



(/news/)

## Public libraries launch, expand services during COVID-19 pandemic

For Immediate Release

Thu, 04/09/2020

**Contact:**

Macey Morales, Shawnda Hines

CMO, PPA

American Library Association

mmorales@ala.org, shines@alawash.org (mailto:mmorales@ala.org, shines@alawash.org)

As public libraries close their buildings to the public, staff continue to serve their communities in innovative ways. Those are among the chief findings the Public Library Association (PLA) announced today in the broadest survey of public libraries' response to the pandemic to date, with 2,545 unique responses nationwide. Most respondents (98%) reported their buildings were closed to the public but, in many cases, staff continued to expand access to digital resources, launch virtual programs and coordinate services with local government agencies.

The survey found that libraries are rapidly adapting services. A substantial majority of respondents report they have extended online renewal policies (76%), expanded online services like e-books and streaming media (74%) and added virtual programming (61%). In open-ended responses, library staff described a range of new activities ranging from reallocating print collection budgets to digital materials, reaching out by phone to those digitally disconnected, and:

- Deploying library 3D printers: "We have a large 3D print lab, and our lead volunteer is working with the El Dorado Community Foundation to use our printers to print face shields for our local regional hospitals and county facilities." (from El Dorado County Library, CA, which has delivered 700 face shields and plans to print 15,000)
- Coordinating local services and information: "The library worked with other city partners to open a day shelter for those experiencing homelessness at the city-owned Mayo Civic Center where all programs and events are cancelled. Other library administrative team members have also been called up to service the community as part of the overall continuity of operations plan for city services." Starting this week, county call lines are being routed to library staff for initial intake and referral. (from Rochester Public Library, MN)
- Adapting in-person programs for online delivery, such as the virtual story times and online knitting group (<https://www.mcarthurlibrary.org/onlineeventsearlyapril20.pdf>) at McArthur Library in

Biddeford, Maine.

- Adding or expanding virtual library cards: “We have issued 418 library cards in 3 weeks (since we closed)! Customers can apply on our website, and their barcode number will be emailed to them. We are adding several hundred e-books and e-audiobooks per week. We fully expect our digital collection to receive heavy use.” (from Central Rappahannock Regional Library, VA)

“As circumstances change daily for all of us, I am proud of the dedicated and creative work of our public libraries and their staff to serve everyone from toddlers to isolated senior citizens to small business owners,” said PLA President Ramiro Salazar. “We are shifting popular programs online, sharing hyperlocal information and resources, and continuing to connect with our communities by chat, text, phone and email. Additionally, libraries are preparing for even greater need to support unemployed workers and small businesses than we experienced during the Great Recession.”

More than 70% of respondents are leveraging social media to share information related to COVID-19—95% to communicate changes in library services and 89% to promote available library resources. More than 60% report using social media to promote participation in the 2020 Census. Cranston (R.I.) Public Library Director Ed Garcia, for instance, uploaded a video PSA (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1WT3XKeUk8>) with Cranston Mayor Allan Fung to encourage online self-response.

With more than 20 million people lacking home broadband access, public libraries are often the only source of free access to computers and the internet—hosting nearly 258 million computer sessions in one year.\* Library building closures widen a chronic digital divide. More than 80% of respondents report they left on their public Wi-Fi access when the library building was closed before the COVID-19 crisis, and 12% have added or expanded this service since the crisis began.

Smaller percentages of libraries have expanded the range of their public Wi-Fi, checked out mobile internet hotspots or used their bookmobiles to provide internet access.

It is unknown what percentage of library staff may be working at home, but 70% of respondents state library policy allows staff to work remotely. With a growing number of stay-at-home orders, the number of libraries with staff working on-site has likely declined. Libraries also have begun to report job losses and budgetary concerns.

“Libraries continue to play essential roles in our communities even as we close our buildings and work remotely to best ensure health and safety. In coming months, we will need libraries to safely reopen, support distance learning and telework and expand economic recovery services for impacted businesses and workers,” Salazar said. “Federal support will be needed for libraries to continue providing vital services such as advancing digital inclusion and facilitating connectivity, as well as keeping our employees working so they can deliver these services.”

#### About the survey

The Public Library Association, a division of the American Library Association, fielded the online survey March 24 through April 1. The online link was shared widely by PLA and other library organizations like the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, the Urban Libraries Council and the Association for Rural & Small Libraries. Subsequently research staff from PLA, the Colorado State Library’s Library Research Service and

the Institute of Museum and Library Services, verified respondents were from U.S. libraries and removed duplicates. Survey responses represented 28% of U.S. public libraries. At least one public library in every state responded to the survey, and 43 states had 10% or more of their libraries represented. As such, the data provide a snapshot of public library activity and planning but are not generalizable to all public libraries in the country. Additional analysis and data collection are planned in the coming weeks. For more information, go here (<http://www.ala.org/pla/issues/covid-19/surveyoverview>).

\*From the FY2017 Public Libraries Survey, Table 18

([https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/fy2017\\_pls\\_tables.pdf](https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/fy2017_pls_tables.pdf)), Institute of Museum and Library Services



(/news/feed/press-releases/rss.xml)

Subscribe

(/news/feed/press-releases/rss.xml)

## Tags

COVID-19 (/news/taxonomy/term/2313), Public Library Association (/news/taxonomy/term/583)