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CHICAGO—Most years, June marks a shift for students from classroom learning and research to summer vacations, internships, and packed public libraries for reading and learning programs. This year is different, and libraries are rising to the challenge.

A new American Library Association (ALA) survey of U.S. libraries documents a shift in services to support students, faculty, and communities at large during the crisis and phased preparations for the months ahead. While virtually all libraries (99%) report limited access to the physical building, survey respondents shared leaps in the use of digital content, online learning, and virtual programs. More than 3,800 K-12 school, college and university, public and other libraries from all 50 states responded to the survey between May 12-18.

Survey responses show that libraries are involved in community crisis response, cautiously planning for re-opening facilities, working to meet the educational needs of students and researchers, reporting increased use of digital services, and anticipating future demands.

“Libraries are places of learning and connection for all ages and backgrounds, so this crisis has challenged us to work creatively to adapt services while our facilities are closed,” said ALA President Wanda Brown. “From bridging the digital divide to addressing learning loss to aiding job seekers and small businesses, we know library services are essential to campus and community recovery and resilience.”

- **COVID-19 crisis response:** Of respondents involved in community crisis response, the majority reported new partnerships, distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE), addressing food insecurity, and sharing accurate community information and resources. “Our community has serious food insecurity issues, and we have been involved in addressing that for the past several years. COVID-19 has made the situation even worse. Ordinarily our (farmers) market has kids’ activities, but those are not possible now. We are focusing solely on the food and working hard making sure those who have SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance) benefits are aware of this opportunity,” reported High Point Public Library in North Carolina.

- **Caution with facility re-opening:** Virtually all libraries have expanded virtual and phone services during the crisis, continuing a trend of library activities beyond physical walls. The survey finds that most
libraries have limited access to their buildings while they work to establish health and safety protocols for staff, social distancing requirements for patrons, and processes for sanitizing materials. Curbside pickup, delivery, and by-appointment services are the most common next steps as national research and state/local guidance evolve. Thirty-seven percent of respondents expect phased re-opening in June and July, whereas almost half (47%) are unsure when buildings will begin to re-open to the public.

- Meeting education needs: K-12 school, academic, and public libraries are working overtime to address the needs of remote learners, teachers/faculty, and researchers. Leading activities include providing: curbside pickup of items ranging from laptops to reading materials, virtual reference, new summer learning activities, and new “how to” resources for accessing virtual resources. “We checked out 143 laptops to students needing devices to do work online. This helped some students persist who may not have in this new learning environment,” reported Hawkeye Community College Library in Iowa. Information on K-12 school library services is available from the American Association of School Librarians, an ALA division.

- Public demand for library services: libraries overall report increased use of virtual library cards, digital content and virtual programming. “We have been amazed by how far away our online story times have reached. People message us with thanks from different continents!” reported the Mulvane Public Library in Kansas. As libraries re-open their buildings to the public, they anticipate demand for access to physical and special collections, access to computers and the internet, helping students make up for lost ground, supporting faculty and teacher needs, and application support for government services and employment.

As libraries re-open their physical spaces, patrons can anticipate several adjustments, such as: restrictions on the number of people inside the facilities, timed visits, additional cleaning procedures, reduced number of public computers to support physical distancing, and use of masks or other personal protective equipment (PPE). Phased services will vary by community based on local guidance, so patrons should check with their local libraries.

More than half of public library respondents reported they were transitioning summer learning programs from in-person to online. Last summer, for instance, the Canton Public Library in Michigan hosted about 130 programs with more than 100,000 people. This year they are mailing packets to every household in their community with a poster including 62 activities that will have a corresponding blog on the library’s website with additional resources. The library is planning online programs, as well as take-home kits. The Caseyville Public Library District in Illinois pushed up its summer reading program launch after hearing concerns from school leadership about learning loss.

“A lot has changed in the last three months, but libraries have an unwavering commitment to providing needed resources to all,” said Ramiro Salazar, president of the Public Library Association, an ALA division. “Libraries are foundational to digital equity and our nation’s social infrastructure, and I hope city, state, and federal government leaders will continue to invest in and maximize these community assets.”

For more information on the survey and other related news, please visit the ALA COVID-19 toolkit
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About the American Library Association

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library’s role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. For more information, visit ala.org.

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