

Public Libraries: Essential Public and Mental Health Mandates

Urban libraries have **essential mandates** that are not fully recognized in federal funding opportunities, from **providing access to health and mental health support** to citizenship classes to **supporting individuals experiencing homelessness**. The programs and partnerships libraries lead around health services, affordable housing and pathways to citizenship create healthy, vibrant and diverse communities.

In their critical role in supporting the unhoused community, libraries **connect people to social services**. Public libraries are directly impacted by the challenges of street behavior, homelessness, mental illness and opioid addiction. Libraries are staffed with social workers and form partnerships with social service agencies to streamline access to workforce assistance programs.

Libraries are also **trusted spaces to obtain health information privately and securely**. Library staff help patrons navigate complex health systems and services. Programs and partnerships with local clinics and health literacy resources empower community wellness. Additionally, libraries provide computers, Wi-Fi and private rooms for telehealth appointments, supporting greater equity in healthcare access.

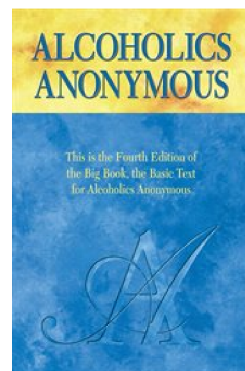
Additionally, libraries play a strategic role in **addressing local needs around food access**. Library gardens and cafés demonstrate healthy, sustainable food access. Cooking and nutrition classes empower community members around food literacy and food security, while local partnerships strengthen community food systems from farm to table, including food pantries.

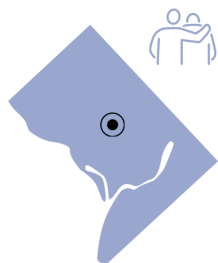
Snapshot of Libraries Creating Healthier Communities



San Francisco Public Library (CA)

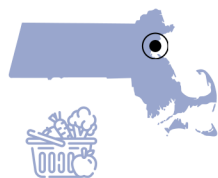
The most stolen books from San Francisco public libraries are those about recovering from addiction. This led the San Francisco Public Library in 2023 to make these books available for free – no library card needed – at three branches. Since then, the library has distributed more than 3,200 **books about beating addiction** to anyone who requests them. In February 2024, San Francisco City Supervisor Matt Dorsey introduced legislation to expand this pilot program to distribute addiction recovery books for free at all 28 public libraries in the city.





DC Public Library (DC)

The [Peer Outreach Program at the DC Public Library](#) supports library customers experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Peers have been trained and certified through the DC Department of Behavioral Health and meet customers at branches throughout the library system. They work with customers to find shelter, housing, treatment programs, mental health services, food, clothing and much more. Peers are role models who demonstrate competency in personal recovery and serve as consumer advocates who provide clients with information and support. Peers build rapport and trust with a customer so that the hard work of moving out of homelessness, and/or into recovery, can begin.



Boston Public Library (MA)

The Nutrition Lab, located at the Roxbury Branch of the Boston Public Library, serves as the [library's hub for nutrition literacy](#). Demonstrations and hands-on classes allow the Nutrition Lab to provide learning opportunities for healthy eating and space to develop life and work skills focused on nutrition and meal creation. The Nutrition Lab also has a Chef-in-Residence who works with the library to increase nutritional literacy and cooking programs for community members of all ages.



Richland Public Library (SC)

For over a decade, the [Social Work Department at the Richland Library](#) has been instrumental in transforming lives and empowering communities in the Columbia, SC, region. Some of the [social services it provides](#) include food access, housing, legal assistance, Medicaid application, prescription access assistance, veterans' benefits, transportation and more. The library has played a pivotal role in serving the community during challenging times, from devastating floods to the COVID-19 pandemic. By minimizing barriers and maximizing outreach efforts, the Social Work Department has consistently demonstrated its commitment to serving as many people as possible.



WHAT'S AHEAD FOR LIBRARIES: BUILDING GREATER AWARENESS OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES

ULC seeks to build greater congressional and federal agency awareness around the role public libraries play in public and mental health services. We also look to strengthen support for public housing and affordable housing partnerships with public libraries.