



TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES FOR REDUCING DIFFICULT CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR

**BETH WAHLER, PHD, MSW
OCTOBER 10, 2024**

ABOUT ME:



- Owner, [Beth Wahler Consulting LLC](#)
 - Support libraries of all sizes with assessing and meeting social service-related needs of their customers, improving workplace culture, and reducing staff stress/trauma
 - Provide staff training, leadership coaching/support, needs assessments, program design, and program evaluation services
- Author, [Creating a Person Centered Library: Best Practices for Supporting High-Needs Patrons](#)
- Co-host of [Surviving the Stacks Podcast](#)
- Affiliated Research Faculty, UNC Charlotte School of Social Work
 - Research focused on trauma-informed librarianship, public library customers' psychosocial needs, library staff trauma and needs, and ways to address these needs (such as social work in the library)



CREATING A PERSON- CENTERED LIBRARY

*Best Practices for Supporting
High-Needs Patrons*



Elizabeth A. Wahler and
Sarah C. Johnson

Published by Bloomsbury
Libraries Unlimited

Available now at
[Bloomsbury.com](https://www.bloomsbury.com) or your favorite
bookseller

SOCIAL SERVICE NEEDS OF LIBRARY VISITORS



- Social service needs of library visitors have been increasing in recent decades
- Top areas of need (Pressley, 2017; Provence, et al., 2021; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler et al., 2021)
 - Homelessness or unsafe/unstable housing
 - Mental health challenges
 - Substance use/overdose
 - Poverty-related needs
- These needs have been increasing since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hertz-Palmor et al., 2021; Horowitz et al., 2021; NAEH, 2020)
- Although frequency of needs varies, rural, suburban and urban libraries are experiencing the same types of unmet visitor needs (Wahler, 2022)
- Many of these needs are trauma-related (and can cause trauma)

COMMON LIBRARY BEHAVIORS FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING TRAUMA

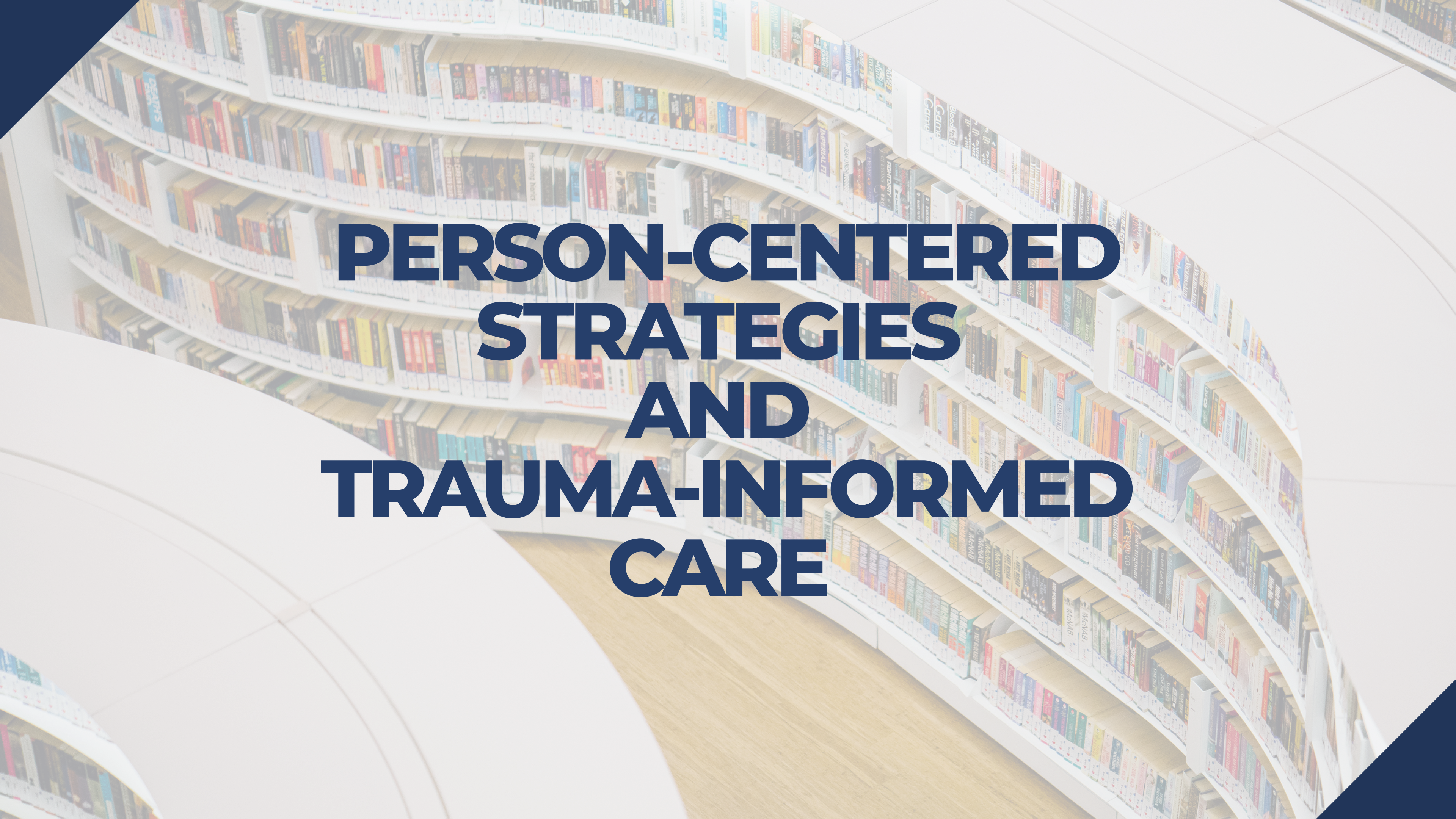
- Depending on the type(s) of trauma experienced, the age(s) when the trauma(s) occurred, and the chronicity of that trauma, customers might demonstrate behaviors such as:
 - Difficulty with social interactions and reading social cues
 - Irritability/easily escalated/rudeness
 - Staying isolated/keeping to themselves or vice versa
 - Using drugs and alcohol
 - Wanting the library to be quiet or vice versa
 - Angry when things happen that are unplanned
 - Inappropriate sexual advances/flirting





STRAINED LIBRARY STAFF

- Libraries are feeling the strain
- Staff are not often trained or qualified to assist with these levels of need (Anderson et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2018)
- Staff sometimes feel conflicted about their role with these needs (Wahler et al., 2020)
- Customers with these needs often take more time for staff, stretching them too thin or causing difficulty in meeting needs of all patrons (Soska & Navarro, 2020; Torrey et al., 2009; Wilkins Jordan, 2014)
- Violence occurs in many libraries, and some staff fear for their safety or the safety of others due to customer behaviors (Anderson, 2018; Clark, 2019; Torrey et al., 2009; Wahler, 2022)
- Some libraries frequently call police or for emergency assistance
- Many library staff are experiencing firsthand trauma, secondary trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue



**PERSON-CENTERED
STRATEGIES
AND
TRAUMA-INFORMED
CARE**

**PERSON-CENTERED APPROACHES =
PEOPLE'S NEEDS COME FIRST!**

**THE PEOPLE INSIDE THE LIBRARY NEED
TO [VISIBLY] MATTER AS MUCH AS THE
PEOPLE BEING SERVED BY THE LIBRARY**



GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Safety



Peer Support



**Empowerment,
Voice, & Choice**



Trustworthiness




**Collaboration &
Mutuality**



**Cultural,
Historical, &
Gender Issues**





**TRAUMA-INFORMED
OPTIONS FOR
ADDRESSING
PROBLEMATIC
BEHAVIOR**

GENERAL STRATEGIES



Outreach

Extending library resources outside the traditional walls of the building



Purposeful Invitations

Inviting people in rather than pushing them out- involving and asking their opinions



Intentional Engagement

Ensuring the library addresses the needs and interests of marginalized groups



Warm Handoffs

Looking for underlying needs, referring out, and connecting the person with the resource

SOME OPTIONS

- **Social Workers or Other Strategic Collaborations**
- **Safety/Security Officers**
- **Improving Preparation/Training of All Public-Facing Staff**

STRATEGIC COLLABORATION



- Problematic behavior is often due to some kind of underlying challenge, which can often be addressed by others who specialize in those areas
- Most common collaborators:
 - Social Workers
 - Public Health/Nurses
 - Peer Support Workers
- Can be added through:
 - Partnerships with available community partners
 - Student-run programs
 - Hiring someone on-staff at the library
- Have to be invested in the collaboration and setting it up for success/working through challenges

SAFETY/SECURITY OFFICERS

- Many libraries are contracting with security/safety officers or hiring their own
- Take care with this! Depending on the approach, training, and orientation of the security-related staff, these approaches can sometimes NOT be person-centered/trauma-informed
- Takes intention and effort to ensure security-focused staff are trained in:
 - Customer service
 - Building rapport
 - Preventing escalation/De-escalation
 - Trauma-informed care
- Works best when well-integrated into the staff and building, focused on relationships/service and not necessarily a traditional security role



INCREASING PREPARATION OF ALL STAFF

- Safety, policy enforcement, and enforcing expectations of library culture are the responsibility of all, but staff need supported to do this well
- Consistency and equity in expectations is essential! People need to know what to expect and know violations will be addressed
- Orienting and supporting staff starts with hiring and orientation and includes ongoing support and supervision
- Staff training is important:
 - De-escalation and working with people in crisis
 - Setting boundaries
 - Trauma and trauma-informed librarianship
 - Common customer needs
 - Mental health (Mental Health First Aid)
 - Community resources

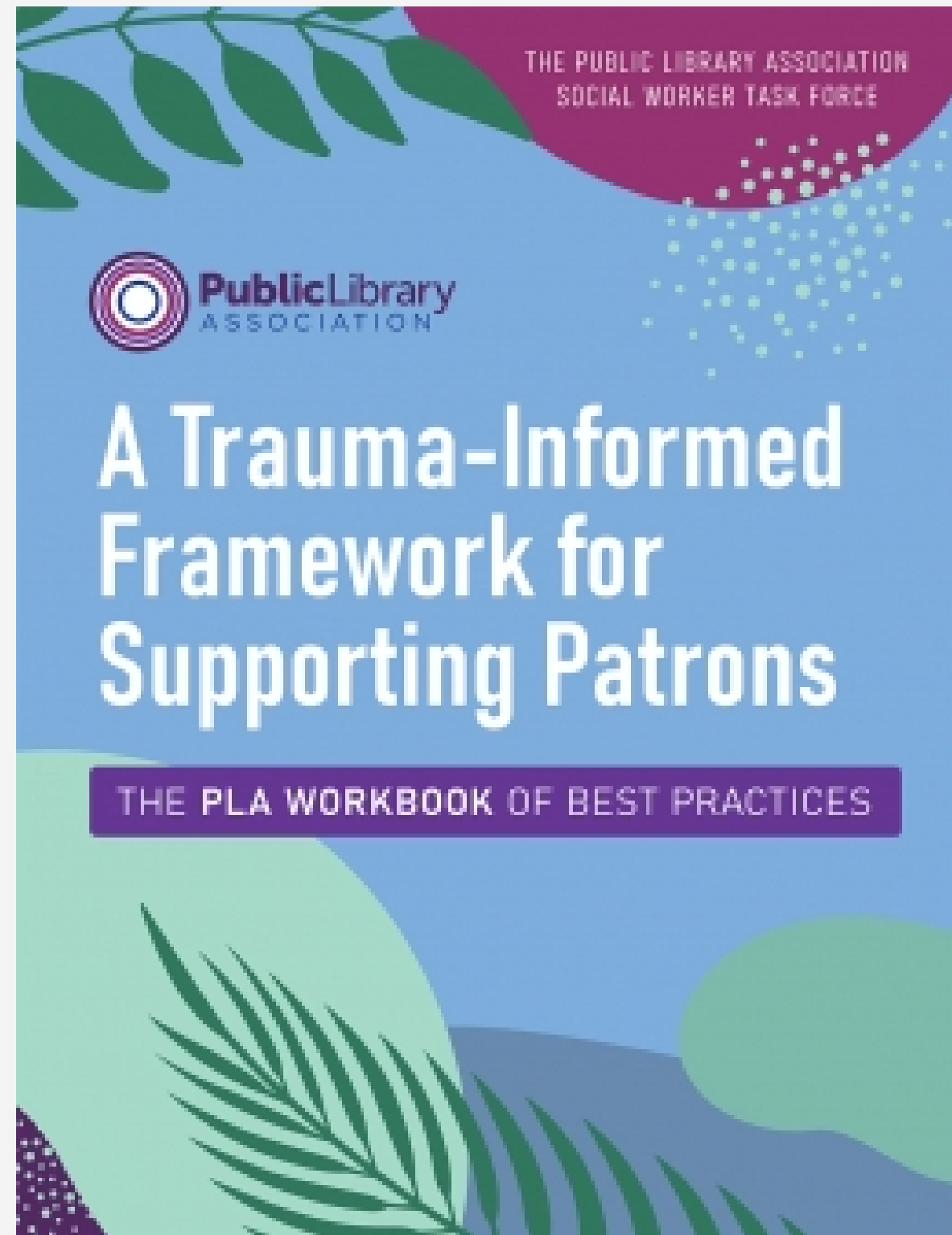


BEHAVIORAL RESPONSE GUIDES

- To help with creating consistent expectations and empowering staff to respond, consider creating clear behavioral response guides
- These guides usually include the following (see [example](#)):
 - The prohibited customer behavior
 - The specific policy prohibiting this behavior and the reasons why it's prohibited
 - A reminder of the reasons why people may behave this way
 - Guidelines about the expected staff response and permission to set boundaries with customers as needed
 - Sample scenarios including scripts of how a staff person might respond
- Train all staff on the responses, and practice the scenarios



REGULAR DISCUSSION OF COMMON CUSTOMER SCENARIOS



CREATING A HEALTHY LIBRARY CULTURE

**Culture
of
Care**

**Culture
of
Accountability**

**Culture
of
Clarity**

**Culture
of
Reflection**

FINAL THOUGHTS



- All libraries are different!
- There's no magic solution
- Important to assess your library's needs first (patrons and staff)
- Use design thinking approach- if you try something and it didn't work, don't throw it out! Evaluate, iterate, refine.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Assessing Your Library's Needs* (2023) by Elizabeth A. Wahler
- *A Trauma-Informed Approach to Library Services* (2020) by Rebecca Tolley
- *A Trauma-Informed Framework for Supporting Patrons: The PLA Workbook of Best Practices* (2022) by the PLA Social Worker Task Force
- *Creating a Person-Centered Library: Best Practices for Serving High-Needs Patrons* (2023) by Elizabeth A. Wahler and Sarah C. Johnson
- Mental Health First Aid (US)/Mental Health First Aid International
- Sample Behavioral Response Guide



THANK YOU!

CONTACT ME:



Beth.Wahler@SWintheLibrary.com



www.SWintheLibrary.com



Image Credits

All photographs and images used in this presentation are stock media sourced from a subscription to Canva Professional and approved for use in presentations through a Pro Content license. Images should not be reproduced or posted elsewhere.

<https://www.canva.com/licensing-explained/>