

Beyond Resilience: Making Public Library Work Sustainable in Maryland

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Maryland
State Library
Agency

Why talk about
this today?



Reflective Moment #1

Turn to someone near you.

Share one thing that has changed in your work in the last five years that has increased stress.

No judgment.

Just one.

What frontline public library workers are telling us

- A 2021 Public Library Association Survey discovered that 57% of public library workers reported experiencing burnout during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Contributors include increased workload, health and safety stress, added emotional labor, reduced informal support from coworkers.
- Burnout hasn't lessened over the past five years. In a 2025 survey conducted by *Book Riot*, participants revealed that:

71% mentioned an increase in stress, burnout, and overwork

60% mentioned an increase in anxiety, panic, and hyper-vigilance

48% mentioned an increase in depression, apathy, and hopelessness

From ["Pizza Parties Don't Fix Burnout: The State of Librarian Mental Health"](#) by Kelly Jensen, *Book Riot*, January 2026

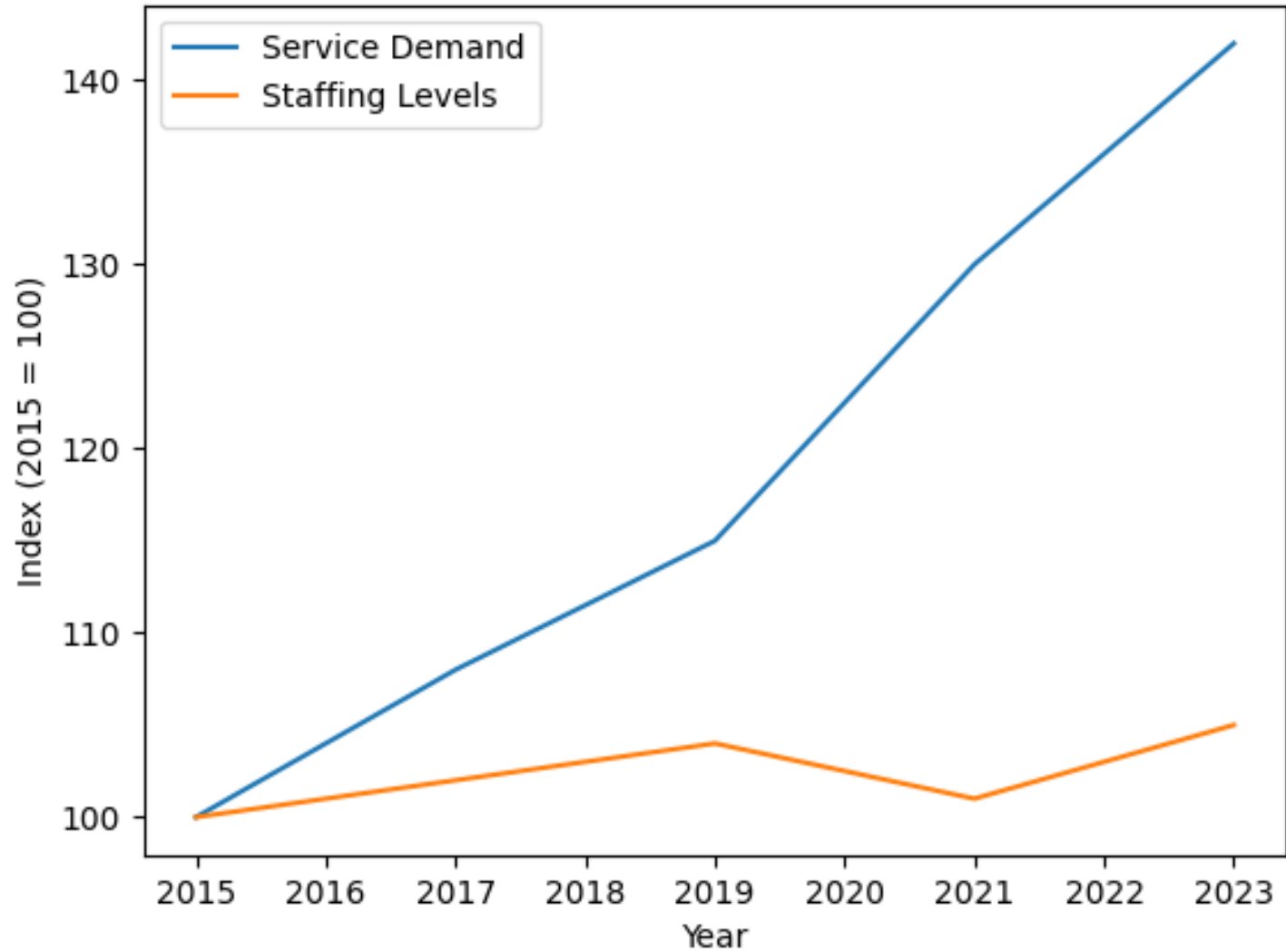
What's driving burnout?

From the *Book Riot* study-

- 95% of responses noted budget cuts, layoffs, closures, and defunding as the most significant concerns from outside the library
- 80% of library workers noted stress came from the expectation that the library operates as a social service provider
- 75% mentioned book bans, censorship, and political interference
- 50% mentioned the rising costs of materials, specifically the high costs of digital materials.

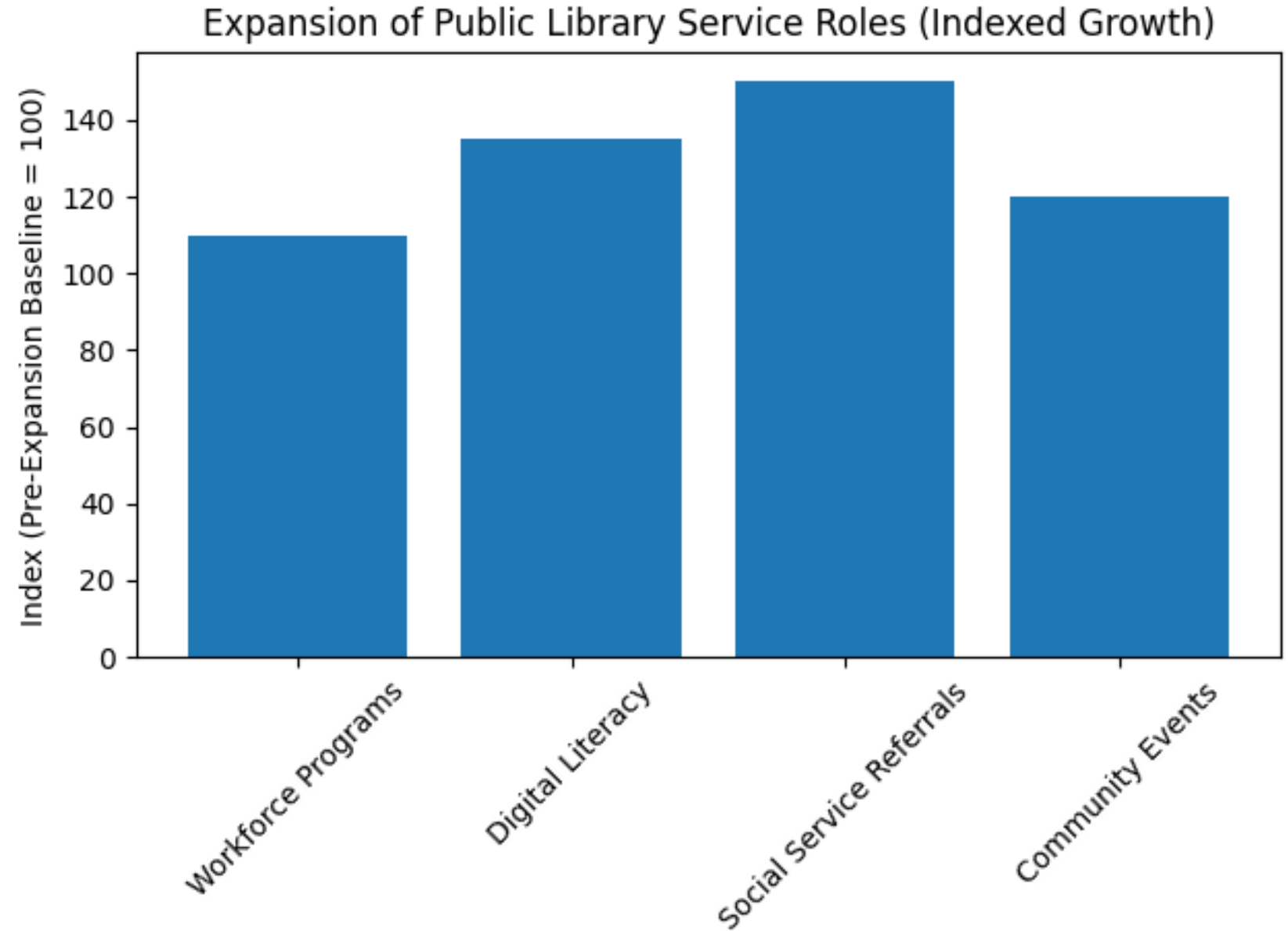
Mission Creep was the single-most day-to-day stressor mentioned.

Maryland Public Libraries Service Demand vs Staffing Trend (Indexed)

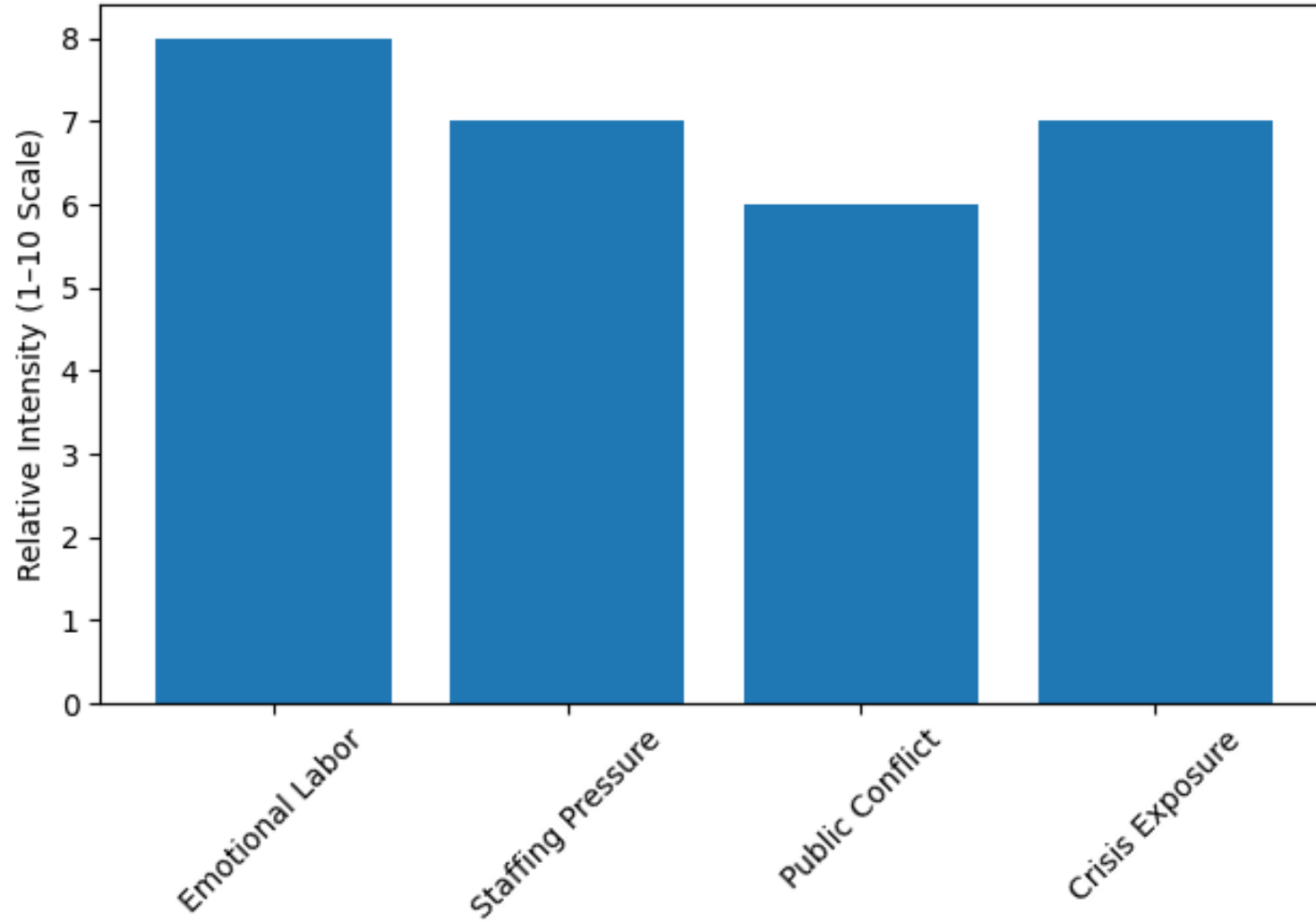


More than 17 million visits. Fewer than 3,500 staff statewide. That's intense.

Over 84,000 programs serving more than 2.1 million attendees. Each of those represents preparation, facilitation, and emotional labor.



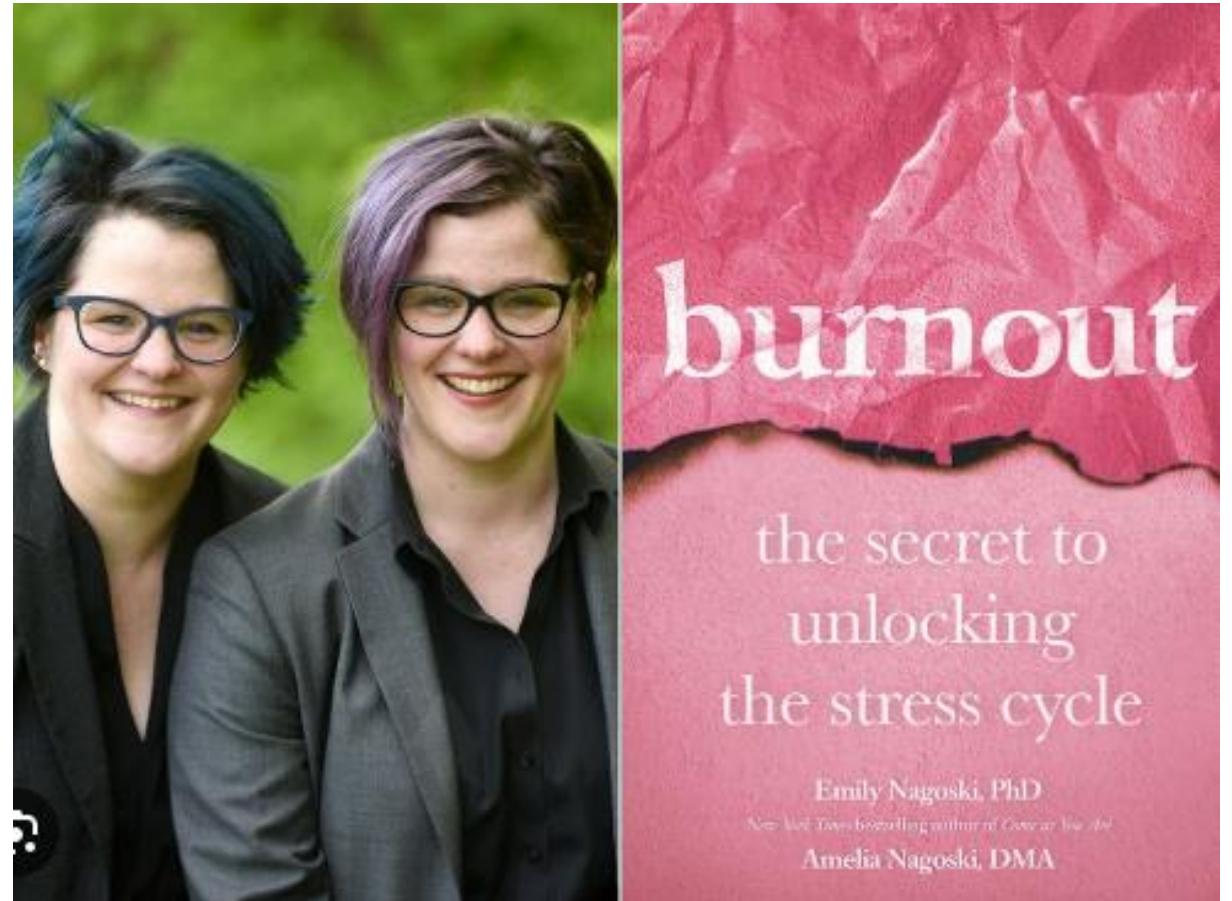
Key Burnout Risk Drivers in Public Library Work



Define “Burnout”

In the book *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*, by Emily Nagoski and Amelia Nagoski define burnout very specifically — not simply as being tired or overworked, but as a biological state caused by chronic, unresolved stress.

“A state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment caused by chronic stress that has not been successfully completed.”



The Stress Cycle

Stressor

External problem

Example:

- Stressor: difficult patron, understaffing, deadlines
- Stress: increased cortisol, adrenaline, vigilance

Burnout is what happens when chronic stress lives in the body without being discharged or completed. It is not personal and it is not a weakness of the individual. It is especially common in caregiving and public-facing roles.

Emotional Labor + Lack of Recovery increases risk of burnout

Stress

Body's physiological response



The Nagoskis emphasize completing the stress cycle through:

- Physical movement
- Social connection
- Laughter
- Deep breathing
- Creative expression
- Clear boundaries

In a library, this looks like

- Adequate staffing
- Opportunities for self-expression and growth
- Psychological safety
- Clear communication and priorities
- Escalation protocols
- Space and time to decompress after difficulty interactions
- Scheduling considerations, i.e. rotating high intensity work

The Body Keeps the Score

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk writes that trauma is not just remembered — it is stored in the body. Library workers are on the frontlines of individual and community trauma. You receive:

Economic stress

Housing instability

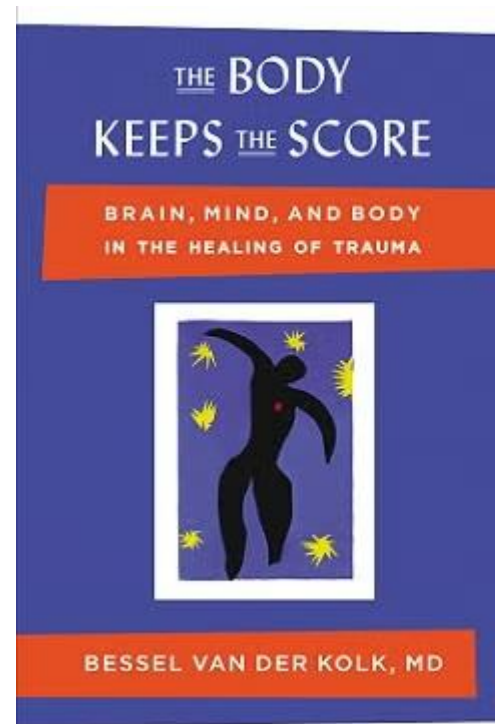
Mental health crises

Political tension

Community grief

Digital inequity

Social fragmentation



To recover, we need safety, predictability, and connection.

Loving your work isn't enough.



Meaning doesn't protect against
burnout
Meaning **plus support structures** is
needed

Recovery must be structural, not just personal.

Reflection Moment #1 (2 minutes)

Take a moment and ask yourself:

When during your workweek do you feel the most activated?

When do you feel most grounded?

No judgment.

Just notice.



Sustaining the People who Sustain Libraries



Building a Culture of Connection & The Power of Trust

Trust is foundational to library work internally and externally

Burnout accelerates when staff feel disconnected from leadership, decisions, and purpose.

Everyone plays a role regardless of position or tenure

Missions and policies must align with values

Create psychological safety through listening, validation, and follow through-*"We always want to ensure people feel heard and validated."*

Empowering leadership practices:

Explicitly name organizational values (kindness, curiosity, belonging)

Model those values in decision-making, not just messaging

Create shared language around trust and teamwork



Empowering Library Staff and Customers:

Building a Culture of Teamwork and Trust

By Christine Feldmann and Catherine Hollerbach

What Staff Told Us Works

- Accessible leadership
- Honest Communication
- Peer support
- Recognition and celebration
- Humor and community
- Permission to be human at work



“We laugh. It sounds so simple but it’s true.”

Leadership Presence Matters

Be visible and available

Check in regularly

Notice signs of fatigue

Audit workload

Being well versed in trauma-informed leadership and library practices



“They [managers] cover a spectrum of checking in/showing us they care- sending friendly texts, taking the time to chat and check in with us, and scheduling branch meetings to bring us together as a whole unit. I think this does a lot to boost our morale because we never feel alone or unheard.”

Encouraging Innovation & Creativity

Autonomy and creativity are protective factors against burnout

Support creative ideas

Let staff experiment outside traditional roles

Invest in professional growth

Align innovation with both staff passion and community demand

Flexible scheduling, displays, signage as real-world trust examples

Treat creativity as competence, not risk



Do It Now:

Inventory staff skills that are currently unused in their job descriptions

“When you have a team of creative people, and it is stifled, it inevitably causes frustration.”

Honesty & Clear Communication

Micromanagement and unclear priorities are major burnout drivers.

Clearly define organizational goals

Communicate consistently

Delegate authority, not just tasks

Allow staff discretion in service delivery

Transparency in Code of Conduct; Clear communication around materials, circulation, and privacy

Empowering leaders:

Staff burn out faster when they must enforce unclear or unpopular policies without support.

Equip staff with the “why” behind policies

Involve staff in policy review

Prepare talking points before controversy arises



Do It Now:

Audit one policy through a frontline enforcement lens.

Giving Staff Agency

Burnout thrives when feedback goes nowhere.

Treat frontline reports as expertise; Listen to frontline reports

Acknowledge stress and capacity

Provide resources (EAP, counselors, debriefs)

Give staff agency in incident response improvements- Feeling unheard after difficult incidents is more damaging than the incident itself.

Collect regular feedback

Burnout Assessment

Embed staff voices in mission, policies, and daily practices

Empowering leaders:

Include frontline staff early in planning

Treat dissent as data



Do It Now:

Identify one standing decision-making space where frontline staff are currently absent.

“To be seen, heard, and understood is one of the loudest forms of love.”

Create & Model Healthy Boundaries

No work beyond scheduled hours

Encourage Time Off- “you can’t pour from an empty cup”

Normalize rest

Staffing is a management responsibility-
“Staffing is the managers problem, not theirs.”

Model boundaries as leaders



What the State Library Agency Can Do

- Reframe Burnout as an Infrastructure Risk
- Advocate & Align funding with Staffing Reality
- Create state-wide opportunities to examine and reimagine library work and how it gets done
- Advance Trauma-Informed Leadership
- Promote Structural Recovery Practices
- Collect better workforce data
- Build Career Sustainability Pathways
- Model the Culture



What This Means for Our Future

Greater well-being for all
Retention & Growth
Stronger libraries,
stronger communities
A responsive, future-
ready workforce that can
better navigate and lead
change



In Closing-

People sustain libraries.
Systems must sustain people.

Thank you!

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