

Activist Social Work in Small Museums: A Community-Level Exploration

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**ABSTRACT**

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While there is much dialogue around the potential for museums to engage in social work, there is little research on how museums practice social work at the community level. This study sought to explore the ways in which small museums engage in activist social work in their local communities. Data from three case studies inform how small museums can work to address local social problems. The research revealed four findings: 1) small museums see themselves as social work agents relative to the success of their social services; 2) small museums' social work is a collaborative and self-sustaining process; 3) small museums' social work is a mutual investment in the museum itself and the community; and 4) small museums assess successful social work through noticeable reductions in identified social problems as a result of their social service. An expanded understanding of small museums' social work provides new knowledge for museums of all sizes to use to help combat social problems in their communities.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For years, museum scholars have remarked on the ability of museums to serve as agents of social change (Silverman, 2010). Lois Silverman (2010), author of the well-known book on this topic—*The Social Work of Museums*—points out that “service to society” is an inherent function of modern museums in addition to collecting, creating exhibits, and conducting research (pp. 3). As a result of this awareness of museums’ social service responsibilities, museums are striving for greater impacts in visitors’ lives than ever before (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Silverman, 2010; Worts, 1995). However, museums’ responses to local social problems are extremely varied, limiting field-wide analyses of museum social work trends. Because of this, little research has been done which examines the intentions, strategies, and successes of contemporary museum social work at the community level.

This is especially true for small museums, which lack the visibility of larger institutions. Some museums’ social work approaches are well documented. The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis’ neighborhood revitalization program, for example, has invested over \$1 million in development and restoration of homes and businesses in six neighboring communities in an effort to ensure a high quality of life for local citizens. Innovative social work efforts like this may be difficult for smaller museums to replicate though, as high financial costs and staffing limitations prevent them from participating in these kinds of actions. As a result, large, well-funded museums which use these activist strategies are more likely to be considered practitioners of social work than small museums (Gurian, 1988). Small museums and community-focused museums have a unique ability to develop the close community relationships necessary to engage in social work, but these museums’ social work strategies are largely unknown.

A contributing factor to the lack of research on small museum social work is that the museum field lacks awareness of what social work looks like in practice. Many institutions conflate actions which could be considered social work with actions that are not (Silverman, 2010). While many museums have

activities which speak to a social problem, the majority of these activities do not strive to correct these problems. Within the museum field, many small institutions may be actively combating local social problems, but have never considered their actions to be “social work”.

“Social service” refers to any actions by museums to improve the lives of their audiences. All museums participate in social service, either intentionally or unintentionally, but not all social service can be considered social work (Silverman, 2010). Silverman breaks down social service further by identifying two categories of deliberate public service: “social action” and “activism”. The author differentiates between the two as fostering change versus pursuing solutions to specific social problems, respectively. (Silverman, 2010, pp. 146) Social action can refer to any actions which provide someone with an opportunity for change; activist service involves actions which provide, or seek to provide, solutions to social problems. Social action can help reduce the effects of social problems by creating opportunities for change, but only activist service attempts to resolve these problems.

To demonstrate the difference between these two kinds of social service, consider this example: an urban community is struggling with food insecurity, as many local residents do not have access to fresh foods. An indirect social action by the local museum might be to host a forum or create an exhibit which addresses the issue of food deserts. A direct, activist service by the museum might be to bring in farmers or partnering grocery stores to the museum and make fresh foods available for community members. The social action strategy creates new dialogue about this social problem, but does not make food any more accessible at the conclusion of the program. The activist approach, though, allows the affected population to go home with fresh food in hand. The issue of food access is not resolved with either of these strategies, as the solutions are short term and do not create systemic change. However, the impact of the activist approach is greater in the lives of the at-risk community members. Social work is activist by nature, as it seeks to provide relief from social problems rather than just raising awareness (Abramovitz, 2008; Van Kleeck, 1934; Sheppard, 2000; Gurian, 1991).

The ways in which small museums practice local social work is likely less explored because of a conflation of social actions and activist social service. A narrow perspective of social service activities makes the prevalence of museum social work seem low and makes the number of institutions involved in social work appear to be few and far between. By illustrating the activist social service actions of museums as “social work”, new potentials for museum-community relationships emerge.

Museum scholar Richard Sandell (2003) describes museum social work as occurring in three different levels; the individual-level social work involves practices which support personal development, as in increased creativity, self-esteem, or social skills. The community-level refers to museum social work practices which address shared problems and supports local social change. Lastly, societal-level social work promotes social, political, and human rights, and resolve issues which affect all members of society (pp. 45). Silverman’s work expertly reveals museum social work at the individual level. The societal-level social work potential of museum, as in increasing democracy, challenging stereotypes, or conserving the oceans, has been broadly referred to by numerous authors (Gurian, 2001; Sandell, 2003; Sheppard, 2000; Weil, 1999). How museums engage in community-level social work though, has yet to be explored in depth.

While local social work becomes a more visible practice of large museums, there are still many questions remaining regarding how small museums practice social work at the community level:

- In what ways do small museums consider themselves agents of social work?
- Why do small museums participate in community-level social work?
- What are the strategies small museums use to combat local social problems?
- What are the desired outcomes of these museums’ social work activities?

The answers to these questions can have major implications as museums attempt to make their social worth more apparent to their publics. Identifying and addressing local social problems clearly

demonstrates a museum's commitment to the welfare of its audiences, helping to emphasize the value of the museums within its community.

Following Sandell's three categories of social work and Silverman's distinctions between social action and activism, this research study will use three case studies of small museums practicing activist social service to describe contemporary museum social work at the community level. An expanded understanding of small museums' social work, accounting for unique responses to social problems, introduces new opportunities for museums to lead social change. By framing select actions as examples of museum social work, new knowledge can be revealed about how small museums view social work, the methods these museums use to respond to social problems, their intentions for this work, and what they hope to accomplish. This provides a model which museums of all sizes can follow as they seek to fulfill their social work potential.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

**Social Work at a Glance.** In order to assess how museums engage in local social work, it is necessary to understand what social work is. Social work is an extremely misunderstood practice. The popular image of social workers as caseworkers or soup kitchen employees is a narrow stereotype that does not adequately reflect the impact of social work on our society (Silverman, 2010). Social workers today are involved in fields like psychology, law, and politics, but are distinct from professionals in these areas. As people conflate the work of these fields with professional social work, misconceptions about what social work is develop (Silverman, 2010). This is reinforced by a lack of consensus among social workers about what kinds of actions constitute social work. Generally, it can be said that social work is about improving lives, but who can participate in this work, and how they do it, is a topic which has been debated (Jordan, 2007).

Numerous definitions of social work exist, with slight variations between each one. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as “a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance their well-being” (Jordan, 2007, pp. 1). The range of different activities which can be viewed as social work under the IFSW definition indicate the complexity of social problems faced by members of a community. This definition is broad enough to include a number of different social services, however it does not outline how institutions can be involved in social work.

The use of the word “profession” in the definition is telling, as it reveals the belief that social work is the product of professional social workers. The actions of institutions are rarely classified as social work. Instead, social work literature discusses how professional social workers can work with institutions to create social change. This image of social work, though commonly-held by both social workers and the public, is a dated one. Contemporary social work systems focus more on building

coalitions for social change with the diverse resources already available in the community (Crane & Skinner, 2003). “Capacity Building” or “Community Resource Mapping” models guide social work practices which seek to empower communities to collectively identify problems and develop solutions, rather than force communities to rely on individual social workers to do this work for them (Crane & Skinner, 2003; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). From this perspective, social work is a process of creating social change by mobilizing all aspects of the community, including institutions. While social work still requires highly-motivated individuals, current social work thought recognizes that solving complex social problems requires the building of coalitions with political authorities, civic leaders, businesses and non-profits, and affected community members (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

Social work is implicitly an activist discipline (Abramovitz, 2008; Van Kleeck, 1934). Social workers can use the financial and political power of like-minded institutions to create policy change, or harness institutional networks to mobilize large segments of the population toward a common social goal. As well, institutions with these resources which practice community social work themselves are able to make these social changes without the relying on trained social workers.

Community social work should serve an equivalent role to people as the interpersonal relationships they have with family and friends (Jordan, 2007). To achieve this, a level of trust must be established through deep relationships between agents and clients (Silverman, 2010). Developing these personal relationships is where individual social workers have an advantage. However, if institutions are able to build long-term relationships with community members, then the role of institutions as social agents can be considered more seriously. Social workers come to understand and address issues of respect, opportunity, and discrimination by integrating into the community (Jordan, 2007). This is an area where museums have been successful as well; the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, for example, empowers community members to share stories of immigration and inequality and participate

in museum practice through exhibit development, and creates programs which support local economic development (Sheppard, 2000).

Also of note, the IFSW definition states that social work is about *promoting* social change, but not necessarily *enacting* social change. By this definition, any actions which support positive social behaviors might be considered social work. This rationale is supported by a number of social theorists. Some believe that actions which make someone feel good can be social work (Jordan, 2007). Gathering in a public setting could be seen as a social service if it promotes positive social interactions between community members (Gurian, 2001). For many museum scholars, this rationale has been used to express the social work potential of museums. Some social workers have disagreed, with good reason, as “increased arts engagement” or “increased self-esteem”, for example, do little to try and undo social problems the way professional social work does (Worts, 1995).

Social work is committed to making positive contributions to individuals and societies (Abramovitz, 2008). Social work scholar Bill Jordan (2007) states that community social work “involves harnessing the collective experiences and resources of the community to mobilize positive change” (pp. 115). This statement refers to professional social workers, but is an accurate reflection of how a museum can participate in local social work as well. As highly-visible institutions in a community, museums often serve as gathering places for individuals and knowledge (Gurian, 2001). While acting as a gathering place is a social action, it is the mobilization toward change, which Jordan refers to, that establishes the museum’s activist social service. If museums are participating in activist social service which seeks to create positive change, it is difficult to categorize these actions as anything other than social work.

**Museums and Social Work.** The concept of museums serving as agents of social change is not new. In addition to showcasing objects of art, history, and natural sciences, the earliest first American museums were founded as agents of moral reform (Chew, 2004). Institutions like Jane Addams’ Hull

House, a settlement house opened in Chicago in 1889, demonstrated the close relationship between cultural and social enrichment. Here, poor immigrants came to see theatre productions and musical performances, as well as learn English, have a meal, and debate contemporary issues. For poor families, an opportunity for leisure and learning, as a distraction from drinking, created real social benefits for the family and the city alike (Silverman, 2010). Hull House provided –and today continues to provide— opportunities for people to participate in American society while improving these participants lives through direct social service (Hull House, 2014).

Examples like the Hull House illustrate the values of museum social work. However, despite the development of museum professionalization and increased awareness to issues of access and representation, museums have been criticized for not fully realizing their social work potential (Gurian, 2001; Sandell, 2003; Stapp, 1998; Worts, 2006). Museums have historically been slow to adapt to changes in politics and society (Sandell, 2003). While the majority of museum workers may recognize the value of community inclusiveness, they do not view their public service roles as as valuable as their obligations to collections, exhibits, and scholarly research (Weil, 1999). Furthermore, some museum scholars claim that museums tend to place their own financial needs ahead of the needs of their audiences (Gurian, 1988; Stapp, 1998).

Interestingly though, much has been written which claims that the demand for financial support has actually increased museums' social service efforts. Greater economic accountability has led to increasing demand for museums to demonstrate their social value (Burton, Griffin, 2008; Sheppard, 2000). Organizations such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) award grants to museums which make a positive difference in their communities (Sheppard, 2000). Without consistent quantitative figures to represent museum impacts, museums often attempt to prove their worth by emphasizing their social benefits. Competition for these grants motivates museums to increase their current social service or pursue social service actions for the first time. Educational success, positive

social behavior, community pride, crime prevention, and development of life skills are all frequently presented to potential funders as evidence of what museums provide for their community (Burton, Griffin, 2008).

Political shifts favoring social inclusion have encouraged museums to take on social service roles, but museums are not acting solely to please their potential funders. Instead, increased public trust and the growing voices of the disadvantaged have led to widespread change in the museum field (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, 2001). In addition to greater accountability from funders, museums are also facing increased pressure by local residents. As repositories of local histories and objects, community residents view their local museums as the heart of the area's civic and cultural life (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). In return, the local community supports museums as visitors, customers, volunteers, and as tax-payers. Museums therefore have an obligation to provide for the needs of the local public (Weil, 1999). If a museum is dependent on the local community and the community trusts the museum to care for its heritage, then it reasons that the museum must make reasonable attempts to ensure the well-being of community members (Weil, 1999; Kelly, 2006). This support is particularly valuable to oppressed populations (such as people of color, the disabled, or the economically disadvantaged) which are targets of dominant groups, as museum social actions can act to redress previous inequality within museums (Appleton, 2001; Ayvasian, 1995).

Carol Stapp advised in 1998 that "the justification for the museum's continued existence ultimately rests on its clear-cut service to the public." (pp. 230) In the time since Stapp made this remark, museums have become more willing to accept their ability to engage in social service. However, the continued claims that museums are not doing enough to serve their audiences indicates a disconnect between the kinds of social service museums are currently participating in and the social service that scholars believe museums are capable of (Gurian, 2001; Sandell, 2003; Worts, 2006).

For decades, museum professionals have continuously written that the social well-being of museums' communities should be at the core of a museum's purpose (Stapp, 1998). These conversations continue today within the museum field, as museum critics emphasize the significance of museums taking on a greater role in social service (Gurian, 1988; Weil, 1999; Worts, 1995). The International Council of Museums (ICOM) includes "service to society" as a definitive function of museums (Hein, 2005). The Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), which oversees museums in the UK, claims that museums and galleries can "[empower] people to determine their place in the world ... [and] play a full part in society" (Appleton, 2001).

Most museums make claims to their ideals of public service in their missions (Stapp, 1998). Museum scholars have offered conflicting opinions about these statements. To some, these missions are merely lip-service meant to elevate a museum's low-priority interests for positive local public relations (Sandell, 2003). Others believe these missions demonstrate museums' new and genuine concern for the well-being of community members (Stapp, 1998). Most museum professionals believe a fundamental shift has occurred, wherein the needs of the local public are now privileged (Appleton, 2001; Casey, 2001; Maluwa, 2006; Gurian, 2001). This new emphasis on local social service was shaped by the demands of early museum social work innovators whose museums created activities, programs, and exhibits which present current issues and work to address them head on (James 1999; Sheppard, 2000).

With this new emphasis on social service, museums may begin to look very different in the future (Gurian, 2001; Simon, 2010; Worts, 1995). In the past two decades, museums have increasingly recognized that museum exhibitions inherently reflect the politics and values of the institution (Chew, 2004; Gurian, 1988). Many museums have embraced this –and have begun taking a greater role in political activism on behalf of their local communities. Traditional museum practice is too rigid to suit the needs of an ever-changing community (Maluwa, 2006; Sandell, 2002). Issues of health, education policy, environmental sustainability, and housing are becoming as important to museums as collecting

and preserving objects (Maluwa, 2006). As many as twenty-five sessions at the 2013 American Alliance of Museums Conference dealt with increasing museum-community relationships (Program, 2013). This clearly demonstrates the significant role communities play in museum practice, and the role museums play in local society. In the near future it may be standard practice for museums to work with local leaders, legislators, and businesses to find solutions to the complex problems plaguing the community.

***The Social Work of Museums.*** Museum literature has stressed the potential for museums to engage in social work, however the literature on this topic is scant (Silverman, 2010). Lois Silverman's 2010 work *The Social Work of Museums* is perhaps the first and most complete source devoted to museum social work. In this text, Silverman describes the history of museum social work and describes the social benefits museums provide to individuals, couples, families, and groups. Silverman concludes her work by envisioning the future of museums within an increasingly socially conscience world. The author illustrates museum social work from the social work perspectives of "people-in-environments", "relationship needs", "at-risk needs", "client-centered relationships", and "interventions".

Silverman introduces readers to museums and social work with a number of interesting points. The author criticizes museums whose social service represents a "special program" which is otherwise nonessential to the "real" aims of the museum. Instead, Silverman supports universal client-centered approach to social service wherein a social worker (the museum) works with clients (the museum visitors) to identify needs and develop ways to meet those needs (pp. 142). Another major benefit of Silverman's work is that it takes a stance on museum social work. The author asserts that museums are definitely engaging in social work, and in more numbers than ever before (Silverman, 2010). Most importantly, Silverman differentiates between "social action" and "activism" as fostering change versus pursuing solutions to social problems, respectively. (Silverman, 146) "Social action" can refer to any social service which provides someone with an opportunity for change, while "activist" social service represents the direct social service that seeks to solve specific social problems (412). Social action can

help reduce the effects of social problems by creating opportunities for change, but only activist social service attempts to provide solutions.

While *The Social Work of Museums* is a thorough examination of museum social work, this work is primarily focused on how museums benefit individual visitors rather than communities. Silverman's chapters focus on how museums fulfill personal needs, as in coping with unemployment, relieving stress and promoting relaxation, or fostering spiritual contemplation (pp. 43-44, 60-61). The author says little, though, about how museums can create positive social change in their local communities. Museum scholar Richard Sandell (2003) describes museum social work as occurring in three different levels; the individual-level, the community level, and the societal level. Individual-level social work includes actions which support personal development, as in increased creativity, self-esteem, or social skills. The community-level refers to museum social work practices which address shared problems and supports local social change. Societal-level social work is the social, political, and human rights, actions implemented by museums which affect all members of society (pp. 45). The personal rewards of museums articulated in Silverman's work represent museum social work at the individual level. Museums' societal-level social work impacts have been advocated by Gurian, Weil, Sandell, and others (Gurian, 2001; Sandell, 2003; Sheppard, 2000; Weil, 1999). How museums engage in community-level social work though, has yet to be explored in depth.

**Critiques of Museum Social Work.** While museum literature, including Silverman's work, states that museums are engaging in social work, many do not agree. Some social workers have been critical of museums taking on the roles of social service, as they are not equipped to meet a community's needs the way a social work organization could (Gurian, 1991; Silverman, 2010). Social workers are experienced practitioners of needs-based solutions to social problems. For these critics, museums which imply that they are agents of social work jeopardize the credibility of trained social workers (Silverman, 2010). However, this belief reflects a misunderstanding of how museum engage in social services and an

adherence to older models of social work. Museums are just one of many institutions which work to solve social problems; instead of viewing museums as a threat, individual social workers should look to museums as allies.

Still, social workers and museum critics alike have correctly pointed out that most museums have an uninformed perspective of how social work works. Many museums engage in activities which address social problems, but are implemented in ways which are of little benefit to local residents (Worts, 2006). An opportunity to interact with museum exhibits is seen as a valuable method for improving one's well-being (Bitgood, 1993). However, these participatory efforts by museums are often done without much consideration of how visitors' actions relate to social outcomes, and therefore do not effectively engage visitors in the topics presented (Simon, 2010). While museums use these activities to gather information from their visitors, there are few examples of this information leading to substantive community-wide social impact (Schwarzer & Koke, 2007; Worts, 1995; Worts, 2006). One-off participatory experiences, pop up museums, or other transformational museum activities may promote increased dialogue between the museum and its visitors, but the social impact of these activities is minimal compared to the long-term, in-person relationships between social workers and clients, and are therefore not examples of social work actions by the museum (Appleton, 2001).

Museum scholar Douglas Worts (2006) stated this best:

In ... attending exhibits in museums and art galleries, watching theatrical or musical performances ... the most that is expected of participants is appreciation. Participation is assumed to be passive. Although a deeply engaged, highly reflective, and profoundly meaningful experience can be had by a visitor/patron, the assumed norm is that you pay your money and catch the show...One might well ask what, exactly, is the ultimate goal of having millions of people ambling by millions of displayed objects during leisure time? Who actually benefits from having members of the public read text panels, for example, in exhibits? Does this type of experience change how people see the world and/or live their lives? Unfortunately, the responses to such questions... are not asked often enough by museums themselves. Even when visitors to museums generate insights that might shed light on such questions, it is rare that these comments and ideas are fed back into the institutional machinery responsible for the exhibits and collections.

(pp. 128-129)

In addition to these individual visitor social service approaches, museum scholars also criticize museum social work efforts as they relate to groups. Ethnic-centered museums emphasize their community collaboration, but this collaboration is often limited in its scope, in the number of participants, and the visibility of their participation. It is certainly a social action to provide underrepresented communities opportunities to influence museum narratives, but if these conversations occur behind closed doors, it is not clear how the local community directly benefitted (Simon, 2010). Elaine Gurian (2001) points out that museum staffs continue to believe that outreach programs targeting ethnically-specific populations will be successful in engaging diverse groups of visitors, only to be baffled when they do not work out. This is because offering programs to community groups is not enough to sustain their interests;

Some staffs maintain that programs like outreach or ethnically-specific special events will, by themselves, encourage broader user mix—and then wonder why that is not sustained... program offerings alone are not enough.

(pp.110)

Museums are far more successful when they offer more activist social services which have greater meaning in the lives of audience members.

The conflation of social action and activist social service is the primary contributor to people's dismissal of museums as agents of social work. The former involves making people feel recognized and appreciated, through things like shared authority or museum outreach; the latter involves actions which directly address and seek to resolve social problems (Appleton, 2001). While social action is an important action for museums to take on, and may even promote social change, social action alone cannot resolve the social problems which affect a museum's community. Ultimately, narrow perspectives of museums' social work capabilities make it more difficult for museums to create meaningful social change (Sandell, 2003). Research has shown that museum – local business partnerships have positive impacts on a neighborhood's well-being, but most businesses do not

immediately think to partner with museums (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, "Function Follows Form" 103) Sandell (2003), describing inhibitors which prevent museums from implementing social service, remarks how the influence of professional social workers shifts popular opinions of museums' ability to solve social problems:

A third change inhibitor is the attitudes towards museums, held by those agencies traditionally most closely involved in tackling the forms of disadvantage now described by the term social exclusion. Many museums find themselves excluded from new initiatives as they are rarely considered as appropriate partners by social, welfare or health agencies.

(pp. 52)

**Museum Reluctance to Engage in Social Work.** In addition to professional social workers' criticisms of museums as agents of social work, many museums do not view themselves as agents of social work either (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, 2001; Sheppard, 2000; Silverman, 2010). Research has shown that this rationalization often occurs internally. Within the museum profession, some do not believe that cultural institutions should play a part in engaging in social issues (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). Part of this reluctance comes from different beliefs in what museum work should entail. Historically, museums have been hesitant to claim goals outside of traditional museum practice because museum employees feel that addressing poverty, health, employment, discrimination, etc. is the realm of professional social workers (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). Museum professionals have training in various social sciences but rarely social work, therefore many museum workers feel that they themselves are not qualified for this work (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). The effect of this is that museums begin to believe that addressing social problems is not something that museums do; research supports that overall, most museum staff persons do not feel that social service is a worthy cause for their institutions to pursue (Sandell, 2003).

Interestingly, some museums resist taking on social work roles because of a distrust of social work as a discipline. Politically active museums in particular may be cautious of government-sponsored social workers, who could represent an intrusion into their private organization (Jordan, 2007). Even

social workers have recognized that their practices has at times unintentionally perpetuated structural disadvantage (Reisch, 2008). The traditional “deficit” model of social work often reinforces social problems rather than solving them, as there is no system in place to empower community members succeed. Kretzman and McKnight (1993) accurately describe this issue:

Public, private and non-profit human services ... translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to these problems. As a result, many low-income urban neighborhoods are now environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services with no incentive to be producers.

(pp. 2)

With this in mind, museums may feel they are better positioned to support their local communities than social workers, because they have more familiarity with the needs of local residents and have a more genuine interest in the well-being of community members.

By distinguishing themselves from professional social workers, museums do not need to be held accountable when social service programs fail. Instead, museums often employ across-the-board actions to address social needs than to delve deeper into solving social problems. A “free first Thursday” event is a popular example of this problem. During these events, all visitors can visit the museum for free on the first Thursday of every month. These programs may increase museum visitation, but they provide unilateral social benefits rather than address the needs of specific local populations. Those who can already afford the cost of admission enjoy a free museum visit that day, and those who cannot otherwise afford to visit are *allowed* the opportunity to visit once a month (Schneider, 2014). The problem is that these programs subside, rather than combat, the problems plaguing the community’s disadvantaged citizens (Chew, 2004; Gurian, 1988).

As well, some museums have been reluctant to implement social work, believing that it causes them to drift from their missions and true responsibilities, and politicizing what should be neutral spaces

(Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Silverman 2010). In truth though, today's museums are not value-neutral institutions to begin with. If museums of the future choose to take stances on social and political issues, then they must be willing to help enact social and political change (Chew, 2004; Gurian, 1988; Stapp 1998). Sometimes museums do take a stance on issues, but are reluctant to allow community members to offer counter opinions because they "do not wish to risk having their minds changed" (Schwarzer & Koke, 2007, pp. 152). The fear of disagreement drives many museums to avoid have conversations about local social problems altogether (Schwarzer & Koke, 2007). Gurian noted this trend in 2005, remarking that most museums want to pursue direct social work activities, but confusion and hesitance has led to a decline in the frequency of these actions from the late 1980s, when the idea of museum social work was an emerging concept (pp. 74).

Another reason for museums' reluctance to embrace social work involves the term "social work" itself. The actions which are viewed as social work in one museum may not be viewed as such in another museum. Terms like "social responsibility" and "community forum" fall into a grey area as museum ideals which are not social work per se, but which seek to make a community more valuable and more just (Gurian, 1988). Because social work is a discipline of its own, many museum employees do not feel they can fairly claim their museum's activities as social work actions (Dodd & Sandell 2001; Gurian, 1991; Sheppard, 2000). This mindset creates a self-fulfilling prophecy, as museums do not see their actions characterized as social work and therefore they do not see themselves as agents of social work. This is summarized nicely by Jocelyn Dodd (2001), who states:

Research suggests that there are a number of very different ways in which museums and galleries can contribute meaningfully towards social inclusion though these are not always understood or accepted both within and without the sector.

(pp. 4)

As a result of this misunderstanding, museums are discouraged from pursuing actions which are frequently associated as social work, as these actions are the domain of professional social workers.

Some museums, like the Belknap Mill Society in Laconia, New Hampshire, are brave enough to pursue topics like local unemployment, at-risk youth, and caring for the ill and elderly (Sheppard, 2000). As museums envision themselves as outside the sphere of social work though, institutions like the Belknap Mill Society appear as outliers rather than trendsetters. Ultimately, this perpetuates the idea that museum practice and social work are not meant to intersect.

The separation between museum social work and professional social work has been articulated by members of both groups. Thinking critically though, it appears that the issue is less about whether museums are capable of leading social change, and more about how their social service actions are characterized. Museum scholars have written extensively about the successful social impacts of museums programs, exhibits, and initiatives, however there are differences in the nomenclature which frame museums' social service as something other than social work to both museum employees and trained social workers. The following is an example of this terminology dilemma from Beverly Sheppard (2000):

Although not all museums consider themselves agent for social change, many are exploring the potential for greater community activism, believing that their own institutional sustainability is closely tied to community sustainability.

(pp. 64)

And another example from Gurian (1991):

Museums are, and have always seen themselves as instruments of social responsibility... but the term "social responsibility", as our trade uses it, has rarely been construed to cover the provision of direct service to some element of community". The number of museums which take part in these kinds of activities is high, but very few museums include direct social service as a stated priority of their institution.

(pp. 83-84)

The fear of change which has hampered museum progress in the past continues today. If museums cannot see themselves as agents of social work, then individuals and other institutions will not see their actions as as valuable as "real" social work. Museums require public validation of their social

worth to survive, therefore it is in their best interest to demonstrate their commitment to the well-being of local residents through social work. While it is wise of museums to defer to the expertise of professional social workers, museums must realize that they do have the potential to make meaningful social change through their actions. The visibility and financial resources possessed by museums are far greater than most professional social work and aid organizations, enabling museums to have far-reaching social impacts. (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). In order to realize museums' true potential to create social change, museum professionals and social workers alike must examine museum social work with the distinction between social action and activism in mind. Once examples of museums' direct activist services are identified, museums can more easily be justified as one type of social work agent, among many, attempting to solve local social problems (Burton, Griffin, 2008; Kelly, 2006; Sandell, 2002).

**Community Museums.** Certain museums meet the needs of their communities by integrating community members and local needs into their institutional practices. These "community museums" are a distinct type of museum which is uniquely positioned to address local social problems because of the close relationship it maintains with local residents (Kelly, 2006). Community museums are sometimes known also as "neighborhood museums" or "ecomuseums", and can be found all across the United States. There is no accepted definition for community museums, as they are incredibly varied in their resources and functions. All community museums though provide similar social benefits. Through services which offer leisure activities, opportunities to work and volunteer, and local economic growth, community museums provide meaningful social benefits like neighborhood pride, cross-generational learning, and heritage preservation (Kelly, 2006).

During the shifting sociopolitical climate of the 1960s, activists who spoke out against inequality in American society also raised awareness on inequalities in the arts (Moreno, 2004; Simpson, 2001). The cultural revolution taking place inspired a critical examination of social institutions, including museums (Davis, 2008). The exclusion of works by women, immigrants, and minorities in major

museums led to calls for the creation of a new type of museum which empowered communities and addressed their sociopolitical and economic needs (Davis, 2008; Moreno, 2004). These new museums would be grounded in social, cultural, and environmental consciousness, and sought the input of the people living nearest to the museum to collaboratively solve the problems they faced (Davis, 2008).

Community museums have taken innovative approaches to addressing social problems in their neighborhoods. Most notably, community museums provide local residents opportunities to participate in museum practice and share their knowledge with the public. By allowing community members to tell their stories within the museum, the community itself becomes stronger (Keys, 2007). Exhibits or programs which focus on particular events can be told by those who experienced the events firsthand, making community members the center of the discussion of local history rather than serving as temporary consultants who supplement existing narratives (Gaither, 1992; Simon, 2010). This bottom-up approach ensures that the community determines what the museum is about, rather than the museum determining it for them (Olsen & Utt, 2007).

Another common social service action of community museums is partnerships with local businesses. Many community museums see strategic partnerships within the local community as an opportunity to disseminate educational content outside of the confines of the museum and ensure the financial stability of the museum. Museums and businesses increase local economies (Stapp, 1998). By combining resources, museums and businesses support each other and their community (Burton, Griffin, 2008). Community museums often act in even more direct ways to strengthen local economies. Several community museums operate out of once dilapidated buildings in their communities (Healy 2003). Renovated theatres, storefronts, and hotels have been transformed into useable museum space (Olsen & Utt, 2007; Simpson, 2001). These spaces provide distinctive locales for community museums while also improving local aesthetics. As the relative appearance of the community improves, the success of local businesses improves as well (Healy, 2003; Simpson, 2001).

In isolated regions, community museums are often called on to address issues of educational accessibility. Access issues are often viewed as an urban phenomenon, but museums in rural communities may have even more difficulties engaging in social service because of their disparate populations (Dodd & Sandell, 2001). Some rural museums have been successful with mobile museum programming and travelling educational materials (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Malawa, 2006). Many urban community museums aim to serve the social needs of specific ethnic communities. By the 1970s, a rejection of the “melting pot” mentality of the US led to a new emphasis on diverse perspectives on American experiences. With increased financial opportunities, minority groups began to open their own museums with the purpose of providing accessible education and a sense of pride to their ethnic communities (Gaither, 1994; Simpson, 2001). These museums become key areas within the local ethnic community, meaning they often have a greater pressure to fulfill social work roles (Chew, 2004).

As museums seek to fulfill their social work expectations, the actions of community museums provide a valuable example to follow. Large museums which expand their building and take in more and more objects limit their own ability to interact with their local publics through direct social service (Gurian, 1991; Worts, 2006). Preserving resources for community development is an investment in the museum, as it ensures the well-being of the individuals who support the museum. Community museums and similar “cultural centers”, which focus on heritage and provide opportunities for social interaction and education, and are more often seen as social work entities than other museums. (Gurian, 1991). If all museums integrated practices similar to those of community museums, then the image of museums as agents of social work might be more widely accepted.

**Summary.** In summary, museums are extremely capable of participating in social work to address problems in their local communities. While museums have been slow to adopt social work practices as a whole, it is clear that museums today are considering the social needs of their publics more so than ever before (Silverman, 2010). Museums are participating in actions which further more

cohesive institutions as a means of creating more democratic society (Gurian, 2001; Hein, 2005). At the same time, however, museums are often criticized for not doing enough to support the well-being of their local community and its members.

This disparity demonstrates differing opinions about how to categorize museums' social service. Nomenclature has played a huge part in museums' reluctance to characterize their own work as social work, and also in social workers' rejection of museums' social services as equivalent to their own work. Either intentionally or unintentionally, much of the social service actions museums engage in *are* social work (Silverman, 2010). This does not mean that museums are equal to social workers in terms of the legitimacy of their work, only that they approach social problems with similar goals in mind. Museum social work actions do not resolve social problems, or even offer any new solutions. Instead, they contribute to existing social capital by working within established social work efforts and creating networks for social change with other local agents (Burton, Griffin, 2008). Silverman (2010) summarized this idea best:

Museums may be pursuing social work goals and applying fundamental social work methods, but they are generally not abiding by a formal and sustained commitment to human rights, social justice, or other key social work ethics and values; they are not engaging regularly in social work evaluations and theory-building efforts nor drawing upon them to inform interventions; and they are not consistently approaching relationships as essential parts of culture. In other words, museums and social work remain two distinct professions, each guided by its own ethics and values, body of knowledge, and competencies.

(pp. 147)

Looking specifically at examples of museums' activist social service, which align more closely with the work of professional social workers, can increase the legitimacy of museums as agents of social work.

The second challenge is that museums' social work successes are not well documented. It is extremely challenging to measure the effectiveness of museums' social work efforts, as they cannot be easily quantified (Sheppard, 2000). Because of this, anecdotal data is relied on heavily to demonstrate the ways museums engage in local social work and the impacts of this work. This in itself is a difficult

task, as anecdotal data therefore tends to be less reliable and is not easily comparable between institutions. As well, the differences in museum social work approaches mean it is difficult to draw conclusions across the museum field.

The size of the institution plays a major part in the visibility of a museum's social service. The literature supports that small museums and community museums have strong connections with local residents, and may therefore have a greater awareness of local social problems (Burton, Griffin, 2008; Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, 1991). While the most well-known examples of museum social work come from larger institutions that have close ties to community needs, some have suggested that larger museums may be less capable of conducting social work which truly addresses local social problems (Gurian, 1991; Worts, 2006). It is essential that the social work practices of small local institutions be examined to provide the museum field with information about empowering museum – community relationships.

The three case studies in my research will seek to reveal different strategies museums use to engage in local social work. Illustrating these methods will support a greater understanding of trends in museum social work across the field. It is beyond the scope of this research to assess the success of museums' social work practices. Further work is required to develop instruments to quantify successful social impacts; at that point, cross examination can occur to determine the most effective approaches to museum social work across variables like museum size and the issue being addressed.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

**This** research sought to explore the ways in which small museums engage in social work in their local communities. Looking at Sandell's community-level social service criteria and Silverman's distinctions between social action and activism, three case studies were conducted on small museums practicing activist social service. These studies were intended to illustrate the diverse social work strategies being employed by small museums in the field, revealing new knowledge about museums' social work potential.

Four research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do small museums consider themselves agents of social work?
2. What are the strategies museums use to address local social problems?
3. Why do small museums participate in community-level social work?
4. What are the desired outcomes of small museums' local social work activities?

Semi-structured interviews with institutions selected for case study revealed answers to each of these questions and helped determine how these institutions think about local social work and view their own role as agents of social work.

**Sampling.** To select the three institutions for my case studies, I used a systematic approach based on relevant research and web exploration. From the literature, I identified a number of recurring social service strategies employed by museums which are referred to as actions of "social work", "social service", or "social responsibility". Among these actions are social service strategies which have been praised for their effectiveness or criticized for their ineffectiveness in implementing social change.

| <b>Frequently-Cited Museum Social Work Strategies</b> |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Economic Support                                      | Food Relief                 |
| Political Advocacy                                    | Minority Inclusion          |
| Public Dialogue                                       | Housing Initiatives         |
| Participatory Experiences                             | Neighborhood Revitalization |
| Distance Learning                                     | Multi-Use Spaces            |
| Local Development                                     | Shared Authority            |

I then inserted the most discussed social service strategies into the chart where they would be categorized according to Silverman's activism/social action framework.

| <b>Activism</b>             | <b>Social Action</b>      |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Local Development           | Shared Authority          |
| Housing Initiatives         | Distance Learning         |
| Political Advocacy          | Multi-Uses Spaces         |
| Food Relief                 | Participatory Experiences |
| Economic Support            | Minority Inclusion        |
| Neighborhood Revitalization | Public Dialogue           |

Next, I conducted a thorough web search to identify one museum to represent each of these strategies. Given my interest in small museums and to ensure consistency in size of the institution, I selected only institutions with revenues under \$3 million as of their most recent available 990 tax forms. Selection was based on programs, exhibits, special initiatives, or institutional beliefs found on their websites which clearly demonstrated their engagement in that kind of social service. I began this exploration by exploring museums whose social service actions I was already familiar with. I also consulted experts in the field to identify museums that they felt were known in the field for their social service; experts included Kris Morrissey, University of Washington, and Robert Garfinkle, Science Museum of Minnesota. As well, I consulted relevant web-based sources such as the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and Nina Simon's *Museum 2.0*. I was directed to a number of institutions by searching award recipients of the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences. Other institutions were

identified from general web searches using a combination of different search terms relevant to the types of social service commonly referred to in the literature.

Once the complete institution list was finalized, I had a clear matrix from which to compare social service strategies and to select museums to explore in more depth.

| <b>Activism</b>             | <b>Museum</b>                      |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Local Development           | Pratt Museum                       |
| Housing Initiatives         | Northwest African American Museum  |
| Political Advocacy          | National Public Housing Museum     |
| Food Relief                 | Hull House Museum                  |
| Economic Support            | Colleton Museum and Farmers Market |
| Neighborhood Revitalization | Harrison Center for the Arts       |

| <b>Social Action</b>      | <b>Museum</b>                  |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Shared Authority          | Wing Luke Museum               |
| Distance Learning         | Valdez Museum                  |
| Multi-Uses Spaces         | Hawthorne Hall                 |
| Participatory Experiences | Hands-On Children's Museum     |
| Minority Inclusion        | Delta Blues Museum             |
| Public Dialogue           | Levine Museum of the New South |

The two types of social service illustrated in the chart clearly reflect differences between “direct” and “indirect” social work. Hare (2007) defined direct service as micro-level problem solving and empowerment, as in therapy and opportunities for expression, and defined indirect service as macro-level social changes, like political action and aid (pp. 412) By this definition, Silverman’s social actions would be considered direct social work, and activism would be indirect. Interestingly, Gurian (2006) cited the opposite view, wherein activist strategies are the direct social service approach. (pp. 83-86) Hare’s categorization is valuable in that it identifies a difference in social work practice and the kinds of actions that take place within each. Because Silverman and Gurian speak specifically about museum service though, I used their framework of activism as direct social service to frame museum social work.

The literature revealed that museums are criticized by professionals in the field for not living up to their social work potential, and by social workers for not practicing actual social work. Furthermore, sources showed that many institutions did not view their own actions as social work. All of these issues exist in part because the majority of known museum social service falls under the social action category. Because social action does not seek to solve problems directly, critics are right to not view these actions as social work. Activist social service—which can clearly be considered social work—is less examined, especially amongst small museums. In order to uncover information about small museums and social work, I selected all three case study institutions from the activist social service column in the chart [see Appendix 1: Site Selection Framework to review all tables].

| <b>Activism</b>                    | <b>Museum</b>                             |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Local Development                  | Pratt Museum                              |
| Housing Initiatives                | Northwest African American Museum         |
| <b>Political Advocacy</b>          | <b>National Public Housing Museum</b>     |
| Food Relief                        | Hull House Museum                         |
| <b>Economic Support</b>            | <b>Colleton Museum and Farmers Market</b> |
| <b>Neighborhood Revitalization</b> | <b>Harrison Center for the Arts</b>       |

In order to elevate the work of small institutions, I selected three institutions from this sample that are the least represented in museum literature. The three museums selected all reported less than \$1 million in revenue on their 990 tax forms and represented three very different strategies for solving local social problems. The National Public Housing Museum in Chicago, Illinois is a yet-to-open museum which tells the stories of those who live in public housing complexes in the US. Through exhibits, programs, and public conversations with local community members, the museum supports civic participation and advocates for housing equality. The Colleton Museum and Farmers Market in Waterboro, South Carolina is a unique collaboration between the county historical museum and the local farmers market. By combining the two organizations, each entity saw financial growth and they collaboratively created new economic opportunities for local residents. The Harrison Center for the Arts

in Indianapolis, Indiana is an arts organization which supports emerging artists and the city's urban community by promoting education, opportunity, and social interaction. A major component of the Harrison Center is its efforts to revitalize the urban neighborhood through initiatives to restore abandoned buildings and integrate the arts into existing community social networks.

**Data Collection.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with one museum professional at each of the three case study museums. Interviews were conducted via Skype, the computer-based video chat application, and by telephone, in March of 2014. Interviews were digitally recorded with participant permission, and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview was comprised of a series of predominantly open-ended questions aligning with Best's (2007) model of the different stages of a social problem. Best identified four stages:

1. Condition - An objective phenomenon bounded by physical reality
2. Claims - The evidence of harm to society
3. Warrants - The justification for action to solve the social problem
4. Actions – Explanations of the organizations' social work strategies and their desired outcomes

My thesis interview questions were developed according to Best's four stages in order to elicit the exact answers necessary to understand how small museums engage in local social work [See Appendix 2: Interview Guide]. Looking at my interview guide, the alignment with Best's framework defines what responses each interview question revealed:

1. Condition [Questions 1-2] - What is the museum? What is the community? How are they related?
2. Claims [Questions 4-5] - What are the local social problems? How are they identified?
3. Warrants [Questions 3, 6-8, 11] - Why does the museum participate in local social work?

4. Actions [Questions 9, 10, 12-14] - What are the museum's social work strategies? What are its desired outcomes?

Furthermore, each interview question corresponds to one of the four research question. Interview responses will provide the information necessary to answer these research questions [see Appendix 3: Alignment Framework].

**Data Analysis.** Transcripts were analyzed on a question-by-question basis using content analysis, an approach that involves identifying emergent patterns and trends within responses to each question. Cross-case analysis was conducted to find similarities and differences across the three case study sites.

**Limitations.** There are three main limitations with this study. The first involves the size of the organizations being explored. In order to assess small museum social work practices in the US, a consistent metric for comparison was required. All of the institutions identified listed less than \$3 million in revenues in their most recent 990 forms. While this provides an upper limit for the size of the institutions being examined, there is a considerable range amongst these institutions. The Colleton Museum and Farmer Market, for example operated with less than \$50,000 in 2012. This disparity between institution sizes, within the arbitrary \$1 million revenue cap, allows for considerable differences in these institutions' capacities to participate in activist social service.

Another limitation amongst the museums being explored is the small sample size. Ideally, a large sample of museums could be studied in order to accurately reflect potential patterns in museum social work in the US. The process of connecting and interviewing staff persons from a large body of museums is incredibly time consuming, therefore this large scale approach is beyond the reach of this study. Instead, the three institutions selected to serve as case studies are meant to illustrate some of the potential approaches to museum social work being employed, rather than determine larger trends in museum social work nationally. A thorough analysis of museum social work is an area for further study which would nicely compliment this research.

Lastly, this research is limited by a shortage of professional social work sources. The overwhelming majority of literature consulted comes from the museum field. This study would be benefited by the inclusion of professional social work perspectives on the process of social work engagement, institutions and social work, and social work perspectives on each of the social service strategies identified in the museum literature (ie: minority inclusion, shared authority, neighborhood revitalization, etc.). Given the adamancy with which museum professionals have remarked on museums' social work potential, it is surprising that there is not much literature on museums from within the field of social work. Examining museums with a professional social work focus would be a beneficial addition to this research, as it would help support or refute the arguments of museum critics regarding museum social work.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To collect data for this research, three case studies were conducted to explore how museums engage in community-level social work. The three institutions selected were the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market, the National Public Housing Museum, and the Harrison Center for the Arts. Through telephone conversations with each institution's Executive Director, and information gathered from each museum's website, data were compiled to answer each of the four research questions. This section will begin with an introduction of each case study and examples of their social work practices, and will then present findings from the research which will inform each of the four research questions.

### I. Case Study Descriptions

**Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market.** The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market in Walterboro, South Carolina presents and preserves the culture and agricultural history of Colleton County. According to Gary Brightwell, the museum's Executive Director, its visitors are mostly local families, and occasional passersby from Interstate 95. From its founding in 1988, the museum was located in the old county jailhouse, a gothic-style building listed in the National Register of Historic Places. While this site had great local significance, the museum shared the building with the Chamber of Commerce and other departments of the local government. The total exhibition space was less than 900 ft<sup>2</sup>, which was not enough space to display many collections objects or effectively host educational programs. The county-run museum sought a new permanent home, but a lack of available funds prevented the development of an adequate space.

The county farmer's market had been in existence for many years on and off. In 2008, the loosely-organized farmer's market was failing financially. Brightwell states that much of the failure stemmed from a lack of a permanent space, as the market frequently changed locations from one parking lot to another around Walterboro. That year, the market was taken over by the County in an

effort to secure public funding and develop a permanent location. The county was motivated to revitalize the farmer's market as a way of participating in new government-sponsored initiatives in health, particularly the fight against childhood obesity. The nearby Clemson University Extension Services was also working in this field, and partnered with the county to administer the farmer's market.

After receiving a large grant, the county was able to build a new space for Clemson University Extension Service to operate in, and where the farmer's market to be held. However, the economic recession led to major staffing cuts for the Service, meaning it no longer had the capacity to oversee the farmer's market, and no longer required the new building which had just been completed. The museum recognized this as an opportunity to gain the larger space it needed and petitioned for the building to become the new home for the Colleton Museum. The county agreed, on the condition that the museum become the new administrator of the farmer's market, and place a greater emphasis on health and food topics in addition to local agricultural history. The combined Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market is the result of this arrangement.

The rural Colleton County was once one of the nation's largest rice producing regions, and the local economy is still primarily driven by farm labor. Financial hardships have affected the county tremendously. Brightwell cites "economic problems, lack of jobs, and lack of new businesses moving in to the community" as the paramount issues facing the county. Unemployment and poverty are common, and business development in Walterboro has stagnated. As a prominent institution in this tight-knit community, the museum becomes aware of local social problems through word-of-mouth.

Brightwell states:

CMFM: It's not a scientific survey that we do, but we do talk to our local people and we hear those things over and over... We are such a part of the community that it's hard for us not to know [about local social problems]. We don't need to seek out the information, it comes to us.

Recognizing that these economic hardships affect the museum and farmer's market visitor base, the museum sought to respond directly to these problems and create opportunities to support the

financial self-sufficiency of local residents. The merger of the museum and farmer's market created opportunities for locals to purchase fresh foods, but simply having these foods available does not relieve local residents any of the financial burdens associated with purchasing them. Brightwell recognized that in order to have a meaningful impact on the community, the museum must take a targeted approach to programming by addressing specific local problems and developing solutions to these problems:

CMFM: Part of our mission is to educate and involve all aspects of our population, and so when we plan programming... it is inclusive and affordable, if not free, to the community.

The museum began developing initiatives which used the theme of healthy foods to support financial independence through sustainable agricultural enterprises. One approach the staff created was the rental opportunity of the museum's existing commercial kitchen for community use. This kitchen, located within the building, is equipped with all the machinery, cookware, and utensils of a professional kitchen. For a nominal fee, local residents can rent this kitchen to produce food products, like jams and baked goods. Products can then be sold at the farmer's market, allowing users the ability to profit from their creations. As well, users of the kitchen are often called upon to serve as educators for the museum's public. The people who used the kitchen to produce food stuffs become instructors for interested residents who want to do the same. Through these unique approaches, the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market are leading social change in rural Colleton County.

**National Public Housing Museum.** The National Public Housing Museum is a yet-to-open museum in Chicago, Illinois which is the first museum in the United States dedicated to interpreting the experiences of those living in public housing. The museum, founded in 2006, seeks to illustrate the stories of former and current public housing residents across America as a starting point to address contemporary issues related to class, opportunity, and social justice. Today, the museum achieves this by hosting programs and symposia related to public housing issues in Chicago-area venues.

The planned permanent home for the museum is a three-story brick building built in 1938 as part of the first government housing project in Chicago. This particular building, one of the last of the

Jane Addams Homes projects still standing, housed hundreds of families until it was condemned in 2002. The museum has secured the rights to the building, and is currently raising funds to renovate the space. Following the inspiration of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York City, the National Public Housing museum plans to recreate public housing residences and utilize actual public housing residents to serve as educators in order to create meaningful connections through immersive environments. Exhibitions about art, music, and politics will present the positive and negative aspects of public housing communities, and the historical legacies of these places as pathways for disadvantaged communities to move towards achieving the American Dream.

As there are no exhibits currently in place, the museum's current audience is the diverse body of visitors who attend the museum's public programs. Todd Palmer, the museum's Interim Director, states:

NPHM: We're really looking at a multifaceted audience which begins with the general public and continues with scholars and subject-matter specialists on public housing—that can include architects, sociologists, historians—and I think what we're trying to do is bring those groups into conversation with public housing residents and to redefine what constitutes [the typically segregated groups which make up the museum's audience].

Conversations with representatives from these groups informs the museum about contemporary challenges in Chicago's public housing communities. Staff "continues to be made mindful" of local social problems by Board members and youth committee members, many of whom are current public housing residents. The museum believes conversations with residents is central to their museum practice:

NPHM: The work of the museum grows out of those perspectives, so [engagement with residents] is written into the mission and the fabric of the institution.

As well, the museum maintains contacts with social justice scholars and policy makers who participate in the museum's programs. Along with the museum's public events, their interpretive plans demonstrate opportunities for positive social change as well. Exhibits will show reconstructed public housing units and be led by current and former public housing residents. Through this, the museum can present the stories and the legacy of public housing, both positively and negatively, in ways that are personal and immersive.

**Harrison Center for the Arts.** The Harrison Center for the Arts is a campus of art galleries and exhibition spaces in Indianapolis, Indiana which seeks to make art accessible to the public, and uses art as a means of creating positive contributions to the local community. Founded as a for-profit arts center in 2000, the Harrison Center became a private non-profit in 2003. The Harrison Center has exhibited the work of over 3,600 “emerging artists”, as in artists who rely on community support and who support the local arts scene themselves. In addition to exhibits which feature the work of these artists, the Harrison Center has 24 studios where local artists produce art and display their creative processes to the public.

The museum has quickly established itself as a major resource for local economic development and increased civic engagement through partnerships with local businesses and charities, and leadership in government initiatives. As well, the Harrison Center has expanded into social services through their extensive social networks. The museum facilitates opportunities for local residents to get involved in community activities and creates programming of their own in response to the needs of community members. The Harrison Center tries to make art accessible to all members of the urban community, and as a result, the museum claims to have the most diverse visitorship of any museum or art gallery in Indiana.

The Harrison Center staff recognizes that Indianapolis has major problems in infrastructure. Dilapidated and empty homes mar what the Harrison Center believes is an exciting urban environment to live in:

HCA: One thing that’s been discussed a lot in the last three years since the recession is the number of abandoned homes in Indianapolis... it’s really quite sobering to look at the map [indicating all the city’s abandoned houses]. I think it peaked at 14,000 abandoned homes. We thought, “how could art be a part of addressing this issue?”

Another social problem the museum has identified is the poor education system in the city, which is partly responsible for the declining economy:

HC: We have companies that cannot hire the type of employees that they need because we have an uneducated work force. Blue-collar companies are having a hard time finding

employees that can operate the now technical equipment, read well, and perform in this modern world... We still have families leaving our county for education elsewhere.

Personal communication with local residents and extensive social networks keep the Harrison Center informed about the problems that plague urban Indianapolis. The museum views its commitment to local artists and art patrons as its basis for pursuing social change. The Harrison Center takes on several social problems at once, and uses arts engagement as the main method for all of its local development strategies. By collaboratively developing solutions to poor local education, weak urban infrastructure, and lack of social and cultural connectivity, the Harrison Center is creating efforts for urban renewal in Indianapolis and beyond.

## II. Findings

Four research questions guided research across these case studies:

1. In what ways do small museums consider themselves agents of social work?
2. Why do small museums participate in community-level social work?
3. What are the social work strategies small museums use to address local social problems?
4. What are the desired outcomes of museums' local social work activities?

What follows is an analysis of the responses from case study participants. Cross-cutting themes are identified which inform the research questions, and illustrate ways in which small museums participate in community-level social work.

### 1. In what ways do small museums consider themselves agents of social work?

Each of the three case study museums viewed their social service in different ways. When asked if they believed their museum's actions were intentional examples of social work, the Colleton Museum and Farmers Market and Harrison Center for the Arts emphatically stated yes:

CMFM: Yes... we're trying to add to the economic impact of our very agricultural, rural community by offering [locals] a certified commercial kitchen with all the equipment for a nominal cost so they can produce their own product.

HCA: Yes. We help connect people to culture, community, and place to help strengthen neighborhoods.

The National Public Housing Museum however, adamantly opposed being considered an agent of social work:

NPHM: From a disciplinary stand point, the staff at the museum are not professional social workers. I think what we're doing is *adjunct* to social work, and as I said, there are organizations that do social work [in public housing]. I would push back against saying we're doing social work.

As demonstrated in the literature, the connection between the practices of the social work discipline and the social services of museums is a stretch for some museums (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, 2001; Sheppard, 2000; Silverman, 2010). Interestingly, this resistance is persistent even when describing museum practices which strive for the same outcomes that professional social workers strive for. For example, again from NPHM [emphasis added]:

NPHM: In my subjective opinion, a museum, by definition, is not a social work organization. There's no pretense to science or to the discipline of social work. **But the outcomes –improving quality of life, organizing, activating research and policy, benefiting those affected by social disadvantage—certainly, that is part of our mission.**

While the Harrison Center for the Arts agreed that its actions constitute social work, the museum expressed hesitation over the term “activism:”

HCA: I would say engagement is an objective. I would shy away from activism... “Activism” to me implies a little bit of –sometimes there's an edge to that; something [one might be] slightly uncomfortable about.

Again, while there was discomfort expressed in this terminology, the actions described by the museum demonstrates the kinds of direct, activist social work articulated by Silverman (2010):

HCA: We're excited about helping artists and art patrons, but we want everyone in the city who wants to be connected to come to the Harrison Center to get connected... We have this magic resource of grassroots networks and are able to – we're not supposed to, but we help people find jobs too! We can't help ourselves because we have all these people and resources that are eager to work with us, so we love connecting people with them.

The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market was the only participating institution not put off by the term "activism." When asked if activism was an objective of their institution, the museum affirmed that activism was indeed an intentional part of their social service:

CMFM: I would say that the answer is yes. Colleton County is a large land mass county with a relatively small rural population of 38,000 residents. There are some very real socio-economic challenges along with a high rate of childhood obesity and diabetes among the population. Adding the Farmers Market to our mix enables us to address these serious issues...

These responses support claims in the literature regarding both museums' reluctance to identify with social work, and museum's strong social work potential. The National Public Housing Museum firmly disagreed with being considered a social work agent, yet the outcomes they strive for clearly represent the kinds of service indicative of social work as defined by Silverman (2010) and Hare (2007). The same can be said about the Harrison Center for the Art's relationship with the work "activism;" while they are reluctant to use the term to describe themselves, their actions reveal that they participate in activist social work, even if they call it something else. Together, these museums reflect small museums' desire to lead social change in their local communities, but a lack of consistency about how this leadership is characterized.

Another important similarity between the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market and the Harrison Center for the Arts is the role that results play in shaping these museums' social work identities. When asked what changes that they had seen as a result of their museum's social service, the participants made similar remarks regarding these initiatives' successes:

HCA: I think it's been significant... Since we've opened the City Gallery we've had an economic impact for art... Art sales have increased by 198%, and that's really amazing for us; we did not expect for that to happen.

CMFM: A wider variety of local socioeconomic levels represented at the museum. More access to locally grown fruits and vegetables ... From a health standpoint I think access makes a difference, as does our educational things –showing how to cook certain vegetables, recipes, food samplings... we don't have a measurable way to know what kind of difference it makes but we hope in the future it [supports healthy lifestyles] against obesity, smoking, etc. From an educational and recreational standpoint, we feel like we're really making a difference

Both of these museums have clear examples of how their social service activities have made a difference to the local community. By seeing the economic, social, and educational improvements these programs have made, it becomes easier to contextualize these museum's service as social work.

Because the National Public Housing Museum has yet to open, they cited no examples of how their social service has helped reduce local social problems. This does not mean that the museum is not capable of making these changes, but instead that they have not yet created activities to respond to local problems directly. If the National Public Housing Museum begins implementing social services which target local social problems, and the museum can track the success of these programs through their existing networks with Chicago's public housing communities, then the museum staff may begin to view their work as social work and reconsider the museum as an agent of social work.

## **2. Why do small museums participate in community-level social work?**

One unexpected commonality between all three museums was that they all reported their social service activities as a financial consideration. Each museum described how their activities are supported by grant funding. By demonstrating their social services, these museums are increasing their appeal to potential funders who want to see the impact of their financial investments. These are the museums' responses when asked if they consider how their social services affect their financial success:

CMFM: Of course we're considering it; we're always considering our financial situation. We are always looking for more ways to increase the till to support more programs and more exhibits... I'm always thinking about the money, but we try to be creative in the ways we earn it.

NPHM: Yes, it is a concern. From a funding standpoint, that is a source of funding for us. As a non-profit, we depend on grants and being underwritten by individual generosity. It's not a conflict or a strain to do this kind of work. It's certainly easier to fund than the work we try to do with the general public.

HCA: It is. It strengthens us, so it's actually good for funding sources. Instead of just having arts funding, which is challenging, we get community development funding and economic development funding and entrepreneurship funding.

The responses demonstrate that small museums are aware of their own financial needs, and use their social service to leverage their justification for support. Museums which can demonstrate their

value through measurable impacts are better suited to receive grants. Social work is a perfect example of an activity which is mutually beneficial to both the museum and the targeted community. Local residents gain an ally to help resolve social problems, which affirms that their needs are viewed as important and strengthens their relationship to the museum. The museum, meanwhile, uses this service to its advantage by marketing their social work to potential funders and supporting the economic stability of local residents who may become members or funders themselves. Regardless of whether or not the museum claims to be practicing social work, any actions the museum participates in which produces demonstrable social impacts can be used a marketing opportunity.

### **3. What are the social work strategies small museums use to address local social problems?**

Three key themes were identified as common to the three case studies in terms of the strategies used to address local social problems: 1) pursuing strategic partnerships; 2) working towards self-sustaining community improvements; 3) creating place-based experiences. Each of these themes is discussed below.

**Pursuing Strategic Partnerships.** In each of the three case studies, the museum utilizes resources which already exist in the community to help solve social problems. Often, this involves partnering with local government to combat local social problems. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market is itself an example of these partnerships. The county felt that the best way to ensure the long-term survival of both entities was to merge them and share resources; the permanent home for the farmer's market provided necessary structure to ensure steady visitation, and the expanded space for the museum meant room to increase exhibits and attract a wider audience. More importantly, this partnership allowed for shared programming. By combining the market's fresh foods and economic opportunities with the museum's mission of education on agricultural history, the combined museum and farmer's market has been able to develop educational programs about SNAP, sustainable farming,

and volunteer gardening along with the commercial kitchen initiative, which provide social and economic benefits to the local community.

The Harrison Center for the Arts also demonstrates collaboration with local government. The city government reached out to the Harrison Center for their assistance in a neighborhood stabilization plan. This partnership, which was aimed at revitalizing dilapidated urban neighborhoods in the city, produced the City Gallery, a new gallery in the museum's complex. In addition to showcasing art and housing a café, the City Gallery serves as a resource for information about home ownership and community opportunities. This space is both a social hub and a starting point for the renovation of urban Indianapolis. As the museum's Executive Director Judy Pamp describes:

HCA: With the City Gallery, we have data that shows that we have been successful with the neighborhood stabilization program. We've found that the city program was successful because of our help because we've directed people through that program. And we keep track of how many renters and buyers we work with, and ... our data is that people from out of Marion County are moving into Marion County, sometimes as renters first but then the renters become buyers. So we have data to show that our programs have been effective.

This gallery provides the museum with a new exhibition space and closer connections to the local community, while contributing to the restoration of these urban neighborhoods through its educational resources. The success of the City Gallery has led to even greater social work partnerships, as the state of Indiana is now looking to the Harrison Center's work as a model for community revitalization statewide.

In the previous two examples, local governments have reached out directly to the museums to help solve social problems. The National Public Housing Museum partners with local government by reaching out directly to policy makers. The museum promotes social change through dialogue. Public talks and co-hosted events raise awareness of issues that have effects both locally and nationally. Strategic partnerships with housing policy institutions have resulted in a number of these events related to contemporary issues of public housing. In 2013, the museum held a symposium called *Reimagining Public Housing* with the Ford Foundation, the mayor of Atlanta, and New York City's top public housing

administrator. This event, and others like it, allow for conversation about issues of economic reform, race, and more as they relate to public housing. During these discussions, community activists are put in conversation directly with policy makers, academics, and political leaders. The success of these public talks has been a boost to the museum, as the museum is now being called upon to discuss Chicago's public housing sociopolitical challenges and inform housing policy conversations in other states.

Museum social work partnerships are not limited to local governments. The small museums in this study discussed how they rely on other community organizations to collectively address social problems. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market and the Harrison Center for the Arts cited poor education as an issue which threatens their local communities. Both museums have responded to this problem by pursuing solutions to education issues through the resources already available in the community. When an annual charity walk event was in jeopardy, the Harrison Center took over the program and added an arts element to it; this preserved the community's interest in the event and increased the museum's own visibility:

HCA: There's a walk in Indianapolis called Homeward Bound which raises money for homeless shelters. It was administratively challenges one year and they couldn't get their act together, so we stepped in and said "hey, how about we host an art walk at the Harrison Center? We have 65000 sq. ft. of gallery space; why don't we theme the art around the issue of homelessness and home and finding your place. And we can invite people in and have their walk here. So we kind of reinvented the walk to raise money through our building as a way of keeping that walk alive.

The rural Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market uses its relationships with the regions other arts and education institutions to develop programs from youths:

CMFM: I believe strongly in collaboration. You have to be involved with ... upper level entities [like the] South Carolina Arts Center, the Historical Society, several other civic organizations, collaborative programs with our library. We [as in, Colleton County] really have nothing else to offer children in our community in terms of activities.

As well, the museum is hoping to use the success of its commercial kitchen initiative to expand its food-related vocational opportunities through assistance with the local hospital.

Similarly, the Harrison Center works with nearby Butler University to put on the annual Unconventional Food Convention, or FoodCon. This event showcases innovative urban farming techniques to educate the local public about ways to develop their own foods in areas considered “food deserts”. This partnership allows the Harrison Center to host a popular event and pursue its mission of urban renewal while utilizing the financial resources of the local university. Another partnership the Harrison Center uses to support neighborhood revitalization is with local community social organizations. The museum co-creates events and activities which take place in the community, and uses the City Gallery to keep the public informed about outside events like these which provide local residents social opportunities.

HCA: We’re always trying to keep an ear out for what is going on in the community, what are the community needs.

HCA: When you bring people together, amazing things happen... We try to take the energy of the arts outside of our four walls and into the neighborhood to have more impact.

By being a part of locals’ lives in ways that are comfortable to residents, the museum has demonstrated positive social change to Indianapolis’ urban communities.

Findings related to this theme suggest that small museums understand the value of collective action, and actively seek collaborations with relevant institutions to address local social problems. Mobilizing multiple community entities for change is an essential element of contemporary community social work (Crane & Skinner, 2003; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Small museums, as one social work agent among many, are more likely to be successful when they work in collaboration with other local institutions (Silverman, 2010).

**Working Towards Self-Sustaining Community Improvements.** An interesting similarity found across the case studies is engagement in social work strategies which are self-sustaining, referring to actions which can be facilitated and expanded upon by community members without infrastructure or oversight by the museum. Self-sustaining strategies are significant, as they let individuals pursue social

change without having to rely on the museum; in this way, the social work programs are user-driven, and can evolve with the changing needs of the community.

The commercial kitchen initiative at the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market is a clear example of a self-sustaining social work strategy. For the local residents, the commercial kitchen allows individuals to earn extra revenue. Most vendors at the farmer's market have large scale farming operations. By facilitating the production and sale of resident's homemade goods, the museum ensures non-farmers a place in the market which they may not have had before. This opportunity directly responds to the economic issues which the community faces, as those without employment are able to generate regular income through the use of the museum's kitchen resources. While the rental fee and cost of materials are still expenses, the visibility users receive at the farmer's market can quickly lead to profits. As well, the museum does not *require* kitchen users to sell their goods at the market; residents who use the kitchen can do so for independent sale elsewhere. The museum believes that encouraging local entrepreneurship is a benefit to the museum regardless, as it supports the local economy:

CMFM: Any member of the community can come to us and provide business planning advice or any kind of canning or baking advice [to the community] and for a very nominal rental fee to use our commercial kitchen [to produce food products]. It could be a part-time income for someone or even evolve into a full time business somewhere.

In addition to the economic benefits for local residents, the museum gains significant benefits from the commercial kitchen initiative as well. More people taking advantage of the museum's kitchen means a steady stream of farmer's market vendors. The participation of these individuals has led to greater turnouts for the farmer's market and for the museum. Because the museum and farmer's market share the same site, increased visitation to one entity leads to increased visitation in the other as well:

CMFM: More and more lower economic people are using the museum and the farmer's market. The farmer's market is natural, but to get them to come in to the museum and feel comfortable [is an achievement].... A wider variety of local socioeconomic levels [are] represented at the museum.

Also, the commercial kitchen directly supports the objectives of the museum. Kitchen users often lead clinics on canning and baking, and sharing recipes. By establishing the kitchen as a place for community exchange to occur, the museum is directly contributing to the continued survival of the county's agricultural and cultural history.

CMFM: The partnership makes sense, because the museum presents the agricultural history of the community and provides opportunities for individuals to learn and profit, in addition to the farmers' market. We've created a compound of local agriculture history and industry.

As people attend these user-driven educational programs, more people will apply what they learned by renting the kitchen themselves, and thus regenerating the cycle of users-to-producers-to-educators. Not only are the renter's businesses self-sustaining, but the museum's programs are self-sustaining as well.

The Harrison Center for the Arts created a self-sustaining solution to the city's poor education system. The museum felt that in order to develop a more arts-appreciative community, public schools had to provide greater opportunities for urban youths to gain a first-class education:

HCA: We started the charter high school to address graduation rates, to address the issue of citizenship, to address the issue of art patrons, to grow our donors and philanthropists and the world-class citizens we need to advance this city.

The museum founded Herron High School, a public charter school, in the basement of their main building in 2006. 50% of enrolled students were students of color, and most came from low-income households. Today, the school is a separate non-profit, and is succeeding in creating a more academically prosperous Indianapolis; Herron High School is currently ranked in the top 5% of the nation's public schools, and boasts a 95% graduation rate.

By founding a charter school independent of the museum, the Harrison Center helped to support a more skilled and intelligent generation of young city residents. The influence this school has had on the community may be small now, but as the school's alumni population grows over time, the impact of this school will become more apparent. Outside of the hands of the museum, this self-sustaining effort will continue to improve the opportunities available to Indianapolis residents in the

future. There is no guarantee that a more educated public will mean a stronger art market. However, even though this school has only an indirect effect on the Harrison Center, the creation of the school is an intentional, continuous investment in the wellbeing of the local community by the museum.

The website of the National Public Housing Museum describes that in addition to exhibits, the museum plans to develop an institute for researchers to study housing policy. An institute such as this demonstrates another successful self-sustaining social work opportunity. Allowing visitors and public housing residents to learn and become active in housing policy creates a body of housing advocates who represent their own communities. This provides a tremendous opportunity for community members to participate more closely in civic dialogue, particularly on the issues that affect them personally. The results of this could range from greater education to increased political participation, and even influencing local policy. As public housing residents are empowered to participate in discussions regarding housing policy, the social activism of the community can be led by local leaders rather than the museum. In turn, the well-being of the public housing communities can be positively affected by a more politically active population, and the support of the museum can increase as a result. Palmer stated that this is a work in progress though, and currently the only housing policy engagement efforts have been the public dialogues the museum has hosted.

Self-sufficient social work programs truly demonstrate a small museum's commitment to their community, as they allow others to take the lead in these programs' implementation. Museums, in turn, show that their support of the community is genuine, and recognize that community members are equally capable of working to find solutions to social problems in effective and enjoyable ways.

**Creating Place-Based Experiences.** The small museums examined through this research each discussed the importance of place in their institutions. Each of these museums expressed that an important part of their social service involves connecting audiences to the community, and emphasizing the valuable contributions the local community has to offer. Inspired by the International Sites of

Conscience, the National Public Housing Museum plans to create exhibits which address local social problems through transformative environments. The location of the museum in the historic Jane Addams Homes housing project serves as a starting point for conversations about America's public housing history, and emphasizes Chicago's significant role in that history. Palmer believes that in powerful places where important things have happened, visitors can be inspired to take action through moving museum experiences.

NPHM: If you bring people to a place where maybe they're motivated by curiosity or by experience, then you can actually catalyze an encounter that makes them think and makes them engaged in a program.

Through interactions with actual public housing residents, the museum will strive to create experiences for visitors which are more personal than community conversations dominated by politicians and community organizers. In this way, policy, class, racism, and other issues related to public housing can be addressed in ways that connect all individuals with these topics.

NPHM: That's a reason why we're a museum; museums work with objects, they work with experience, they work with arts and culture, they work immersively. And we're using all these strategies to get at these problems.

Recreated spaces create a sense of wonder that may not be capable in traditional museum spaces. In this way, the physical setting of the National Public Housing Museum instills in visitors a sense of reverence and creates distinct museum experiences.

The Harrison Center for the Arts reflected the significance of place, but in a much different way. Rather than presenting to the public the value of a particular place or story, the museum promotes the artistic value and opportunities of its entire urban community. Recognizing that artists were leaving Indianapolis for larger art markets, the Harrison Center began thinking of ways to increase the city's urban and cultural landscape.

HCA: In 2003, artists started coming to me and saying 'I need to leave Indianapolis, I need to go to a city where they have art patrons'. And I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to provide them with art patrons here in Indianapolis. So, we started thinking in broader terms about how we could grow a new generation of arts patrons.

The museum began practicing “creative place-making”, wherein art is used as a strategy for economic development. With the support of the city government, the museum began its creative place-approach by encouraging artists and art patrons to buy abandoned urban homes in the neighborhood.

HCA: We got into creative place-making –which uses art as the center for economic development—and we opened a new gallery called the City Gallery... It shows place-based art, as in art that celebrate the place, and every month there’s a different story about urban neighborhoods where artists have a different way of celebrating and telling the stories about what is good and true about urban neighborhoods.

The museum’s new City Gallery serves as both an exhibit space and a resource for information about home ownership and the benefits of living in urban Indianapolis. As Pamp describes it:

HCA: We educate people about what urban neighborhoods are and what they offer, and we get them excited about the different amenities and characteristics of the different neighborhoods. And they find their place in these neighborhoods, and consider buying these abandoned homes or building a new house on an abandoned lot.

The Harrison Center’s place-based efforts have been successful in increasing local art support, as the museum has contributed to positive perceptions of the city’s urban neighborhoods. The museum presents Indianapolis as rising cultural center, and local residents have responded to these messages by contributing to this growth through their own arts and social engagement.

The Colleton Museum and Farmer’s Market emphasizes the value of place, but from a distinctly historical standpoint. The museum sees local social problems as a threat to the region’s culture. To the museum, providing solutions to the problems of food access and economic disadvantage are vital to the physical health of community members and also to the survival of the museum, as representatives of the rural county’s declining lifestyle. The museum’s kitchen rental opportunity and farmer’s market therefore provide ways to generate local pride and for the region’s agricultural traditions to proliferate.

CMFM: Our regional history is one of great success... This area was very well known for rice production as its means of agriculture... that is no more. However with our agricultural history, and people being dependent on that, it is incumbent upon us to ... make this history happen.

The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market does not emphasize any particular aspects of the town of Walterboro or the physical space it occupies. Unlike the examples of the two urban museums, the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market uses local legacy as a place-based experience, rather than on making connections to specific locations.

#### **4. What are the desired outcomes of museums' local social work activities?**

A trend which was identified across the case studies was a desire to support the health of the local community. For each museum, a healthy community was one where the specific problems identified were reduced. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market tackled community member's physical and economic health. Following national trends, the museum pursued a new emphasis on agriculture and nutrition which ultimately led to the merger with the county farmer's market. Now, combined programs on healthy foods and lifestyles reach wider audiences, and have led to increased community participation from volunteers.

Economically, the commercial kitchen initiative provides local residents a low-cost opportunity to generate revenue from food-related pursuits. Residents can either sell their goods at the farmer's market, or on their own, as either way supports the local economy. As community members use the kitchen to produce foodstuffs, the museum encourages them to lead public programs at the museum so that others can produce goods of their own. This cycle supports economic growth for the museum, the market, and the community members.

For the Harrison Center for the Arts, a healthy community is an arts-engaged community. The museum seeks to improve the social health of Indianapolis by providing art access to all and supporting stable neighborhoods. Pamp describes the museum's target audience as "emerging artists and emerging patrons".

HCA: Emerging artists are artists that need community. Emerging patrons is a term we made up, and it refers to people that like art but are intimidated by the art scene. Initially we thought emerging patrons would be low income or not very well educated, but what we found out is that 99% of the people we come in contact with, whether they're lawyers, plumbers or

students, art to them is incredibly intimidating. Most of the people we work with in Indiana are emerging patrons, so we purposely put on art shows that are accessible, that engage, that make people feel comfortable, and we program to that emerging patron demographic.

This shows that the Harrison Center is committed to making sure every member of the community can be a part of their museum, as a creator of art or as one who appreciates art.

Through the City Gallery, the Harrison Center seeks to encourage new development and residents by showcasing local art and providing information about housing and career opportunities. As well, the City Gallery serves as a source for social networking:

HCA: We connect people to culture. Culture might be inviting them to gallery openings or letting them know about grassroots organizations, parades, and festivals that are an important part of telling the stories of some of these urban neighborhoods. And we connect people to community. People are often lonely, and they come to our events to meet other people. We also are really well connected in the community, and if someone want to live in an urban neighborhood but doesn't have a connection to the community, we can get them involved in neighborhood associations or get them invited to neighborhood [events].

The National Public Housing Museum actively pursues the health of the community through social justice and political equality:

NPHM: We're mindful that our outcomes benefit [public housing representatives] in whatever ways that they can be, whether its benefiting them in terms of changing people's consciousness, stereotypes and stigma, or when possible, that there is a direct tangible material benefit – economic benefit, or connections that they can benefit from politically... it's definitely the beginning and end of any decision-making process in our work.

By giving a voice to the insight of scholars and the general public, in addition to public housing residents, museums can raise greater awareness of public housing problems than can other community organizations:

NPHM: A community meeting would not include a scholar or not include a member of the general public. We think we need those other two groups to care about what's happening in our public housing communities, and we're looking at ways to bridge those groups.

While the National Public Housing Museum's responses reveal that its focus is change at the societal rather than the community level, the museum is similar to the other case study museums in that it strives to improve the health of the populations it represents. The museum seeks greater recognition

of the contributions of those living in public housing, and a breakdown of the stereotypes which continue to limit the opportunities of public housing residents.

### III. Discussion

Reviewing each of the three interviews points out areas of similarity and difference between each institution. The trends identified by this comparison provide the basis for the answers to the four research questions in Chapter Five, and are summarized below.

The responses from the case study institutions help to reveal some of the differences in how social work is perceived by small museums. Each of the three museums examined in this research expressed different acceptance of the terms “social work” and “activism”. The Colleton Museum and Farmer’s Market accepted both term as representative of the kinds of work they do. The Harrison Center for the Arts was comfortable identifying as an institution which engages in social work, but not as one whose work should be considered activist. The National Public Housing Museum rejected both terms.

These varied responses confirm museums’ disagreements around the term social work, as expressed in the literature (Dodd & Sandell, 2001; Gurian, 2001; Sheppard, 2000; Silverman, 2010). There may also be confusion about this terms due to how common they are used within a museum context. Contemporary social work emphasizes the value of institutions in solving complex social problems; museum with familiarity with this concept may be more willing to accept their position as one of a community’s social work agents (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Silverman’s use of the terms “activism” and “social action” though have been articulated less by other museum scholars, therefore these terms may not be as widely accepted as the expanded classification of social work is. Silverman used the term “activism” to refer to direct responses to combat social problems, but without knowing this, misunderstanding of the term “activism” is possible (Silverman, 2010). Both the Harrison Center for the Arts and the National Public Housing Museum described activities which seemed to fall within

Silverman's definition of activism, yet they both rejected the term. Informing participants of Silverman's definition of activism may have provided clarity; providing this information though could have prevented authentic responses, and was therefore deliberately avoided.

The other major difference between these institutions was in the methods they used to participate in community-level social work. At the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market, social work is a process which brings community members into the museum. Using the strategic partnership of the local farmer's market and the county museum allowed both entities to share programming and transmit messages of healthy foods and lifestyles onto the expanded visitor population. The community kitchen encourages locals to come to the museum to use this resource. As this initiative grows, other residents are encouraged to take part as well. The growth of this kitchen rental opportunity means a larger market for agricultural education programs and more attendance at the farmer's market (in both visitors and vendors). The success of this social work strategy can be measured by the number of community members who profit or are empowered by the museum's activities.

Social work at the Harrison Center for the Arts involves mobilizing individuals outside of the museum. By increasing the access to quality educational and connecting residents to rewarding social opportunities, the Harrison Center is actively working to enrich the lives of community members. As well, the extensive urban renewal efforts have made major reductions in the physical dilapidation in urban Indianapolis. Supporting home ownership and assisting with job searches is an indirect way to increase art patronage, but is a direct way of creating meaningful social change in the neighborhoods where the museum's audiences live. Tracking local social engagement and the physical transformation of the community can reveal some of the impacts of the Harrison Center's social work.

In term of consistencies, each of the three museums expressed similar means of identifying local social problems, some shared approaches to implementing social change, and similar desired outcomes. All of the participants described identifying local social problems through their interactions with local

residents. Rather than developing social services based on problems addressed in the media, the museums all claimed that their primary source of information on the challenges local residents face is from the local residents themselves. The National Public Housing Museum uses their Board of Directors and youth advisors as informants for the ongoing issues affecting Chicago's public housing communities. The Harrison Center for the Arts communicates directly with the emerging artists whose work they feature, and from those conversations learn about the issues that hinder Indianapolis' art community. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market's social position in the small community establishes it as a locus for conversations, revealing the problems that affect members of the county.

Another interesting similarity is that each museum emphasized their work with other institutions, and local government in particular. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market illustrates this best, as the museum is the product of a merger between two county-operated organizations. In addition to the combined economic impact of these two sites, the museum is expanding into partnerships with other local organizations involved in health, such as the local hospital and the Clemson University Extension site whose work indirectly created the new museum building. At the National Public Housing Museum, housing scholars and political authorities are treated as equally valuable audience members as the general public. By bringing these groups into conversation about the museum's topics, the credibility of the museum is increased and the museum becomes a focal point for conversations about societal-level changes in housing policy. The Harrison Center for the Arts relies on its local connections to keep local residents informed about the happenings in the city. The creation of a charter school would not have been possible without an existing relationship with the local government. As well, the collaborations between the museum and the city has resulted in the Harrison Center's strategies for neighborhood stabilization to be used as a model for urban development statewide.

The case studies showed that museums are participating in social work to support themselves as well as the local community. By supporting the well-being of local residents, the museum contributes to

a stronger local economy and helps to ensure a large population of potential visitors. Grant funding opportunities for activist social work efforts serves as an extra incentive for museums to pursue solutions to local social problems. It would be interesting to examine how small museums field-wide compete for grant funding by emphasizing their social service activities. In-depth research on community social work granting may reveal interesting trends in small museum social service nationwide.

Lastly, the three museums all strive for outcomes which reduce the specific problems their social service strategies address. For the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market, this means increased economic development as well as a greater appreciation for local agricultural history through production and education surrounding health foods. The Harrison Center for the Arts developed a multifaceted approach to increasing Indianapolis' art patronage, involving increased education, social interaction, and urban renewal. Their desired outcomes would ultimately be a more arts-engaged public, as seen through smarter, happier, and more stable local neighborhoods. While the National Public Housing Museum seeks change at the societal-level, the museum's responses demonstrate that their desired outcomes—like the museums operating at the community level—involve a direct reduction in the problems which plague the populations they seek to represent. The museum seeks greater to highlight the achievements and communities of public housing through place-based conversations which enrich visitor experiences. For all three museums, the emphasis on place as a site of community cohesion and appreciation was noted; differences in how place-based education is practiced in urban and rural communities is an area for further study.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

From the responses of these three institutions and the trends identified among them, foundational hypotheses can be put forth about the nature of community-level social work within small museums. The case study responses have been summarized below to answer to the four research questions of this study:

### 1. In What Ways Do Small Museums Consider Themselves Agents of Social Work?

**Small museums consider themselves to be agents of social work when they implement actions which produce visible social change.** Interview participants from the Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market and the Harrison Center for the Arts both believed their museums represented institutions engaged in local social work. They do so not because of their missions necessarily, but because of the initiatives they have created which have demonstrated a reduction in the local social problems the museum identified. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market is a history museum, and the Harrison Center is an arts institution. Social work is not the primary objective of either of these museums, but after successful attempts to give back to their community, these institutions recognized that they have the potential to make major contributions in the lives of community members.

This finding suggests that evidence of social change from their actions may be an important requirement for museums when describing their work as social work. This may be a huge factor for why the National Public Housing Museum does not view itself as a social work agent, as they do not yet have any evidence to support local social change as a result of their programming. Outwardly, this museum has the most social work messages of the three museums consulted, although they are aimed at societal-level issues. If, once it opens to the public, the National Public Housing Museum begins implementing activities which targets local social problems specifically, visible social change to Chicago's public housing communities from the museum's work may appear. This in turn may alter how the

museum views itself in terms of being a social work agent. What these findings demonstrate is that small museums' social work requires communication with local residents to identify problems, to develop solutions to those problems, and to follow up on the success of these efforts.

## **2. Why Do Small Museums Participate in Community-Level Social Work?**

**Participating in social work is an investment for the museum's survival, and demonstrates the museum's commitment to the local community by taking on social responsibilities.** All three museums made it very clear that participating in social service is an opportunity to increase their marketability to potential funders. Granting agencies often have specific actions they wish to fund. Museums which can apply to several kinds of grants have a greater chance of bringing in revenue. In addition to grants, museums recognize that by working to reduce social problems in their communities, they are supporting the financial stability of local residents. Case study museums perceived that working to combat social problems helps to ensure a large body of potential visitors and funders.

More importantly, the case study museums participate in community-level social work because they feel they have the responsibility to do so. The Colleton Museum and Farmer's Market described that they have a part to play in continuing local agricultural industries and heritage, as they seek to represent the local community by displaying this heritage. Similarly, the Harrison Center for the Arts believes that as an arts organization, they owe it to local artists to help build a vibrant arts and culture market in the city. Addressing local social problems directly emphasizes that the museum is a member of the community. Problems that affect residents affect the museum as well. Museums which take on local social work roles are stating their support of the community's well-being and their own accountabilities in helping it succeed.

## **3. What Are The Social Work Strategies Small Museums Use to Address Local Social Problems?**

**Small museums work collaboratively to develop self-sustaining, needs-based solutions to the local social problems.** All three museums described how their social service efforts involved learning

about local issues from personal conversations with community members and working with community members, local government and local organizations to create solutions to these problems. Museums often implement social service strategies which address a generic issue across the board. An “outreach” activity which seeks to make a museum visit more affordable is valuable, but these activities are often done without much consideration of what the actual social problems facing the communities are. A social work strategy is one where the museum listens to the concerns of community members and identifies a social need. Then, the museum uses the resources already available in the community to create empowering solutions to these problems.

The Harrison Center for the Arts uses the city government and networks of artists to create innovative solutions to complex social problems. Abandoned homes threatened the success of the museum and the stability of the community; the Harrison Center responded by building a coalition among local groups to sponsor outdoor events and community gatherings as a means of encouraging increased home ownership and urban development in these downtrodden neighborhoods. The Colleton Museum and Farmer’s Market turned the local community’s interest in healthy food initiatives into an opportunity to create economic growth and pass along local food traditions. These efforts have been successful, and most importantly, they are self-sustaining. One implemented, both of these initiatives allow community members to lead, and continue to make progress toward reducing the effects of the social problems identified.

#### **4. What Are The Desired Outcomes of Small Museums’ Local Social Work?**

**Small museums’ social work efforts aim to make noticeable improvements toward their community’s health and increase local resident’s appreciation of place.** While there is variance between case study museums regarding what successful social service resembles, all the museums in this study expressed that they want the final outcome of their service to be a direct reduction in the social problems their efforts were meant to address. Each museum described their desire to improve

the health of the community—economically, educationally, socially, or politically—by creating opportunities to improve local residents’ well-being and strategies to improve the community as a whole. As well, small museums work to create meaningful place-based experiences by stressing the significance of their setting for education and community building. Small museums which contribute to appreciation of place help emphasize the unique value of their communities, and positively affect how the community is perceived.

**Implications.** The results of this study illustrate some of the considerations, strategies, and intentions of social work present in today’s US museums. By no means are the three case study sites meant to be representative of museum social work as a whole. Further research on this topic would be benefited by a larger sample size, with geographic diversity (including urban and rural) and distinctions between museums by type. As well, a more strategic categorization of “small” museums will allow for greater consistency when comparing methods of museums by size.

A logical complement to this research is an in-depth study on how large museums participate in social work across the individual, community, and societal levels. I hypothesize that the differences in size would not make for significant difference in individual-level social work potential, however a great deal could be revealed by testing the validity of museums’ societal-level social work claims. Uncovering how museums of all sizes seek to curb macro-level social problems will reveal the full range of museum social work. Research which can quantify the successful impacts of museum’s social work strategies would also be of great benefit for field-wide social work analysis.

The findings of this research have a number of implications for the museum field: Museums are capable of serving as one valuable agent for social change within a community, along with other non-profits, businesses, local governments, and those working in social work fields. Reluctance to the term social work is primarily an issue of nomenclature; museums which can produce noticeable social change in their local communities may be more likely to see themselves within a social work context. Museums

of all sizes and budgets are capable of engaging in social work through meaningful partnerships with individuals and institutions. These relationships produce innovative, lasting approaches which work actively to redress a social problem, and can be sustained by community members themselves. Pursuing social work is a valuable opportunity for the community and the museum itself. By supporting the health of local residents and the local economy, small museums create reciprocally beneficial relationships between themselves and their audiences. Markers of successful social work can be seen in the reduction of the social problem which directly results from the museum's social service efforts and an increased appreciation for the community.

The most important implication of this research is the understanding that small museums across the US may be implementing unique social work strategies which go unseen to those outside of these communities. The challenges of visibility for museums practicing social work may not be as much the result of the institutions' size as the literature suggests, however. As museums have become more socially conscious and visitor focused, the number of larger museums engaged in community-level social work has expanded. The work of institutions like the Seattle Art Museum and Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History demonstrate a commitment to the needs of community members through activist service approaches to solving local social problems. Large museums' social work is difficult to find, perhaps because these institutions do not view their local service as a valuable point of marketing. For large museums which make social work part of their institutional branding, their efforts are better known. These museums still appear to be in the minority, but as more large museums begin to view themselves as social work agents, these museums' community social work effort may appear to be more prevalent than previously thought.

The small institutions examined in this study demonstrate the significance that local well-being plays on small museums, and recognizes their successes in making a difference towards the problems they witness in their communities. Museums of all sizes can look to the example of these institutions,

and explore the strategies of other small museums nationwide, to discover how they can create active social change in their own communities.

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## Appendix 1: Site Selection Framework

| Frequently-Cited Museum Social Work Strategies |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Economic Support                               | Food Relief                 |
| Political Advocacy                             | Minority Inclusion          |
| Public Dialogue                                | Housing Initiatives         |
| Participatory Experiences                      | Neighborhood Revitalization |
| Distance Learning                              | Multi-Use Spaces            |
| Local Development                              | Shared Authority            |

| Activism                    | Social Action             |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Local Development           | Shared Authority          |
| Housing Initiatives         | Distance Learning         |
| Political Advocacy          | Multi-Uses Spaces         |
| Food Relief                 | Participatory Experiences |
| Economic Support            | Minority Inclusion        |
| Neighborhood Revitalization | Public Dialogue           |

| Activism                    | Museum                             |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Local Development           | Pratt Museum                       |
| Housing Initiatives         | Northwest African American Museum  |
| Political Advocacy          | National Public Housing Museum     |
| Food Relief                 | Hull House Museum                  |
| Economic Support            | Colleton Museum and Farmers Market |
| Neighborhood Revitalization | Harrison Center for the Arts       |

## Appendix 2: Interview Guide

### *Activist Social Work in Small Museums: A Community-Level Exploration*

I am asking you to participate in a research study that is part of my Master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which small museums engage in social work in their local communities, through a series of case studies. I am conducting interviews with full-time staff persons at small US museums to gain a greater understanding of the role social work plays in their institutions. Your museum has been selected based on activities described on your website which meet my research standards for social work. Your participation is purely voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me or my advisor using the contact information I have provided above and will leave with you. Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this interview?

### Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I'd like to learn more about your institution and its relationship with the local community.

1. What does your museum consider its primary audience?
2. Who visits your museum?
3. In what ways does the wellbeing of your community dictate your institutional practice?

Let's talk about the problems of the museum's local community.

4. What are the main problems facing your local community?
5. How does your museum identify these problems?

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways museums engage in community-level social work.

6. Do you see your museum's actions as examples of social work in your community? If yes, is this intentional?
7. Why do you feel it is important for your museum to address local social problems?
8. How do your museum's social service practices affect the financial success of your museum? Is this a consideration of your museum?

I'd like to talk about your museum's social service efforts. I have identified the \_\_\_\_\_ program as an example of [SOCIAL SERVICE STRATEGY], a strategy for activist social work.

9. Please describe how this program works, its audiences, and its intentions.
10. What local social problems does this program address? In what ways has this program made a difference relative to this problem?
11. Would you say activism is an objective of your museum? How so?
12. Besides [SOCIAL SERVICE STRATEGY], does your museum use any other strategies to address local social problems?

Let's talk about the outcomes of your museum's social programs.

13. What changes have you seen in your community as a result of your museum's local social service?
14. What changes to your community do you hope will come from your museum's social service activities?

### **Appendix 3: Alignment Framework**

#### Alignment of **Research Questions** with *Interview Questions*

Note: Questions 1, 2, 4, 5 are meant to set the background, not to answer a specific research question.

- 15. *What does your museum consider its primary audience?*
- 16. *Who visits your museum?*
- 4. *What are the main problems facing your local community?*
- 5. *How does your museum identify these problems?*

#### **In what ways do small museums consider themselves agents of social work?**

- 6. *Do you see your museum's actions as examples of social work in your community? If yes, is this intentional?*
- 11. *Would you say activism is an objective of your museum? How so?*

#### **What are the strategies small museums use to address local social problems?**

- 9. *Please describe how [SOCIAL SERVICE STRATEGY] works, its audiences, and its intentions.*
- 10. *What local social problems does this program address?*
- 12. *Besides [SOCIAL SERVICE STRATEGY], does your museum use any other strategies to address local social problems?*

#### **Why do small museums participate in community-level social work?**

- 17. *In what ways does the well-being of your community dictate your institutional practice?*
- 7. *Why do you feel it is important for your museum to address local social problems?*
- 8. *How do your museum's social service practices affect the financial success of your museum? Is this a consideration of your museum?*

#### **What are the desired outcomes of small museums' local social service activities?**

- 13. *What changes have you seen in your community as a result of your museum's local social service?*
- 14. *What changes to your community do you hope will come from your museum's social service activities?*