

# A SOCIAL WORKER IN THE LIBRARY

Hospitals, schools and community organisations were once considered the most common working environments of social workers. But social workers in libraries are now a thing. DEBORAH MILES, a social worker at the State Library of Queensland, outlines how social workers and librarians can work well together.

The title of this piece might make you think I walk around a library helping homeless people, or maybe read to children, or spend time doing digital literacy things. I actually spend most of my time at a desk, reading and writing – working behind the scenes to improve people’s experiences of the public library.

How can that be? Well, here’s my story.

At the State Library of Queensland (SLQ), my work focuses on supporting public libraries. My role emphasises building skills, providing funding, advocating the value of libraries, attracting partners (and more funding), developing policy, plus sharing information and good practice. I do this with a team of creative individuals: our elevator pitch is that we support libraries to stay FIT – through funding, ideas/innovation and training.

I studied social work as a mature student and loved it, and I amazed myself by achieving first-class honours in community development. I was excited to discover a framework around my experiences, and I eagerly honed my knowledge and skills and wanted to share them. More importantly, I couldn’t wait to develop policies and strategies. My strengths and interest in community development enabled me to work in and with local government, where I developed a publication titled ‘An Introduction to Community Development in Local Government’ and then led the Arts Community Engagement team in Arts Queensland before coming to SLQ.

Working in a library wasn’t my original plan but, to my delight, I discovered that libraries are a perfect fit for social workers. These two seemingly diverse professions share some of the same goals, such as a focus on supporting access, increasing wellbeing, facilitating social change and development, building social inclusion and enabling community development.

A recent example of this was an SLQ project in partnership with Logan Libraries, in which I supervised two QUT Masters of Social Work students who were from India



Deborah Miles, State Library of Queensland

and Vietnam. They worked in Logan with their respective communities, identifying awareness and use of the Logan Libraries, their LOTE collections, their reasons for not being members and so on. They used the SLQ WELCOME Toolkit (We Love Community Outreach Model of Engagement) to guide their approach, and they went out and engaged with their community members by visiting Hindu temples and grocery stores, Vietnamese bakeries and by attending cultural celebrations.

In summary, I apply social work principles to how I work through my professional and personal approach, which means that I try to

- consult and engage and participate (more heads are better than one, you’ve got to be in it to win it, always ask ‘What do you think?’)
- work in partnership (bring people with you, ask ‘Who else can I do this with?’, ‘How can we complement each other?’, and aim for win-win outcomes)
- build skills, strength, and confidence (learn new things and share knowledge)
- advocate (speak out for a cause or policy and its articulate benefits)
- develop a sense of belonging and identity (build a community and be inclusive)

The language of librarians is the language of social workers: we both want access, advocacy, engagement, development, wellbeing and inclusion – and that’s how I get my jollies! 🌟

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