up from 1,170 in the three months before, Campolucci said.



(Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune) Nicole Campolucci, right, helps a woman experiencing homelessness with her Section 8 housing paperwork in the Salt Lake City Library, June 12, 2023.

Campolucci is a licensed clinical social worker, and helps connect people experiencing homelessness with available resources.

These services can look like a pair of socks, or helping someone obtain a new ID or bus voucher, or apply for food stamps. It could also be providing suicide intervention or crisis de-escalation, which Campolucci said happens "pretty often."

The increase in services provided came after Campolucci transformed a space near the library entrance known as the "resource corner." For years, Volunteers of America was the only group utilizing the space, cordoned off near the entrance with stanchions, signs and shelves for information pamphlets.

But even though Volunteers of America is there every week day, they can only help people experiencing homelessness, and its volunteers don't staff the area full time.

Campolucci brought in eight additional providers, including the Asian Association of Utah, The Road Home, Odyssey House, Valley Behavioral Health and the Department of Workforce Services, which rotate in and out of the space on set days of the week.

These other groups can give services to a broader group of people who have psychosocial needs, like those with substance misuse disorders or those experiencing domestic violence.

Through the Odyssey House partnership, 20 people have entered substance misuse detoxification and treatment since February, and 35 people have made contact with a mental health provider through Valley Behavioral Health since April, Campolucci said.

Before Campolucci started at the library, she was the director of clinical

services at Valley Behavioral Health, working in the children, youth and families division.

"That wasn't really my jam though," she said. Campolucci said she missed the work she was doing before at the University of Utah Health and Volunteers of America — working with people with mental health and substance misuse disorders and people experiencing homelessness.

"I just really like working with people who other people seem to have forgotten about or seem to want nothing to do with," she said.

Erin Mendoza, co-chair of the library's social service council, said bringing in a social worker has given library staff insight into how to best help library patrons with needs beyond checking out a book or a telescope.

"We are always trying to advocate for people the very most," Mendoza said. "But sometimes, it's hard to know, is this a good boundary? Is this enabling? Are we not doing enough?"

Campolucci typically knows those answers, Mendoza said. She also has helped library staff prioritize self-care — something Mendoza said the staff needs especially after the pandemic, as some patrons' needs have increased and others are more often in a "heightened state" of emotion" and more likely to take out frustrations on staff.

Mendoza said after the pandemic and the demolition of the downtown Road Home shelter, "that fundamentally changed the dynamic of how that community is able to exist in the downtown space."

"I don't even know if it's necessarily more people. But in some cases, it feels like the situations that people are in feel more extreme, or behaviors have become more extreme," she said. "A lot of mental health going untreated,

things like that."

That's exactly why Campolucci feels her role is so important, even if sometimes other library patrons don't understand or feel uncomfortable with the library being a hub for unhoused people.

Campolucci says she and other staff try to explain that it's their mission to allow "equal access for everybody."

Starting in July, Campolucci will start her own office hours in the resource corner, providing direct services to people after setting up the program.

Mendoza said after that, Campolucci will look into other ways the library can offer services, such as through a peer navigator program or working with universities to provide internships to people studying to be social workers.