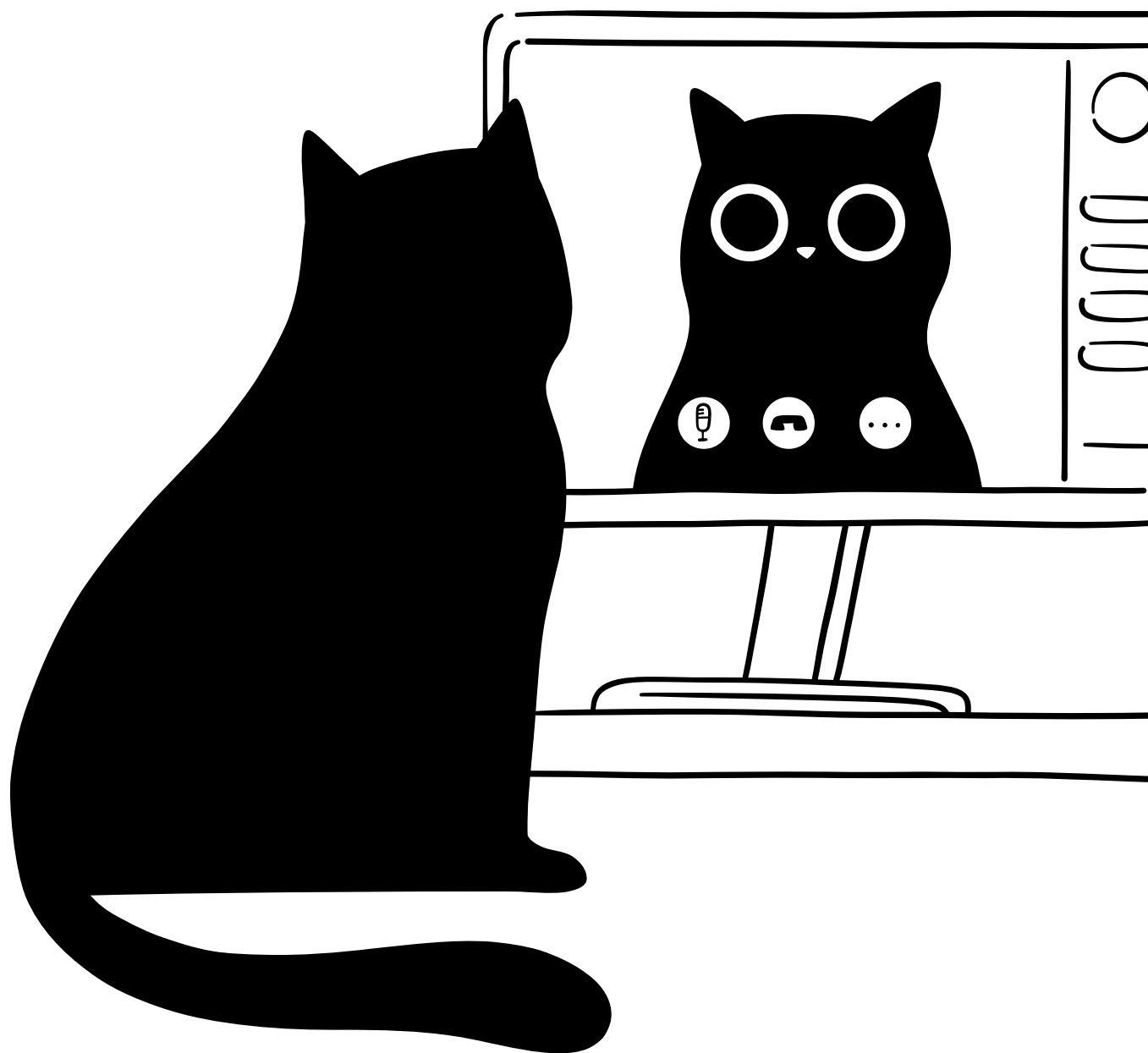




LIBRARY WORKER SUPPORT NETWORK

Year One Report

TABLE OF CONTENTS

05

Introduction

07

Background

08

What is Peer Support?

09

Program Structure and
Implementation

11

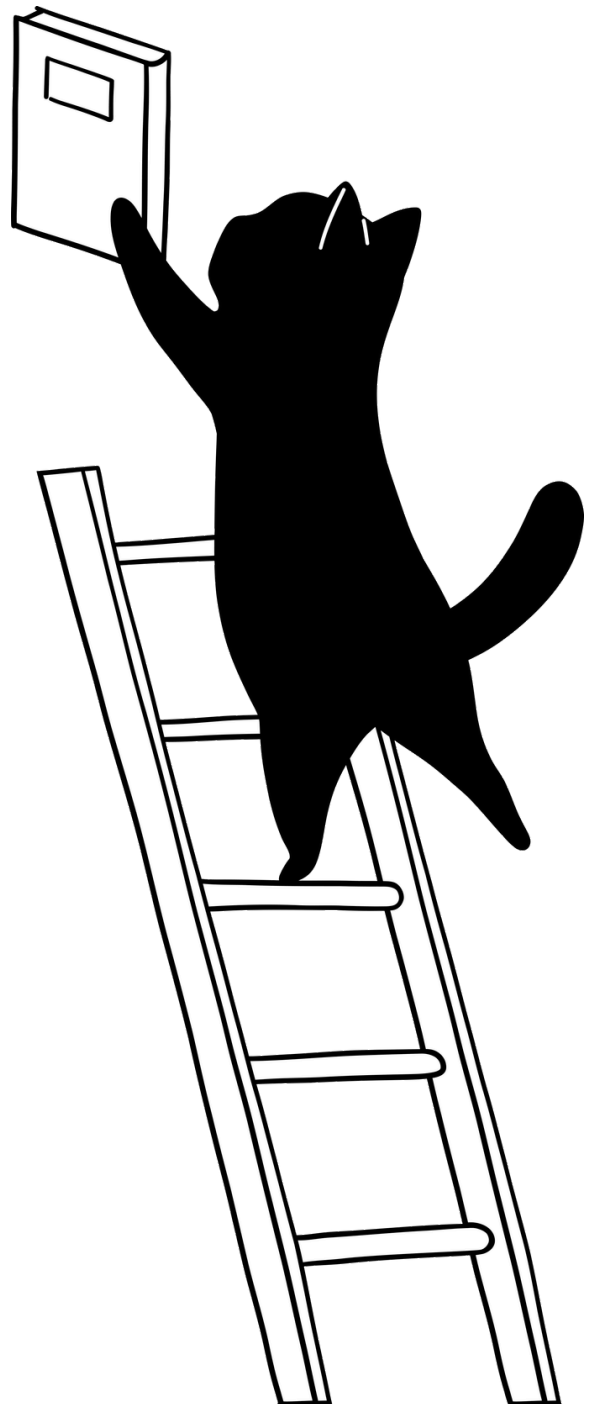
Results

17

Discussion

19

Conclusions



INTRODUCTION



The Library Worker Support Network (LWSN) successfully completed its first year of operations in August 2025. Born from the 2022 Urban Library Trauma Study which highlights the pervasive workplace trauma in libraries and the idea of library workers on how to start to solve this problem, LWSN has established itself as a vital community network created by and for library workers.

With over one hundred-fifty survey responses collected across three different surveys, the program demonstrated a strong positive impact on library workers with an average overall experience rating of 4.5/5 and a recommendation likelihood of 4.42/5. This past year, the network successfully designed the network, training manuals, support documents, and implemented our peer support model grounded in trauma-informed care. Our main users were public library workers, with academic library workers as a distant second.

While we are no longer supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, our initial grant (Grant RE-254903-OLS-23) was vital for the development and creation of a sustainable framework for addressing the unique challenges of library workers. We are now committed to continuing the program without IMLS funding.

BACKGROUND

The Library Worker Support Network (LWSN) grew directly out of the Urban Library Trauma Study (ULTS). That study documented what many library workers already knew from lived experience: that trauma is a common experience in library work. Survey responses, focus groups, and the national forum made clear that library workers across the country were experiencing similar forms of harm—violence, harassment, grief, burnout—and often believed they were facing these challenges alone.

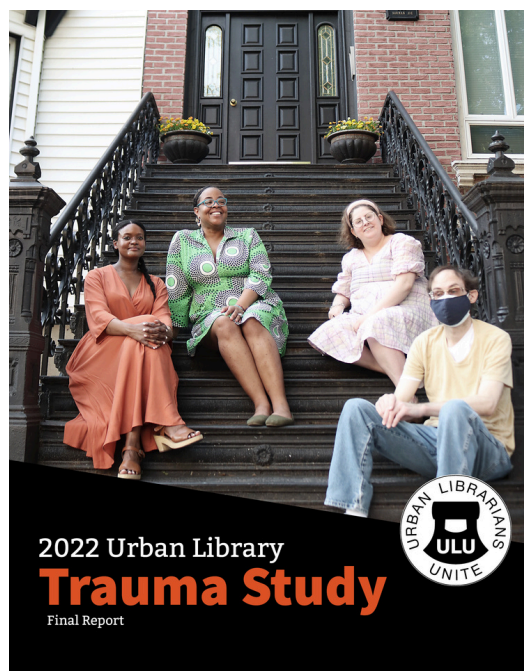
A consistent finding across the study was the lack of meaningful support for workers once harm occurred. Many participants described being encouraged to “self-care” or rely on formal employee assistance programs that felt disconnected from the realities of library work or unsafe to use. Libraries were often applying trauma-informed approaches outward, toward patrons, without creating parallel structures of care for staff. As a result, workers were left to process trauma alone.

During the ULTS forum, participants were asked not only to describe the problem, but to imagine practical responses. One of the clearest themes to emerge was the need for peer-led support spaces where library workers could talk with others who understood their work, without fear of retaliation, evaluation, or being required to “fix” systemic problems on their own. The proposal that became the Library Worker Support Network - a way to increase care for library workers, while reducing isolation and creating community. Disrupting the ULTS trauma cycle at the community level.

LWSN was intentionally designed as a peer-driven network, created by and for library workers, rather than a program embedded within management or clinical systems.

Its virtual format was chosen to allow participation across geography, job classifications, and library types. From the

beginning, the goal was to create regular, facilitated spaces where library workers could show up as peers, be heard, and not have to explain why their work is hard.



2022 Urban Library Trauma Study Cover

The first year of LWSN focused on turning this idea into something usable. That meant building trust, establishing shared norms, and testing whether peer support could function as a meaningful response to the harms documented in ULTS. In this sense, LWSN represents a direct continuation of the study’s work—moving from naming trauma to creating a structure that acknowledges it and offers connection as a starting point for healing.

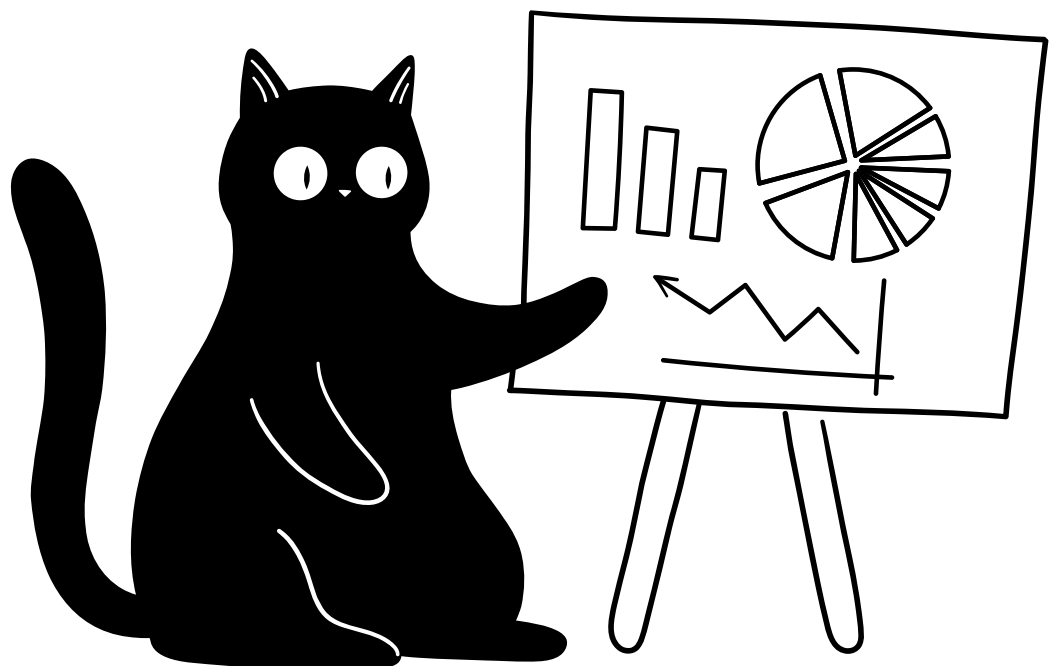
WHAT IS PEER SUPPORT?

Peer support is a peer led, person-centered, trauma informed, type of support group. It operates separately or outside of a medical setting by and for individuals who have experienced similar experiences, which in our case is any of the stress, confusion, trauma, anger and joy of working in library settings. These shared experiences and understanding allows for us to build mutuality, and trust, rooted in empowerment, the sharing of power, shared knowledge and experiences, and social and/or practical assistance given to support others with similar lived experiences.

Peer support is focused on relationships, not only between the leader and participants but the group as a whole, in order to create a safe space for sharing, discussion, and growth. We do not claim to know the best way for individuals to handle things, but offer support as they learn to handle them, acknowledging that we are all experts in our own lives and experiences. As such, we operate from a strengths-based approach, focusing on what individuals are able to do and have accomplished, rather than focusing on the deficit or errors of the individual. Ultimately, the goal is a safe space, where people can be encouraged and find connection. LWSN is also a disruption to the ULTS Library Trauma Cycle, fighting trauma on the community level by offering a flexible, liberatory model for supporting library workers in healing and connection.

Finally, we acknowledge that peer support is just one part of healing, and that peer support is not and does not replace therapy, but we can create a safe, welcoming space for mutual understanding and community.

[For more on this please read our literature review!](#)



PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND STRUCTURE

During its first year, the LWSN was built and sustained by a small group of library workers - 15 in total. We met in Brooklyn, NY in the Spring of 2024 with our first cohort of peer leaders to build the network. Our peer leaders were broken into groups based on tasks: our logistics and structure team figured out the tangibles of how the sessions would be run; training and documentation put together our training modules and manual; the ethics and boundaries team put together the community guidelines and assisted with the manual; support put together a beautiful journal and ran sessions for our peer leaders; and de-escalation conflict resolution stood on the ready to jump in if any conflict occurred. During this time, Leah T. Dudak was brought on as ULU's Community Care and Support Coordinator, and part of her duties involved overseeing the LWSN and making sure it runs smoothly. Ultimately, the LWSN has developed structured facilitation protocols to support consistency and to ensure meetings are run in a mindful, non-hierarchical way.

We started running LWSN sessions in October of 2024. Twelve of our peer leaders ran six sessions a month - three general sessions for anyone to join, one for queer library workers, one for Black library workers, and one for managers. We also had three peer leaders who provided peer support sessions specifically for our peer leaders, along with stepping in as substitutes. This structure allowed the network to operate consistently while keeping facilitation labor distributed and sustainable.

To create safety and clarity for participants and peer leaders, LWSN developed a community agreement and onboarding form that all participants complete before joining a session. These documents outline shared expectations, boundaries, and values, and help establish trust while protecting the individuals involved and the network as a whole.

To join our network, participants must first fill out an online application. While we acknowledge that this application is long and some participants have found it intense. However, the form is long so that we can protect the safety of the participants and ULU against doxing. As such we added the following statement to the application to allow for a more trauma-informed onboarding for those who need it:

"This form is rigorous so that we can protect the network and its participants - only Leah T. Dudak (Community Care & Support Coordinator) and Lauren Comito (Executive Director) have access to this form. However, if you have any questions or do not feel comfortable filling out some of the form please contact lwsn@urbanlibrariansunite.org and we can collaboratively figure out alternate ways for verification."

Once onboarding folks are sent registration information for the upcoming month, which is also sent out to the whole network on the 20th of each month.

Our sessions are led by two of our onboarded peer leaders. One peer leader serves as the facilitator, guiding the flow of the meeting and holding space for participants. The second serves as the moderator, who may participate in the conversation while also managing technology, monitoring the group, and responding to any issues that arise. This shared leadership model helps prevent burnout, provides some legal protection should the need arise, and ensures that sessions remain grounded and supported.

All sessions are held on Zoom and are an hour in length. The start of the session begins with going over community guidelines and orienting folks to the groups. Because LWSN is a peer support network and not a clinical service, crisis resources and mental health referrals are always shared at the beginning with participants. This reinforces the boundaries of the network and ensures that participants have access to additional support when needed, while keeping the role of peer leaders clear and sustainable. Once our opening has been completed, then we open the floor for discussion. Finally, we spend the last 5 minutes of each session with a grounding activity to wrap up.

Because LWSN is a peer support network and not a clinical service, crisis resources and mental health referrals are always shared with participants. This reinforces the boundaries of the network and ensures that participants have access to additional support when needed, while keeping the role of peer leaders clear and sustainable.

Peer leaders meet for 15 minutes before each session to check in, review protocols, and prepare, and for 15 minutes afterward to debrief, process what came up, and support one another. This pre- and post-meeting structure is an intentional part of the model, recognizing that facilitation itself carries emotional labor.

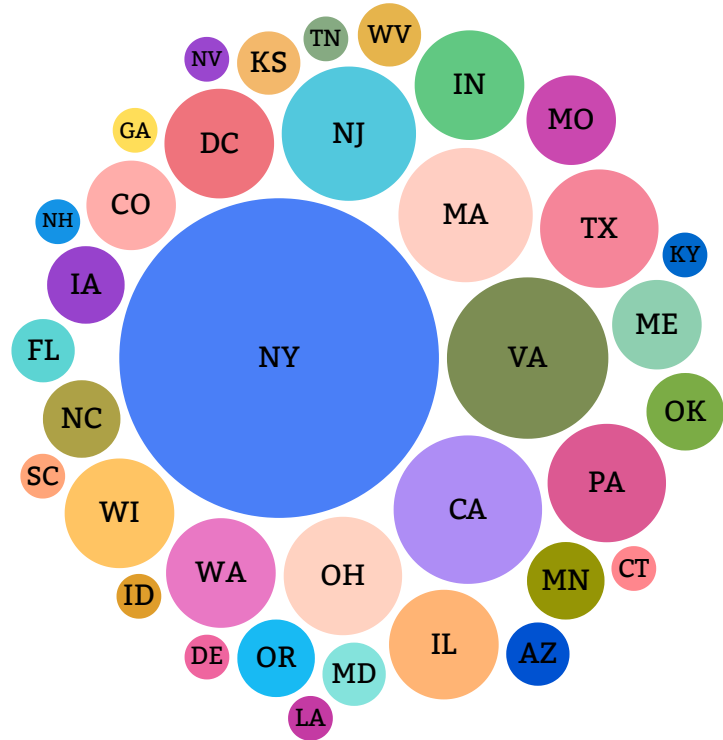
The first cohort of peer leaders did more than facilitate sessions. They built the network from the ground up, presenting on the network at a variety of conferences, and created a comprehensive training program for the second-year cohort. This training covers active listening, boundary setting, recognizing and responding to vicarious trauma, de-escalation techniques, emotional intelligence, group dynamics, and the practical mechanics of running a session. The training manual is publicly available and intended to support others who may want to replicate or build on this peer support framework.

RESULTS

PARTICIPATION AND REACH

During our first year of operation the Library Worker Support Network established a national presence and participant base. A total of 195 library workers completed the onboarding process and became verified members of the network during the first year. These participants represented over 35 US states and Washington, D.C. demonstrating that interest and need for support for library workers extends beyond the geographic base of Urban Librarians Unite. While participants were distributed nationally, the largest concentration came from NY, which is consistent with ULU's organizational location and existing connections. Expanding participation before this regional concentration will be a continued focus for future outreach efforts.

States of LWSN Members



Conference engagement has already played an important role in expanding awareness of the network. At the 2025 American Library Association conference, we had more than 130 individuals sign up to receive additional information about the network and other ULU initiatives. The conference also included a co-hosted mixer sponsored by PAVE Prevention, providing an opportunity for in-person community building and discussion about workplace trauma and peer support in libraries.

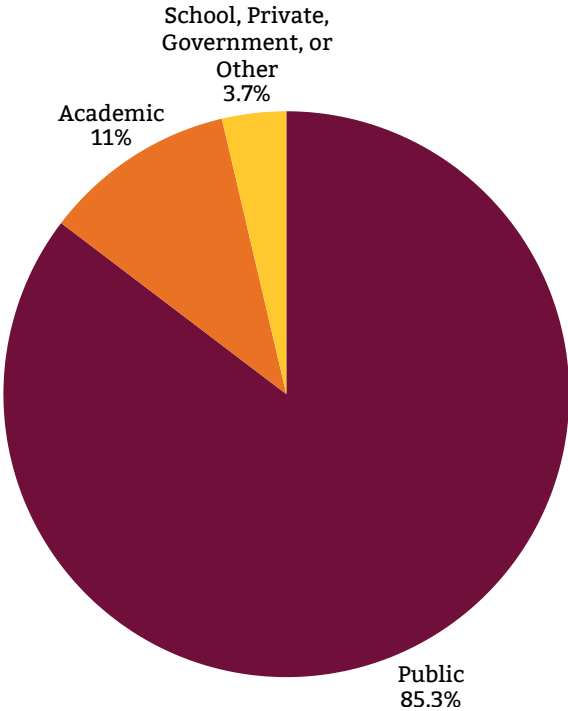
Data collected during the onboarding process shows that the majority of participants in LWSN work in public libraries (85.3%), with academic libraries representing the second largest group (11%). This distribution reflects ULU’s connection within public library spaces, and offers opportunities to expand as the larger professional discourse shows that workplace trauma affects library workers across all types.

Participants represented a range of professional roles within libraries. The largest group of library workers were librarians and middle management (each making up 32.29%), followed by paraprofessional staff (21.88%), library directors (5.21%), and participants who were categorized as “other” (3.65%).

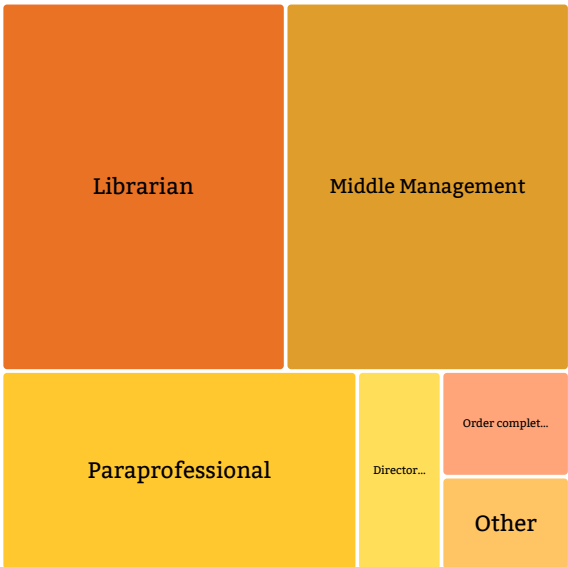
The strong participation of librarians and managers is reflected in the consistent registration and attendance in our manager-specific support sessions. Managers may be more likely to seek out peer support outside of their institutions because there is a lack of peers to discuss within their organizations. In addition, managerial roles may allow for greater scheduling flexibility compared to staff who spend more time working on public service desks. At the same time, the wide range of people who take part in the network highlight the need for support at all levels.

Overall, the first year of LWSN demonstrates strong early participation, broad geographic reach, and clear interest across a variety of library workers. These participation patterns provide an important baseline for understanding how the network is being used and where ULU might expand our reach in the most impactful way.

Where LWSN members work



Jobs



SESSION EXPERIENCE

Survey responses indicate that participants generally experienced LWSN sessions as supportive, structured, and emotionally safe spaces for discussion. Across post-session surveys, participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the sessions and strong interest in continuing to participate. When asked to rate their likelihood of attending another session on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being very likely), respondents reported an average rating of 4.74, suggesting a strong interest in continued engagement and use of the network.

Participants also consistently reported feeling heard and respected during sessions. When asked if they felt heard during the session, 52 out of 53 respondents answered yes, and all respondents indicated that the space felt respectful and safe for sharing. These responses suggest that the structure and community agreements developed for the network were successful in establishing a supportive community environment.

Qualitative responses highlight several aspects of the session structure that helped to create this inviting experience. Participants frequently referenced the importance of clear expectations and facilitation practices. One participant noted:

“I loved the standard disclaimer before every meeting. The rules were clear and no one was supposed to guess or assume how things work based on cues or vibes.”

Others emphasized the tone set by the peer leaders and the opportunity to participate at their own comfort level. Respondents described the sessions as welcoming and calm, and noted that facilitation allowed participants to contribute without pressure.

A recurring theme in participant feedback was the value of connecting with peers who share similar experiences in library work. Participants described the sessions as validating and grounding, particularly when discussing challenges that are difficult to share within their own communities. As one respondent described:

“Being around people who get it and seeing others face similar issues - validating.”

Participants also noted that speaking with peers outside of their own organizations allowed for more open conversations about workplace experiences and challenges. One respondent explained:

“I like the opportunity to speak to peers who are not necessarily in the same sphere and who have no influence or investment in one’s future success or failure within the organization.”

Overall, responses suggest that LWSN’s peer-lead structure, combined with clear facilitation practices and shared community agreements helped create an environment where participants felt comfortable discussing both the challenges and rewards of library work.

IMPACT AND USE

Beyond the immediate experiences of the sessions themselves, participants reported that the LWSN had broader impacts on their personal and professional lives. Feedback indicates that LWSN has functioned not only as a support space but also as a resource for conversations about workplace conditions and trauma within the library field.

Several participants noted that materials developed by ULU including the Urban Library Trauma Study have been used to advocate for change within their institutions. One participant shared that the study and related resources helped encourage their management to start addressing workplace safety more directly:

"Honestly, the fact that it exists is very validating and reassuring. The resources like the LWSN study have helped convince my management to start taking similar action to LWSN's goals and purpose. The facilitator guide and other tools are also helpful and insightful. Very well thought out and powerful tools even for those who cannot necessarily attend sessions. Things like the study and peer support resource guide also helped convince my union at the state level to fight for better protections, resources and support in systems statewide, and to start a statewide library caucus with a focus on workplace trauma and peer support. LWSN is creating conversations even beyond its own programming and that's pretty cool."

Several other participants noted that LWSN is not only contributing to individual participant wellness but also starting to shift the conversation in the field around care and support, by giving space to discuss workplace trauma and care for library workers.

In addition to institutional impacts, participants describe the personal benefit to having access to the LWSN, contrasting the peer-support model with traditional mental health resources. In this, they note that many traditional mental health resources do not fully understand the realities of library work. One participant noted:

"There are options for counseling and there are workplace mental health and trauma services out there, but so rarely do they understand what we do, what we encounter, what we take home as trauma as library workers. Stereotypes and "I didn't know you dealt with [weapons/overdose/assault/harassment/workplace violence/all the gosh darn awful things]! I thought you just read all day!" THAT is why I would recommend LWSN, because it is PEER-BASED and only we really know the strange mix of joyful moments and traumatic lows of library work. LWSN is a unicorn--our unicorn."

These responses suggest that the LWSN fills an important gap within support systems by providing a space where peers can discuss with people who get it. They do not have to perform or prove the difficulty of library work, it is understood, heard, and held. Stereotypes of library work are left at the door, leaving space for authentic sharing and connection.

BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

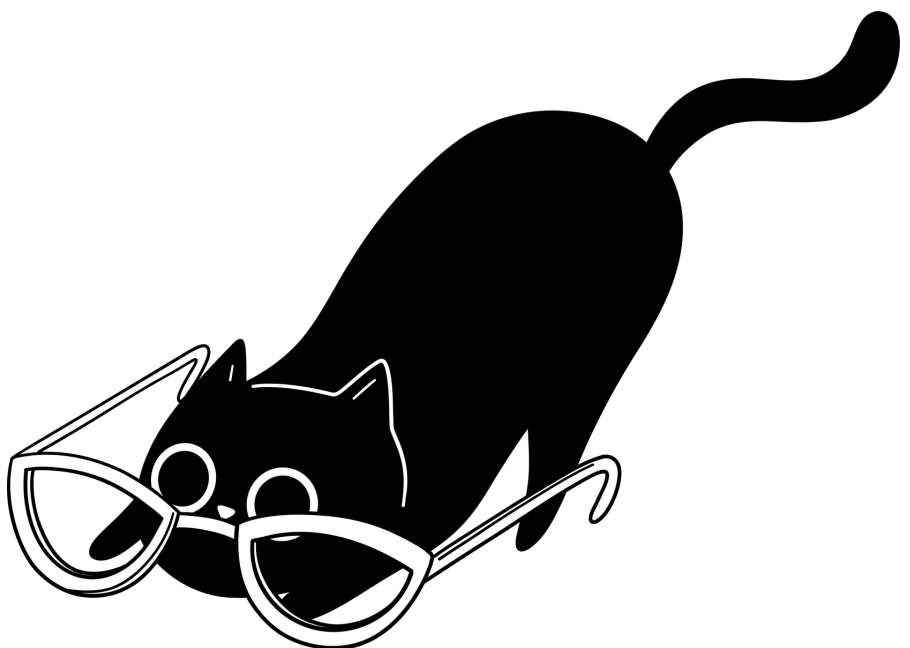
While feedback about LWSN was largely positive, even with those participants who had not made it to a session yet, survey responses also identified several barriers that affected participation. These barriers were primarily related to scheduling, workplace logistics, and concerns about privacy.

The year-end survey results included responses from verified participants who had not attended a session in order to better understand these challenges. Among the twelve respondents who had not yet participated in a session, the most common reasons were limited time, scheduling conflicts, or forgetting about sessions after signing up.

Some participants noted that attending sessions during the workday could be difficult depending on workplace expectations and/or their role. Desk staff, in particular, may have limited flexibility to step away from service desks or public-facing responsibilities. Others reported that by the end of a workday they often felt too tired to attend a session, so it was also difficult to attend outside of work time.

Privacy concerns were also mentioned as a potential barrier. Although respondents expressed overall support for the network, some indicated personal hesitation about sharing personal experiences in a group setting, feeling unsure that those conversations would remain confidential. This feedback highlights the importance of continuing to clearly communicate and enforce community agreements and expectations regarding confidentiality as part of the onboarding process and session introduction.

Overall, the barriers identified by participants appear to be primarily logistical rather than conceptual. Respondents generally expressed support and appreciation for the network even if they had not been able to attend a session.



FEEDBACK AND SUGGESTIONS

Participants offered a range of creative suggestions for how the LWSN can continue to evolve and help support library workers in future years. Many of the suggestions focused on approving access and expanding opportunities for participation. Some of these suggestions we are already putting into practice in year two, as indicated below.

One of the most common recommendations was to offer sessions at additional times, including evening and weekends - which we have implemented in our second year. Participants also suggested avoiding meeting times during typical lunch or dinner hours, which may make attendance more difficult. However, due to the national reach of our organization it can be hard to navigate. Finally, some respondents suggested offering longer sessions or increasing frequency of meetings to allow for deeper conversations and ongoing engagement. We have also implemented this in our second year, allowing for sessions to be increased in time based on the needs of the group and the availability of our peer leaders.

Several participants also suggested offering interconnected or ongoing affinity-based groups potentially expanding into groups for library workers with disabilities, caregivers, male library workers, and crossovers between affinity groups. These groups will be something we will continue to revisit and consider as the network expands and based on the ability of our peer leaders to lead these groups.

Participants also showed interest in additional resources that could be connected to the network. One suggestion was the creation of a peer-reviewed or ULU-reviewed list of speakers and trainers aligned with the network's values who could be invited to speak and do training by libraries and professional organizations. Respondents noted that it can be difficult to identify speakers who understand both trauma-informed practices and have familiarity with the realities of library work. This is something that ULU is looking into implementing going forward, establishing a speaker series and sort of training menu that libraries can utilize.

Finally, some participants suggested providing discussion topics or starters to initiate conversations. It was noted that this would be useful for newer participants to LWSN. For example, one session could cover talking about vicarious trauma. At the same time, one participant highlighted that they liked the open ended discussion that is guided by the participants rather than predetermined topics. This feedback reflects the balance between participant autonomy and structure that is central to our model.

Taken together, these suggestions have provided practical guidance for growing and strengthening the network going forward while maintaining the core principles of peer-lead support and participant-driven conversation and community.

DISCUSSION

The first year of the LWSN demonstrates that peer-lead support spaces for library workers is something that we can create and is filling an important need. Participation data shows that the network quickly developed a national reach in our first year, with nearly 200 verified participants across over 35 states and Washington, D.C. While participation was strongest among public library workers, the data highlights that there are still places to grow who are in need of support across the library profession.

Survey responses indicate that the peer support model was largely successful in creating an environment where participants felt heard, respected, and able to speak openly about their experiences. These consistently high ratings for likelihood of returning to future sessions, along with the qualitative feedback describing the sessions as valuable and supportive, suggest that LWSN is filling a gap that many library workers need in their lives.

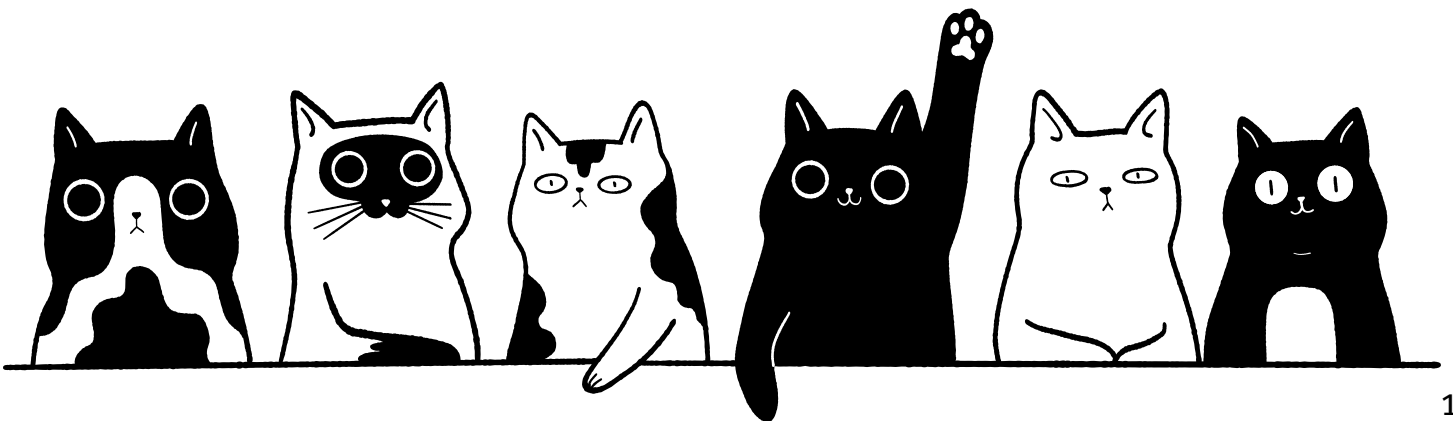
Participant feedback also highlights the importance of the network's peer-lead structure. Many respondents noted that traditional workplace mental health resources or employee assistance programs often lack familiarity with the unique difficulties of library work. In contrast, LWSN sessions allow participants to connect with colleagues who understand the unique mix of emotional labor, public service challenges, systemic pressures, along with the joys of library work. We are able to share the stuff that is fucked about library work, while also being around those who understand why we love and why we stay. The shared context and community is central to LWSN's effectiveness.

In addition to providing individual support, the network is contributing to broader conversations within the field about workplace harm and care for library workers. Participants reported using LWSN materials and findings from the Urban Library Trauma Study to advocate for changes within their organizations, unions, and professional organizations. These examples point to the network not only being a support space but a change agent for larger discussion about working conditions in libraries and organizational responsibility.

At the same time, the first year of LWSN also revealed important areas for continued growth and development. Participation barriers related to scheduling, workplace constraints, and privacy concerns highlight challenges in creating support spaces within a profession where many workers have limited control over their work time and schedules. Addressing these barriers through expanding meeting times, continued communication around confidentiality, and continued outreach will be important for continuing to expand the network.

Finally, the demographic and professional composition of the current participants points to opportunities for growth. Expanding outreach to other library sectors beyond public libraries will help build the network out to more fully reflect the diversity of positions in the profession. Similarly, continued attention and support for affinity spaces and role-specific groups may help address the varied experiences of library workers across identities and job classifications.

Taken together, the findings from Year One suggest that peer-lead support networks can play a meaningful role in addressing the isolation and lack of support that was documented in the Urban Library Trauma Study. While LWSN cannot resolve the structural causes of workplace trauma in libraries, it offers a model for creating community connection and to call out things that are not okay. In our trauma study, many people thought it was just them alone struggling and the LWSN breaks down the silo that you alone are struggling.



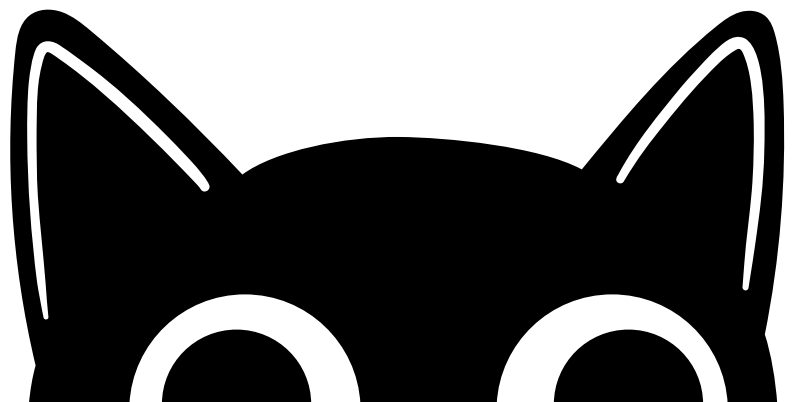
CONCLUSION

The first year of the Library Worker Support Network represents a vital step in taking the findings from the Urban Library Trauma Study and creating change based on the research. The study was not made to just prove it happens and fade away, it was created to create change - and through the LWSN we are creating that change. Over the course of year, the network developed a facilitation model, trained peer leaders, and hosted regular sessions while building a national participant base.

Participation and survey data prove that LWSN has successfully created spaces where library workers feel heard, supported, and where community is built with people who understand the realities of library work. Participants consistently describe sessions as emotionally safe and validating, and many expressed strong interest in continuing to engage with the network.

At the same time, Year One also highlights the growth opportunities that come with building a new community program. Scheduling constraints, privacy concerns, and uneven participation across library sectors suggest areas where the network can continue to grow and evolve. Participant feedback was generously shared and provides valuable guidance for expanding, increasing outreach, and continuing to refine and build out structure as the network continues to grow and evolve in coming years.

However, the overall response to the LWSN demonstrates a clear need for peer-lead support spaces within the library profession. The network has already begun to influence conversations about safer workplaces and care for library workers. Something that was largely missing from the professional discourse when we started the Urban Library Trauma Study back in 2020. As LWSN moves into its next phase, without continued IMLS funding, the foundation that we have built along with the commitment of peer-leaders and participants provide a strong base to continue to build and adapt from. Even without the IMLS funding that helped get this project started, we are committed to continuing to run and develop it. And to continue to offer free, online, peer support for any library worker who needs it. We are here waiting for you if you need us, and it would be a pleasure to talk with you. We will continue our focus on mutual support, shared experience, and community care, so that we can continue to work towards building a broader movement to create healthier and more sustainable workplaces in libraries.





87 Richardson St
Brooklyn, NY 11211
(718) 569-7309

www.urbanlibrariansunite.org
lwsn@urbanlibrariansunite.org
@ULUNYC