
PUBLIC LIBRARIES RESPOND TO THE OPIOID CRISIS WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES: CASE STUDIES

Case Study: Kalamazoo Public Library

Through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, OCLC and the Public Library Association have conducted research into how public libraries are supporting their communities through the opioid crisis, and how libraries are partnering with organizations to meet local needs. This profile was created through interviews with nine individuals: three staff members at the Kalamazoo Public Library, two staff members at their partner organization the Recovery Institute of Southwest Michigan, a library board member, and three community members who worked with peer navigators at the library. Their thoughts and experiences may not be generalizable to all of the staff of the library or their partners.

This is one of eight research-based case studies highlighting varying opioid response efforts across eight locations in the US. Additional information about the project can be found online at oclc.org/opioid-crisis.

Community and Library Overview

Kalamazoo Public Library (KPL) has a service population size of 116,445 and operates with one central and four branch library locations. It has an operating budget of \$11,638,645 with 19.5 librarians and 100 other staff, totaling 119.5 personnel. On average there are over a 600,000 visits per year.¹

The library's service area includes Kalamazoo City, Oshtemo township and Kalamazoo township. These communities are comprised of 71.2% White population, one-fifth Black or African American populations (19.4%), and 6.6% percent Hispanic or Latino populations. About one-third (36.4%) of its citizens hold a bachelor's degree, and 91.8% have at least a high school diploma.²

The median household income is \$40,749, and about one quarter (26%) of its citizens are living in poverty.³ Kalamazoo County's unemployment rate is 3.5%,⁴ and about 8.7% of the population does not have health insurance.⁵

The central library location is in an area with a shortage of mental health care professionals.⁶ Kalamazoo County has an opioid prescribing rate of 63.3,⁷ which is the number of retail opioid prescriptions dispensed per 100 people. Kalamazoo County has more people using prescription opioids than the national average.⁸ The number of general drug overdose deaths for Kalamazoo County was 144 people during 2015 through 2017.⁹



5 LIBRARY LOCATIONS



SERVICE POPULATION, 116,445



UNINSURED RATE, 8.7%



**OPIOID PRESCRIBING RATE, 63.3
(per 100 people)**



“I predict that it is going to be common for a library of our size, or any library, to have a social work connection. It just makes sense to me because libraries are the democratizing, stigma-free place where people feel like they can come to and have some semblance of safety, especially in the kind of polarized world we live in. You can just go to the library, and be in the library, and talk to people, and not have to wear your feelings on your sleeve. I think that’s really important.”

—Kalamazoo Public Library Manager

Kalamazoo Public Library’s Opioid Response

Kalamazoo Public Library’s primary strategy to address the opioid crisis is their peer navigator program, which supports patrons in need by identifying and guiding them to appropriate resources and services. For this program, the library has partnered with the Recovery Institute of Southwest Michigan, an organization that employs people in recovery as peer navigators. The Recovery Institute peer navigators work on site at the library and serve as a resource to help the public, just like other library staff. The navigators connect patrons to recovery services, community services, and also offer direct support.

KPL and Recovery Institute staff collaborated on the development of the program, intentionally starting small using existing resources and working together on iterations of the program as it grew. A staff member at the Recovery Institute described this further, “We just put the pieces together and started small with a couple of hours per week, because we were basically using other funding resources to loan out our staff to the project before there were any identifiable funds. We squeezed out a few hours here and there that we could spare. Then the library put some money in the budget to hire us and that

was nine hours a week. And then it was 15, and now we just secured our grant funding to get 40 hours per week.”

KPL leadership first sought board approval for the program, then moved on to internal staff buy-in. The Recovery Institute provided library staff with a presentation that covered what a peer navigator is, what they do, and what the program would look like in the library. Awareness for the program is built through word of mouth and by making contact in person when peer navigators walk around in the library and introduce themselves to patrons. The library does not do other external marketing of the program.

In addition to the peer navigator program, library staff have the option to become trained in naloxone administration, the opioid overdose antidote, and there are sharps containers in the bathrooms to allow for safe needle disposal.

Staff also began distributing comfort kits available with items such as shampoo, deodorant, and snacks to distribute to community members in need.

Partnering for Success

Much of the success of KPL’s peer navigator program can be attributed to its community partner organization, the Recovery Institute,

which is equally invested in the work as the library. From the start, Recovery Institute staff jumped to offer their services for free to help get the program up and running.

The library and the Recovery Institute share similar missions and values. A staff member at the Recovery Institute elaborated on this, “The library is a public service organization, so it’s a philosophy they have that allows us to partner easily with them. That’s just the way I’ve understood it as we’ve gotten together. They also have a real principle of civil liberties that rights of people should be honored with dignity and respect. These are values we really hold strongly.”

The library is also an active member of the Kalamazoo County Opioid Coalition, which addresses opioid treatment, awareness, and education in the community. For example, the Coalition worked on the safe needle exchange law passed in Kalamazoo, as well as on the extension of a Good Samaritan law

that passed in June 2019 and exempts staff in Michigan libraries from lawsuits if naloxone is administered onsite.

Funding

Initially, KPL’s peer navigator program services were offered three hours a week, with the Recovery Institute donating these hours. The Recovery Institute provided the services to the library for about six months, without the need for additional funding. The program has since expanded, and out of the 40 hours per week that the peer navigator program will operate at the library, the library will fund 15 hours through its operating budget.

The Recovery Institute negotiated with Southwest Michigan Behavioral Health to fund the expansion to 40 hours per week, under a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration program called State Opioid Response Grants. This increase in hours for the



Peer Navigators meet at the library.
Photo courtesy of Kalamazoo Public Library

program was accomplished as a result of staff investing time and effort to demonstrate the impact of the program to share with the library board and other funding decision-makers.

A Recovery Institute staff member described the value of this outreach, “The library has written articles and given talks to audiences that we wouldn’t really necessarily have been involved in before. Having somebody speak about your organization in a positive way in this kind of partnership really increases our reputation in town. We’re a really small non-profit. A lot of people hadn’t heard of us. So when the library talks about you, it’s a whole different level of exposure and it’s a really positive level of exposure for us.”

Local Conditions Leading Up to the Library’s Response

Local factors and conditions that led to KPL’s response to the opioid crisis with their community partners include:

- **Regular use of the library by populations experiencing homelessness and substance use disorder.** Library staff had recognized the challenge of serving patrons who were experiencing difficult circumstances and required additional supports the library was not equipped to provide.
- **KPL participation in the Kalamazoo County Opioid Coalition.** In fall 2017, the Kalamazoo County Opioid Coalition gathered community leaders and medical experts to discuss the local impact of the opioid epidemic. KPL staff attended this initial meeting and decided they wanted to be a part of the solution. This is also where KPL learned about the Recovery Institute’s peer navigator program as they were also a Coalition member.
- **Examples of successful social work efforts at other libraries.** Library staff

were also tracking what other US libraries were doing to address the opioid crisis in their own communities and were inspired by the social work and peer navigator programs of public libraries in Denver and San Francisco.

“Really, the library covers about everything. Anything I need to know or what I have to do, I can ask one of the librarians here. They’ve been very helpful. And it’s very refreshing and uplifting when I talk with the peer navigator also. We are kind of peers because he’s in recovery too, so we have good conversations. He’s kind of like a recovery coach with me, which is cool because I’m comfortable with talking with people that been down the road I’ve been.”

— Community Member

Reactions and Experiences of Library Staff, Board, and Community Members

Overall the reactions and experiences of KPL staff, their community partners, the media, and the community as a whole are supportive of the library’s opioid response activities.

LIBRARY STAFF AND BOARD

The library’s leadership shared that they were initially concerned about how the program might be received by the staff and board, and worked to mitigate these concerns and generate buy-in when it was introduced.

For example, library staff participate in professional development sessions called “KPL Academy,” and prior to the launch of this program, a KPL Academy session introduced the staff to the Recovery Institute, how they work in other organizations, what they do, and who they are. As new peer navigators start at the library, they are introduced via email to the library staff, including a picture, and they also walk around and meet staff in person.

Library staff also understand peer navigators will help them to do their job better by providing direct assistance to patrons with specific needs. One library frontline staff person expanded on this, “A lot of times you interact with people and you’re like, ‘I just wish I could help them a little bit more but I don’t have the resources to be able to do that.’ So having peer navigators in the library has been really great.”

MEDIA

Library staff have intentionally not promoted the program to the media to allow the program to get its footing before sharing the work externally. There is a concern that the program might cause unwarranted worries in the public. The library would prefer to provide some data to demonstrate the program’s positive impact on the community to offset any concerns, but this data is not yet available.

In addition, there is a lack of local media in Kalamazoo. Most of the television media is produced out of a larger, neighboring city, and the local newspaper is part of a group of small-town papers without much local content.

COMMUNITY PARTNER

KPL’s main partner, the Recovery Institute, has



Staff provide comfort kits to community members in need.

Photo courtesy of Kalamazoo Public Library

been very supportive of the library since the start. Its staff are “110%” on board because a number of their staff have experienced challenges in their own life, such as homelessness and substance misuse, and have used the library as a refuge. These individuals and the organization as a whole were pleased to be invited into the library as an equal partner. Moreover, other partners of the Recovery Institute are also excited about the library’s involvement in peer navigation.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Library staff shared that as patrons learn more about the program, they either express support that it seems like a great idea or some discomfort with the evolving role of the library in meeting these community needs. The patrons who access the peer navigator program speak very highly of it and are grateful for the benefits they have received and the relationships they have built through these engagements, “The peer navigator is about the only person I’m comfortable talking about my situation with. It’s been very helpful at the library, and I appreciate that the navigator’s here with the program. I hope this program continues.”

Outcomes of the Library’s Response

Several positive outcomes have occurred as a result of KPL’s opioid response activities. The library has developed new partnerships because of presentations at community events with the Recovery Institute. For example, the library plans to work with the local food bank to have their food pantry truck come to the library and set up during specified times for their patrons.

The library is also having exploratory discussions with the police department about working with their community liaisons, and with Western Michigan University about potential opportunities for social work students to intern with the library’s peer navigators. KPL staff believe they are overall more connected with the city and seen as a resource for other

“The key to this whole thing is having a partner that’s totally in on it. I have never worked with a group in my 20-plus years working in public libraries that’s so invested in the program as much as they are. It’s so incredibly awesome.”

—Kalamazoo Public Library Manager

community organizations as a result of their opioid response programming.

Collecting data to help demonstrate the effectiveness of the program is a challenge because of the need to build trust in the populations served by the program. Individuals accessing these services might not want to share their personal information or have it written down at the library, and the peer navigators feel that trust is critical.

There are, however, anecdotal stories of impact from staff. For example, over 100 contacts have been made with patrons by peer navigators since the start of the program, and patrons who have accessed the program now have housing and are off the streets. Anecdotally, there are fewer behavior and safety concern incidents occurring at the library since the peer navigators started.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS

There were many factors that contributed to the success of the KPL’s peer navigator programming, including the following:

- champions within the library and at the library’s equally committed community partner organization
- a new library director who demonstrated support for the peer navigation program and created an opportunity to explore the partnership
- starting small and letting the program grow naturally
- mission alignment between the library and partner organization

Challenges, Needs, and Opportunities

Through the course of developing and implementing the opioid response activities, KPL experienced challenges, needs, and identified opportunities for the work moving forward.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

- There was, and still exists, **some resistance from staff** to any change in current procedures and protocols, such as bringing in the peer navigators.
- **Additional funding** is needed for more peer navigator capacity support during all library hours.
- The scope of work between peer navigators and library personnel **should be clearly defined** for the organizations and the staff.
- Substance use disorder affects all populations and spans many substances. The **programming needs to address the full spectrum** and not target certain groups or substances.
- **More community collaboration and awareness building** between organizations is needed so that resources and efforts can be combined versus competitively fought over.
- Broadly, there is **a housing shortage and**

public transportation issues in Kalamazoo which can limit access to services.

OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The following are ongoing and future needs to support efforts to best address the opioid crisis:

- **Reach out to and partner** with organizations that have overlapping missions already potentially working on similar issues.
- **Educate the public and staff to break**

down stigma. The library is currently looking at offering Mental Health First Aid training to staff to aid in this education.

- Communicate and ensure **board and frontline staff buy-in** from the start.
- **Provide compassion and trauma training for staff** to see a person for more than their substance use disorder.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The staff of the Kalamazoo Public Library and their partners at the Recovery Institute of Southwest Michigan generously provided their time for these interviews, as well as for review of the case study.

The steering committee for this project provided guidance, recommendations and resources to create the interview protocol used for this case study, as well as feedback on the content and structure. More about the steering committee and the project team is available on the project website: <https://oc.lc/opioid-crisis>.

This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (project number LG-00-18-0298-18).

The views, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this case study do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

NOTES

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