



# Beyond Coping: Libraries Stepping Up to Meet Community Needs During the Pandemic

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. about a year ago, libraries at first acted to slow the spread of the virus. Many locked their doors and sent staffers to work from home. They stopped circulating books and other physical materials. Some declared themselves “closed.” But soon, they came to the realization that, in fact, they didn’t have to be. Even if their buildings were locked, they had ways to provide services while mitigating the contagion. They adopted coping strategies. First, they made it easy for new patrons to set up library accounts—virtual library cards. Then, they established contactless curbside pickup services for items requested through their websites. They provided telephone reference services, in many cases re-routing the calls to staff members working from home. They promoted digital resources: ebooks, audiobooks, movie streaming, and online databases. Library leaders established the REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM) project, which built a body of scientific evidence on the transmissibility of the coronavirus through the sharing of library materials and spaces and informed practices for processing materials.

These coping strategies were good, but not enough. Dedicated, innovative library workers soon realized that they needed to do more. The pandemic, like any other natural or human-caused disaster, had created new community

needs. So, librarians began reaching out to their communities and expanding their services. Here are some of the important actions they took.

## MEETING NEW CONNECTIVITY NEEDS

In recent years, internet connectivity has been one of the most important reasons why people visit libraries. When offices, universities, and schools transitioned to working from home and distance learning, the demand for connectivity surged. But libraries were closing their doors too, so going to the library was no longer an option for the professional or student seeking internet access. The solution? Libraries left their access points on even when the building was closed—24/7, in some cases. They boosted signals and moved hotspots so that people could connect from their parking lots. They began, or expanded, the lending of hotspots. They converted bookmobiles to mobile access points. A survey by the Public Library Association (PLA) found that 93% of public libraries provided or planned to provide Wi-Fi access on their grounds, 44% had moved routers to improve access outside the building, and 23% were lending Wi-Fi hotspots. These efforts were rewarded with the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Digital Opportunity Equity Recognition (DOER) award. (“America’s Libraries Receive Inaugural FCC Honor,” 2020)

## FACILITATING SOCIAL SERVICES

The coronavirus pandemic, like the Great Recession before it, caused widespread increases in demand for existing social services and created entirely new needs. Most obviously, the sudden, dramatic jump in unemployment led to expanded requests for help with unemployment applications, career advisement, and job-hunting skills. Public librarians report an especially strong surge in demand from people in lower-income jobs and from the older-than-50 age group. (Fields, 2020) Some libraries provided services online and by phone. Others, such as the Joliet Public Library in Illinois, made the decision to continue with some in-person services. Megan Millen, the library’s executive director, tells the *Chicago Tribune*, “In our community, a lot of people need our close-up assistance on how to fill out a job application or an unemployment application.” (Keilman, 2020)

## ADDRESSING INEQUALITY

As librarians provided Wi-Fi access beyond their buildings, they realized that connectivity alone wasn’t enough. For a student without a suitable computer, Wi-Fi was meaningless. The Hawkeye Community College Library in Iowa lent 143 laptops to students so that they could continue their studies. (Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19: Survey of Response & Activities, 2020) In Alameda County, Calif., the library provided power outside

its building, as well as Wi-Fi. (Nonko & Salinas, 2020)

For students who had been dependent on school-provided meals, no in-person class meant no food. And for families whose breadwinners had lost their jobs, no income and inadequate financial support programs meant hunger. Libraries responded to these needs in ways that were tailored to their communities. Some, like the public library in Woodstock, Ill., started a heavily used food pantry. (Keilman, 2020) In Little Rock, Ark., the Central Arkansas Library System expanded an existing partnership to provide grab-and-go meals 7 days a week at branches and other locations. (Schwartz, 2020) The San Francisco Public Library addressed the needs of low-income families and essential workers by repurposing branches into daycare facilities, while in Los Angeles, the libraries served as cooling stations. (Nonko & Salinas, 2020)

## NEW NEEDS AND NEW SERVICES

Beyond connectivity and the heightened impacts of inequality, libraries pivoted to address new needs, serve new audiences, and deliver new services. In Homer Glen, Ill., the township library neatly redirected its volunteer programs for students to give them new ways to earn service hours while meeting new needs. Among the new activities: creating greeting cards for children in foster care and hospitals and contributing to a community digital archive about the pandemic. (Keilman, 2020)

Some libraries made a point of reaching out to senior citizens. The Anythink libraries in Colorado systematically called senior patrons to check on their well-being. In one case, the call resulted in the library supplying a laptop and hotspot to enable the person to connect to academic and other services. (Simpson, 2020) In La Crosse, Wis., librarians assembled and distributed “senior activity kits.” (“Area Libraries Offer Project to Safely Connect the Community With Seniors,” 2020)

In Iowa City and elsewhere, libraries extended their usual readers’ advisory service and started “grab bags” or “book

bundles” to mitigate patrons’ inability to browse the collection. With these services, the patron fills out a form indicating their general interest, and the librarians select appropriate materials, which can be picked up curbside, or in some cases, delivered. (Russell, 2020)

The responses of academic and school libraries depended on the teaching and learning plans of their parent institutions. School closure meant the loss of student access to the library and thus more emphasis on access to networked digital resources. In Waco, Texas; Brooklyn, N.Y.; the Lancaster-Lebanon district in Pennsylvania; and many other locations, school and public libraries partnered to make public library ebooks and e-reference resources available to all students and teachers. (Fox, 2020; Ishler, 2020; Saegert, 2020) The Brooklyn Public Library also created a new online resource guide specifically for homeschoolers and remote learners. (Fox, 2020) Similarly, many academic libraries noted and promoted the use of OERs and other OA materials. (Kletter, 2020)

These innovations didn’t always require large investments, sophisticated plans, or advanced technologies. In Berkeley, Calif., librarians noticed that students were spending long periods of time outside the library using its Wi-Fi connectivity for their schoolwork. What else would they need, since they were there all day? Bathrooms! So librarians installed port-a-potties. (Sass, 2020) Similarly, in Seattle, five library branches remained open solely to provide bathroom access. (Nonko & Salinas, 2020)

## CONFRONTING THE INFODEMIC

Our society has actually suffered two pandemics at the same time. One is biological, caused by the novel coronavirus. The second is what the World Health Organization (WHO) calls an “infodemic,”

(Lin & Trinkunas, 2020) which is caused by rampant misinformation about COVID-19. Libraries led the fight against the infodemic by example. As extolled by *Library Journal* editor-in-chief Meredith Schwartz, they based their service policies on science, not rumor. Sometimes, they were subjected to criticism. In Weber County, Utah, the library’s mask mandate and required use of hand sanitizer prompted “periodic grumbling among some” and a complaint at a county commission meeting from a community member who felt that the policies violated her rights as an American citizen. (“Weber County Library System COVID-19 Rules Generate Some Ire, but Mostly Praise,” 2020)

In addition, libraries pivoted their web-based resources to address the specific challenges of the pandemic. Academic libraries across the country published research and literature guides. Public libraries provided links to authoritative sources for local, state, national, and international information on the spread of the virus and measures taken by government and health authorities.

## CONCLUSION

They say that every cloud has a silver lining. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a very dark cloud, but it has caused library workers to reassess their services and relationships to their communities. And once again, they’ve demonstrated just how valuable they are. They’ve shown that their value transcends their buildings and their books. It depends on them as individuals and their commitment and creativity in serving their communities.

*The author’s in-depth coverage of libraries and the pandemic in 2020 will appear as a special report in the 66th/2021 edition of Library and Book Trade Almanac (Information Today, Inc., June 2021).*

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