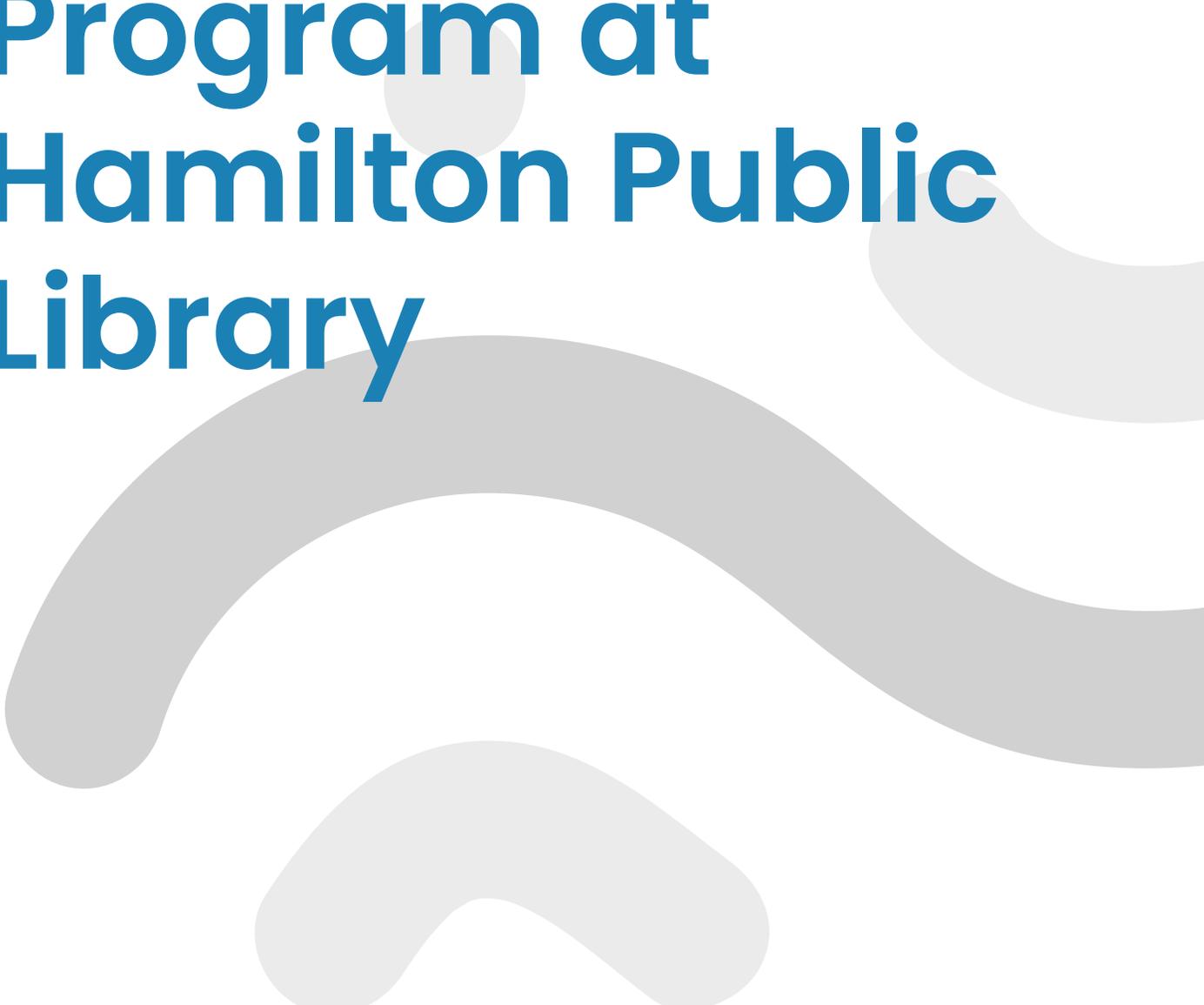


2026

Evaluation of the Social Work Program at Hamilton Public Library



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Introduction

In November 2022, Hamilton Public Library's (HPL) Central Library Branch initiated a partnership with Hamilton Public Health Services to provide an on-site social work program, creating positions for two part-time social workers who provide on-site social work services from the first floor of its downtown Central Library branch. HPL launched its Social Work Program in response to the growing needs of vulnerable and marginalized community members who rely on the library as a safe, accessible public space.

The people involved in initiating this program have a commitment to understanding, evaluating and strengthening the program: documenting how it is working, identifying the needs it is meeting for library members and staff, outlining areas of tension and unmet needs, and making recommendations for change and improvement. This evaluation provides an in-depth review of the program's purpose, outcomes, and challenges, while also capturing the voices of patrons, staff, leadership, and community partners. Their reflections provide a powerful testament to the role that libraries can play as inclusive community hubs. The findings are intended to guide future development, sustainability, and potential expansion of the program.



Background

Given the growing recognition of libraries as inviting spaces that support community connection and wellbeing, the inclusion of social workers within library spaces is well justified. Since 2010, an emerging trend across North America has been the integration of social workers into public libraries, either as permanent staff or through university partnerships¹⁻⁸. This development reflects libraries' expanding role as community hubs that are often the first point of contact for individuals experiencing social isolation, homelessness, mental illness, and other complex social challenges^{9,10}. While the original rationale for hiring social workers in libraries was to connect patrons to external agencies or provide crisis intervention, the scope of these roles has since expanded significantly³. Today, library-based social workers are engaged in shaping the overall service environment by supporting patrons' diverse needs, delivering staff training, and embedding preventative approaches into everyday library operations¹⁻³. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored the growing complexity of urban, social needs and reinforced calls for social workers to adopt innovative, "non-traditional" practices in accessible community spaces such as libraries^{7,11}.



Background

Evidence indicates that library-based social workers provide a broad range of interventions, from immediate crisis response and de-escalation of disruptive behaviour to longer-term supports such as referrals to housing, harm reduction, food security, and employment services¹²⁻¹⁴. They act as system navigators, reducing barriers to care and mitigating the pressure placed on library staff who are not trained to manage these social issues¹⁵. Importantly, social work field placements in libraries also serve as valuable training sites for MSW students while addressing urgent community needs^{16,17}. However, despite growing recognition of these benefits, the research base remains limited. Current scholarship is dominated by descriptive case studies and small-scale surveys, with very few rigorous evaluations of outcomes for patrons, staff, or communities. Furthermore, most published studies focus on the U.S. context, with relatively little comparative work from Canada, Europe, or other regions^{1,3,5,12,18-20}. As a result, there are significant gaps in understanding how social work roles in libraries are structured, sustained, and valued across diverse policy and funding environments.



Background

These gaps have shaped this project as they reveal an urgent need for broader evaluation of library–social work partnerships. As most research in this area has been descriptive and/or is U.S.-centric, this present evaluative study is an important step in providing valuable insights to ensure that library-based social work move beyond an “experimental” framing and are recognized as a sustainable and integral component of community social infrastructure.



Program Rationale & Objectives

HPL has long been a gathering place for diverse communities. In recent years, staff observed a sharp rise in patrons experiencing homelessness, mental health crises, addictions, and poverty.

Several senior HPL leaders highlighted the challenges HPL faces due to its unique role as a community space while recognizing its long history of serving the community: “We have serious problems and challenges with a lot of people in our spaces. That’s creating a huge amount of stress for people.”

Many patrons use the library as a warming and cooling centre, or as a place to find safety, respite, and connection. While library staff provide compassion and assistance, they are not trained to address complex social issues. The Social Work Program was developed to bridge this gap by embedding professional social workers with specialized skills into HPL’s Central library. The program’s goals include:

- Providing timely, trauma-informed, and client-centered support to at-risk patrons.
- Connecting individuals with housing, health care, and social service systems.
- Relieving library staff of responsibilities beyond their expertise, reducing stress and burnout.
- Supporting HPL’s role as a community hub promoting equity, inclusion, and wellbeing.

Evaluation Methods

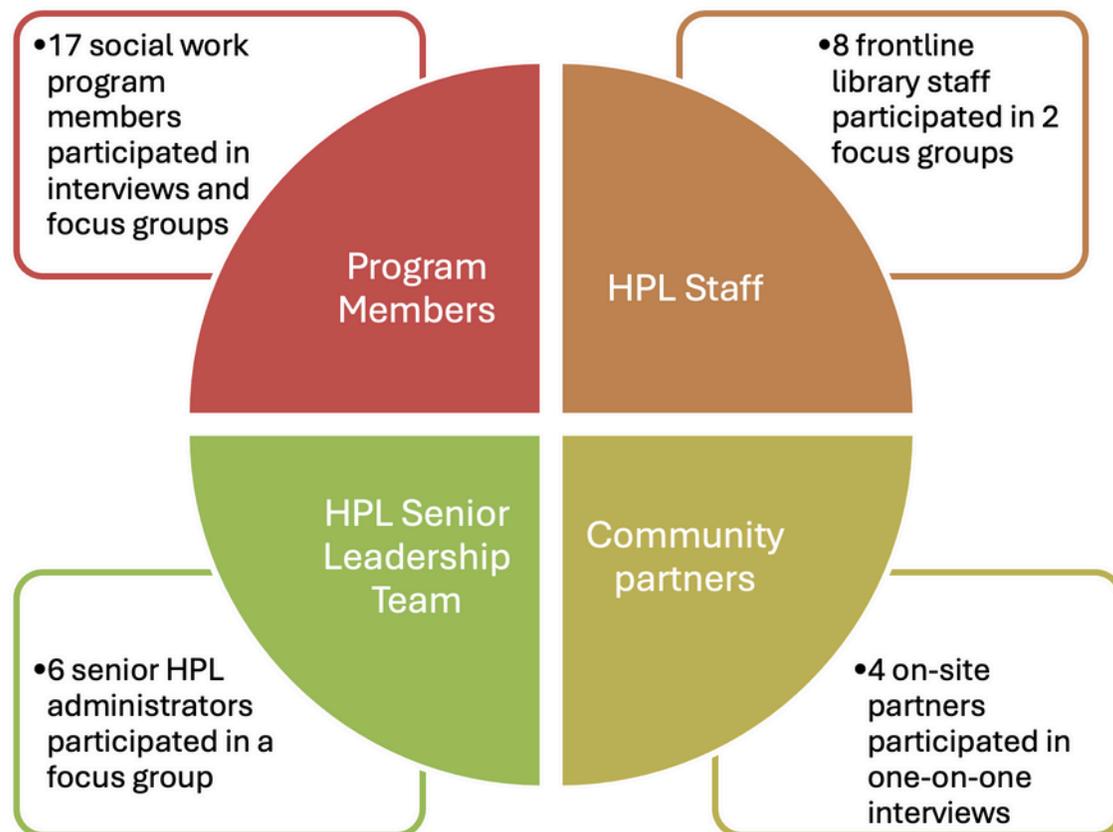
A core advisory group, comprising social workers, front-line library staff, representatives from Hamilton Public Health Services, an HPL Manager, and a social work client representative (a peer evaluator) collaboratively developed a working **logic model** for the program. This logic model visually maps the relationships between program resources, social work services and activities, and the intended short-term outcomes and longer-term impacts of the social work program. A copy of the logic model is available as an Appendix.

Through this process, the advisory group jointly identified key social work services at HPL, including on-site short-term counselling, instrumental assistance, systems navigation, referrals and advocacy, crisis intervention support, staff consultation, active engagement with library members, and training opportunities for social work students and graduate interns. For each of these services, the group outlined the required inputs and activities, as well as anticipated outcomes and impacts.

This phase of work was essential for establishing a shared understanding of the social work program's scope and functioning, ensuring advisory group alignment, and informing the subsequent development of evaluation questions, methods, and outcome measures.

Evaluation Methods

Input from the advisory group guided the selection of engagement methods used to effectively engage the different stakeholder groups. In a series of focus groups, we spoke with individuals differently linked to HPL's Social Work program. This layered approach ensured the findings reflect lived experiences and capture multiple perspectives.



Key Findings



Service Utilization

Program members found out about the social work program in a variety of ways, including:

- Close friends who use the program
- Observing the social work office on the first floor
- Referred by library staff at the front desk
- Security staff
- Social service organizations recommending the program
- Connecting directly with a social worker through outreach at HPL

This program member shared that he had recently been released from prison, and a member of the security staff referred him to the social worker:

"I got out of jail. I came here because I was trying to find my place, trying to find my way. I had no clothes...and then I was talking with security because I was trying to borrow a phone. They got the social worker who let me use her phone. So I went to her office, made some calls and got some clothes..."

Referrals to housing supports, mental health care, and practical resources were common. One program member shared: *"It's very convenient for me because I was on the streets for a little bit and it's a warming place. I can come in and relax here for a little bit and I can borrow the telephone. There's free computer. Everything I need is basically right here."*



Impact:

Program Members

Program members described the service as life-changing, noting improvements in mental health, stability, and social connection. Many highlighted the dignity and respect they felt when working with social workers as well as the sense that the library was an appropriate and accessible setting in which to meet with them.

One participant explained: "I was in a negative mindset for the longest time, and talking to the social worker helped put me in a more positive mindset... it helped me turn my life around."

Another reflected: "Talking to the social worker was the first step in my recovery."

Yet another noted: "I thought it was cool... I've been on my own since I was a young boy. I travel all over. I have lived all over... so I have used social work programs, and this is the perfect place... everybody comes here that needs help."

Note: The study does not capture individuals who chose not to engage with HPL social workers, including those who may have left after observing that social workers were busy.

Impact:

Program Members

The program members who participated in this study received a wide range of services from the social work program, including:

- Development of individual case plans
- Counselling and emotional regulation
- Advocacy
- Social supports
- Practical assistance and resources
- Facilitating external supports and services for people with English as a second language
- Assistance signing up for classes, such as ESL (English as a second language)
- Development of resumes/employment assistance
- Referral to a family doctor
- Support in obtaining Canadian citizenship
- Support with paying bills online
- Sorting through personal documents
- Support for mental health issues
- Addictions support
- Assistance with technology
- Assistance with essential documents/filling out forms
- Facilitated referrals to other services
- Human Rights Applications
- Support in seeking housing
- Assistance in obtaining ID



Impact: Staff

Library staff strongly supported the program, describing it as both a relief and a critical complement to their library work. Social workers provided de-escalation, staff training, and moral support.

“Having the social worker step in when I’m like, ‘Okay, here comes that member who’s done this,’ and definitely they don’t want to see security. No one wants to see anybody in uniform when they’re already upset, and that’s the last person they trust. So it helps having the social worker to de-escalate this behaviour.”

As one staff member said: *“My first reaction when I heard that there was a social worker coming on staff was honestly, like, finally, what took so long?”* Another added: *“The social workers are amazing... they are advocates, they are allies.”*



Impact:

Staff

Staff also noted: *“The amount of incidents have been cut in half... If they hear something, they [the social workers] come out, and they are able to de-escalate instantly because that’s their training.”*

At times, staff shared a perceived mismatch shared between what was experienced on the floor and what was espoused and hoped for by senior leadership:

“I think leadership likes having the idea of the library being a wrap-around service. I think they like it when one of their many values is the library as a cultural beacon and as a place where anyone can come and receive the help they need, which is an ideal. I really want to live up to. I love that ideal. But you can’t just put us on desk and expect us to fill in that gap. I see a lot of parallels between the situations we are being put in and the situations that the social workers are being put in.”



Impact:

Senior Leadership

The senior leadership team demonstrated strong support for the social work program by emphasizing the expertise of social workers and the numerous benefits their services have provided to the HPL community. Senior leaders identified several positive outcomes from this partnership, including supporting library staff through debriefings, in-house referrals, and crisis intervention, as well as delivering exceptional and compassionate service to program members. Additionally, senior leaders noted that social workers have established more community partnerships, enabling HPL to expand its community engagement.

A senior leadership team member who works closely with library staff highlighted the valuable support provided by the social workers:

"...I know the staff feels much more supported in handling situations, both in the fact that they have someone to both support them and the members too, but also that they have somebody that they could go and ask questions. So, overall, the level of support that staff receive and the guidance in dealing with these situations that may arise in the future when there is a social worker on site has definitely been a benefit."



Impact:

Senior Leadership

This senior leader described how HPL social workers have the expertise to expand community partnerships:

"We're always looking to establish new [community] partnerships, mostly in the form of programming, but that's a benefit I see having the social worker on-site to provide that expertise we might be missing."

Several senior leaders highlighted how the partnership with Public Health has increased the benefits of this service:

"The other observation I have is that it's a benefit that when we have the social worker program here, they also bring lots of information from the Public Health side to us, you know, it's more timely. So, for example, if there is a new drug on the street, we probably would have no idea if they're not here, but they usually know right away from their hospital system. So then they will alert us..."

Finally, senior leadership underlined how the social workers have helped stabilize the environment at HPL:

"In terms of the broader context, I'd say when we first started it, it did help us stabilize our environment here in the library ... Members were in a better state than when they [social workers] were meeting them in an institutional setting. You know, just in terms of their frame of mind."



Impact:

Community & System-level

The program built stronger connections between HPL and Hamilton’s social service sector. By creating a trusted, accessible entry point for support, the library became a de facto hub for wrap-around care.

A community partner observed: *“Libraries provide a very unique space within the community – they are the last free space that people can go and access Wi-Fi, a bathroom, computers, books, and just a space to stay warm or cool.”*

This role supported stronger coordination across services by facilitating referrals and informal collaboration within a shared, accessible setting.

Challenges

While the program has been successful, stakeholders noted several barriers linked to broader social issues. As one program member explained: *“Sometimes people come with higher expectations than what they can do anything about or higher needs... we’re in the library, right? Not a hospital.”*

1. Insufficient staffing: participant feedback indicated that existing staffing levels limited the program’s ability to meet current demand.

- *“...one social worker or two social workers is not enough...because I know that this is the place that a lot of people here need help...”* (HPL Program Member)
- *“I really think they do need to be full-time. I did not also expect how in demand they would be because they have line-ups whenever they have open office hours.”* (HPL Staff)

2. Overlapping crises: overlapping crises related to homelessness, opioid use, and mental health extend beyond the scope of a library-based social work program and point to broader, system-level challenges.

- *“We need them [the social workers] from opening to close. Like the incidents and the need doesn’t stop. You know there’s so many people and there’s no housing, there’s no services, there’s no support. The library is their support network.”* (HPL Staff)
- *“The scale of the problem is beyond what any individual intervention or strategy is going to address in our space”* (HPL Senior Leadership Team)

3. Safety and balance: Families sometimes share space with distressed library members, creating tension.

4. Funding uncertainty: The pilot relies on short-term budget allocations.

Recommendations

1. Expand Staffing & Hours

- Increase the number of social workers and extend hours to evenings and weekends.

2. Strengthen Outreach & Visibility

- Promote the program through signage, peer networks, and outreach within the library.

3. Enhance Training for Library Staff

- Provide ongoing trauma-informed training, ensuring staff can support patrons respectfully and safely.

4. Develop Outcome Metrics

- Standardize tracking of referrals, service outcomes, and patron progress to demonstrate impact.

5. Secure Sustainable Funding

- Advocate for municipal and provincial support and explore partnerships with universities, public health, and philanthropic organizations.

6. Expand Wrap-Around Support

- Integrate peer support, case management for seniors, support groups, and specialized services like art or trauma therapy.
- Program members emphasized: *“Bus tickets...we need the bus ticket to get from A to B, and I’m allowed only one a month. Just not enough.”*

Conclusions



The evaluation confirms that the Social Work Program at HPL is highly valued and has already transformed the library environment. Members, staff, leadership, and partners alike stressed that the program addresses urgent gaps in the social safety net. At the same time, the program's success underscores the broader, profound unmet needs in the Hamilton community, which exceed the scope of what a library alone can provide. With sustainable funding and expanded capacity, the HPL model could become a leading example for libraries across Canada.

As one participant concluded: *“Every library needs a social work program like this to help the people who need it.”*



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Working Logic Model for Hamilton Public Library Social Work Program

Compass Statements for the HPLSW Program

Vision: libraries as a site of information and access into systems of care

Why HPLSWP came to be: To be responsible civic partners in addressing social crises [and system challenges], drawing on models at other libraries and working in partnership with Public Health.

Mandate/Goals:

- Provide necessary, responsive social services to library members (who are over 16 yrs.), with particular attention to those who experience various forms of marginalization
- Respond to or consult with library staff in crisis/disruptive situations
- Provide students with training in a busy, dynamic community space with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds and diverse experiences
- Partner with McMaster University to provide hands-on experience for students and readiness for social work practice and provide graduate internships to offer specialized program information for community development, research, and evaluation

Working Logic Model for HPLSW

<i>Inputs: HPL/HPH partnership, funding, program governance...</i>			
Services	Activities/outputs required to deliver Services	Intended Outcomes of Services (shorter term)	Anticipated Impacts of Program (longer term)
On-site, short-term counselling	Individual, therapeutic, confidential conversations, brief coping strategies	Library members can be held in moments of grief and/or trauma response and have experiences of support, empathic interaction, worthiness and belonging	Reduction in suffering for marginalized members Reduction of barriers to accessing other services
Instrumental assistance	Practical and focused help with basic needs (access to clothing, food) and personal administration (identification, applications for housing, employment, citizenship)	Library members receive material items and support with processes that result in a greater capacity for independence, agency and choice	Greater security and stability in living for marginalized members
Systems navigation, referrals and advocacy	Develop and maintain resources that document systems of care in Hamilton, including locations and contacts Initiate or increase agency support through communication with appropriate staff, warm transfer procedures	Library members are connected with resources that are appropriate to their needs and self-identified goals and have experiences of being heard, finding solutions, and reduced marginalization	Increase in frequency of use of services across the systems of care in Hamilton that are most appropriate for needs
Crisis intervention support	Assist security in diffusing volatile situations in library spaces (in non-emergencies) Providing support and input for library and security staff (protocol development) Relieve/ support library staff in crisis / disruptive situations	Library members experience harm reduction and support during crisis Library staff can primarily focus attention and resources on programming and duties related to information science and public education	Improvement in the social atmosphere of the library for all members Reduction in workplace stress for library staff

<p>Staff consultation and training</p>	<p>Supporting and consulting with library staff to respond to members' needs (instrumental assistance and systems navigation, especially when a social worker is not available)</p> <p>Allocate resources to these trainings and expanded work descriptions</p>	<p>Library staff have a larger repertoire of coping strategies and intervention methods and feel confident in their practice</p> <p>Library staff feel well-equipped for, aware of, and valued for the expansion of their work responsibilities</p>	<p>Enhanced capacity of library staff to respond to evolving responsibilities</p> <p>Increase in capacity of public space to meet the needs of all members</p>
<p>Active engagement with library members</p>	<p>Being physically present in the library to engage in conversation with members, share information about services, and develop familiarity with members and staff</p>	<p>Members are aware of social work services</p> <p>Social workers are recognized and appreciated by members who visit the library frequently</p>	<p>Increased visibility of the social work program within the library and community</p>
<p>Training opportunities for social work students and support for graduate interns</p>	<p>Providing ongoing training and supervision to social work students as an integral part of the program</p> <p>Support and offer guidance to graduate interns participating in community development, research, and evaluation</p>	<p>Social work students have the opportunity to learn first-hand social work practice skills in a busy community practice setting and receive supervision from experienced social workers</p> <p>Graduate interns become familiarized with the various elements of this program and learn from the knowledge and expertise of the social workers</p>	<p>Social work students contribute to serving members and enhance their knowledge and practice skills in a dynamic program that serves members from a vast array of backgrounds and experience</p> <p>Graduate internship research, community development, and evaluation projects are enriched and contextualized by the knowledge and expertise of the social workers</p> <p>The outcomes of this new knowledge generation can be used to enhance this program</p>
<p><i>Enabling Conditions: skilled SW personnel; methods/approaches to service delivery that are anti-oppressive, accessible, culturally intuitive, trauma-informed, low-barrier, focused on harm reduction, adequate time and resources to support social workers in a high-intensity practice</i></p>			