



## Promising Practices

### Using Byrne JAG to Support Library Social Work Programs: It Takes a Library

Libraries are often overlooked as community resources for at-risk populations, and they can serve to connect at-risk individuals with services to help keep them out of or prevent them from re-entering the criminal justice system.

In 2009, the San Francisco Public Library hired the country's first full-time library social worker and created a model library social work program based on peer support and ensuring at-risk individuals who were homeless and/or who were struggling with mental illness and substance abuse received the treatment and care they needed. Since this program's inception, other library social work programs have sprouted up across the nation.

One such program is in Colorado, where Byrne Justice Assistance Grant (Byrne JAG) funding was used to support the It Takes a Library (ITAL) project operated out of the Denver Public Library. This program, now functioning under a new name, builds on the traditional library social work program and increases access to mental health and human services and supports the reduction of crime and recidivism using evidence-informed best practices of peer support and library social work models. The partnership for ITAL included the Denver Public Library, Denver Human Services and the Colorado Mental Wellness Network.

Public libraries are free community hubs and serve as safe spaces for at-risk individuals who visit libraries daily. This provides an opportunity to meet individuals "where they are" and assist them with obtaining resources, support and necessary services. The social work model within the context of a public library can help increase access and decrease stigma for individuals in need.

### How the Program Works



The program team consists of both social workers and peer navigators who provide outreach, assessments, drop-in hours and service referrals for individuals traditionally at-risk of entering or re-entering the criminal justice system, either as victims or as individuals committing crimes, based on factors such as income level, homelessness and mental health.

The team provides a range of services: connecting individuals with health care or crisis services; helping clients sign up for benefits such as SNAP; transporting and accompanying clients to

appointments; speaking with clients one-on-one; facilitating support groups, and leading sessions on finding housing, employment and other needs.

The program emphasizes the use of the evidence-informed practice of peer support. Each of the peer navigators is in recovery from a mental health and/or substance misuse condition for at least one year, actively utilizes a wellness plan and has received extensive training to prepare for work as a peer navigator. This allows a connection with clients that the library social workers may be unable to reach. Above all, this program emphasizes and values human connection and peer-to-peer interaction that is responsive to an individual's needs.



## Program Success and Evaluation



A 2017-2018 ITAL program evaluation, conducted by the University of Colorado's Behavioral Health and Wellness Program, collected both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate and record the experiences of peer navigators, ascertain the peer-to-peer connections created and services provided by ITAL staff and evaluate the overall impact of the program. The program evaluation found ITAL to be effective and efficient in providing services, utilizing peer support and providing individuals with complex needs with the help they need exactly where they are, in a familiar and comfortable setting. [Read the evaluation in its entirety.](#)

This program is an excellent example of the innovative use of Byrne JAG funding. Originally funded using Byrne JAG dollars, the program continues under the new name of Resource Navigation, with the premise and services remaining the same and the peer navigators employed by the city.

Denver Public Library's social work program has been recognized by many newspapers and online sources such as [Westword](#), [The Denver University Graduate School of Social Work](#), and many more.



To learn more about Denver's library social work program, contact [Rachel Flank Goldberg](#).

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