



## WHY THIS MATTERS

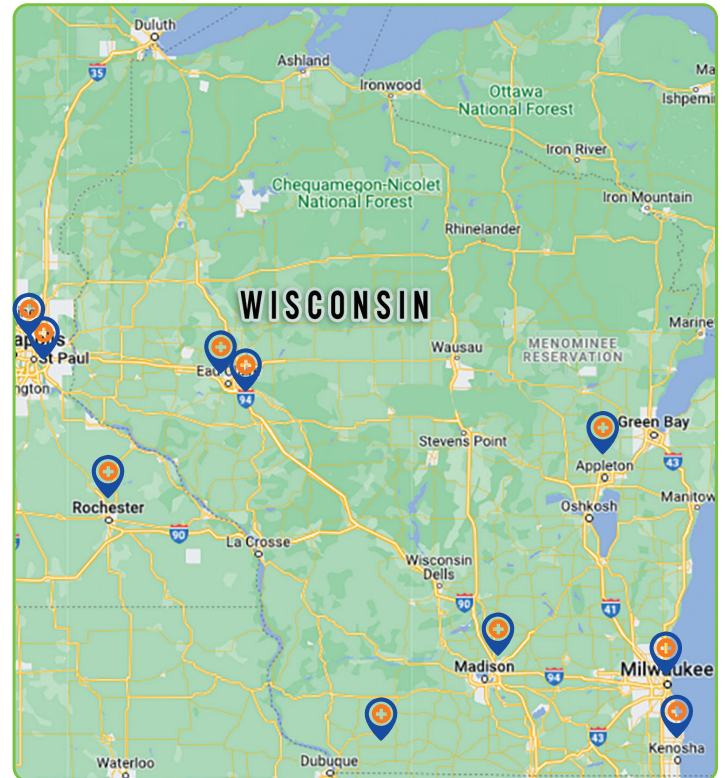
Libraries can play an important role in supporting youth mental health. They offer safe, welcoming, and inclusive environments that help youth explore their interests; connect to trusted adults; play and participate in activities that enrich learning; and foster community connections, all of which build mental health and resilience. Bookmobiles, digital libraries, and internet access allow libraries to reach many children, especially those in rural communities that may lack adequate internet connectivity. Libraries also help parents dealing with financial strain access community resources that can mitigate housing, health, or legal stress – all drivers of mental health concerns in families.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Research tells us that people who visit libraries have unmet needs with their finances and mental health.<sup>1</sup> Because libraries often serve as a community hub and are a trusted community resource, there is less stigma going to the library than walking into a treatment center. For youth living in rural areas, access to a mental health professional often means traveling outside of their community. Embedding information on wellness and resources like social workers within the library can alleviate some of those barriers.<sup>2</sup>

Researchers investigated the role that library workers play in connecting youth to digital mental health resources, finding libraries are a highly promising setting to implement digital mental health and to reach adolescents, especially those who are underserved.<sup>3</sup>

Library systems across the country are responding with novel youth mental health programming, including virtual reality tools that allow teens to examine their mental health and co-design solutions.<sup>4</sup>



Library Social Work in Wisconsin  
Source: Whole Person Librarianship

## LIBRARY SOCIAL WORKERS

Libraries are starting to hire mental health coordinators and library social workers. These professionals are often Licensed Clinical Social Workers who can assist library patrons with their individual needs, and in the process, become a trusted adult to youth and an invaluable resource to parents.<sup>5</sup>

Though they do not provide counseling services, library social workers can serve as a critical bridge to community service providers and the people who need these services, but often do not know how to access or navigate their local resources. As such, libraries can be a protective factor, especially for underserved people.<sup>6</sup>



# WHAT WE CAN DO

## ➔ PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

- Model information seeking and help seeking skills at the library.
- Visit your local library to explore the children's programming, and connect with library staff.
- Encourage your child to visit both their school and community library. Also, try checking out e-books or e-audiobooks from [Wisconsin's Digital Library](#).
- Make use of [BadgerLink](#), Wisconsin's free online library, available statewide.

## ➔ SCHOOLS & LIBRARIES:

- Curate youth mental health collections and offer developmentally appropriate resources that reduce stigma.
- Cultivate a warm and welcoming environment that fosters belonging, offering a safe space for all children.
- Educate staff on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma-informed care, and build awareness of local mental health supports to assist youth in need
- Develop relationships with and/or host local youth-led peer mental health groups. Engage youth to ask what kinds of resources and programming youth want at the library.
- Display the Accessing Children's Mental Health Services posters to empower caregivers seeking support for their children: <https://children.wi.gov/Pages/AccessingMHServices.aspx>
- Leverage the ALA's mental health resources: <https://www.ala.org/support/mental-health-resources-libraries>

## ➔ POLICYMAKERS:

- Create and fund robust pathways such as paid internships to support mental health work in public libraries.
- Consider leveraging libraries as a service point for existing local, state, or federally funded mental health programs serving children, youth, and families.
- Expand funding for libraries to address mental health within the library setting.

## ➔ COMMUNITIES:

- Consider co-locating mental health service providers at local libraries to improve access.
- Inquire how your organization can support local libraries and youth mental health.
- Create partnerships with local libraries to advertise and host wellness events.

# WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN

Libraries are a natural hub for finding information and sharing resources, and Wisconsin libraries across the state are curating collections to address teen mental health, as well as providing help to those in need.

- In one community, the local middle school librarian is building awareness of the library's mental health offerings as she virtually walks students through their public library's website.<sup>7</sup>
- In Wisconsin, 40% of teens who are food insecure have seriously considered suicide.<sup>8</sup> Libraries promote local food banks, and house non-perishable food collection bins at the library entrance. Staff across the state offer teen nights with free pizza and snacks. Some also host cooking clubs for kids.
- Libraries commonly host presentations by local community organizations as a means of reaching people who lack help-seeking skills, which youth are often just developing in adolescence.

The Wisconsin Policy Forum reports overall attendance at library programs has steadily increased since 2000, more than doubling during 2000 and 2018.<sup>9</sup> According to public library service data, preliminary 2022 figures show that well over a million children and young adults in Wisconsin attended youth programming at their local library, demonstrating the growing importance of libraries.<sup>10</sup>

Wisconsin Public Libraries 2022 Preliminary Youth Service Data	
Age	Program Attendance
0-5	539,668
6-11	510,937
Young Adult	86,123

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup>Scripps National News, 1/6/22. Interview with researcher Beth Wahler.
- <sup>3</sup>Knapp et al. (2023). "The library is so much more than books": considerations for the design and implementation of teen digital mental health services in public libraries. *Frontiers in Digital Health*, Vol 5. 7/25/23. [doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2023.1183319](https://doi.org/10.3389/fdgth.2023.1183319)
- <sup>4</sup>Whole Person Librarianship, Hub for Library-Social Work Collaboration. [Map](#) accessed 9/13/23.
- <sup>5</sup>Scripps National News, 1/6/22. Interview with researcher Beth Wahler.
- <sup>6</sup>Lloyd, Patrick. The Public Library as a Protective Factor: An Introduction to Library Social Work. *Public Library Quarterly*. Vol 30 (1), 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2019.1581872>
- <sup>7</sup>Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. 7/10/23. Greendale Public Library establishes mental health collection for teen readers.
- <sup>8</sup>Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2023. "2021 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Summary Report." <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrebs>
- <sup>9</sup>Wisconsin Policy Forum. February 2020. By the Book, How Wisconsin's libraries are adapting in 2020 and beyond. <https://wispolicyforum.org/research/by-the-book-how-wisconsins-libraries-are-adapting-in-2020-and-beyond/>
- <sup>10</sup>Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. 2023. "2021 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Summary Report." <https://dpi.wi.gov/sspw/yrebs>