

## **Libraries as Public Health Partners in Times of Crisis**

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Libraries have a long and positive relationship with their users. As far back as the mid-1800s citizens in the United States have turned to libraries for information, entertainment, and physical, mental, and social development and support. Libraries are generally held in high esteem by those who access the myriad resources offered there. In addition to the print and e-resources of modern times, staff members are valued as important resources by library users as well. Along with providing a broad range of services and resources, libraries are also seen as trustworthy and as credible sources of information. For example, a recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center indicated that “about eight-in-ten adults (78%) feel that public libraries help them find information that is trustworthy and reliable.”<sup>1</sup> As a result, libraries are well positioned to play a key role in addressing and supporting emergency and disaster preparedness, response, and recovery within the communities that they serve.

One of the ways in which libraries can actively support effective public preparedness is to disseminate public health information. Libraries have become very adept at leveraging many different tools and channels to communicate with their patrons including Web sites, social media apps and tools, print and e-newsletters, and even creative signage within and around their facilities. Libraries use all of these tools and resources to communicate important preparedness information such as creating an emergency evacuation, or, “go” kits, how to develop a family evacuation plan, and what information resources can be trusted during emergencies, to name a few.

Libraries have a long history of dispelling myths and promoting the truth in an unbiased way. As a result, libraries can serve as effective collaborators in disseminating truthful information on any number of topics, including such public health subjects as safe public interaction during viral outbreaks and how to safely return to disaster impacted areas and homes.

The current coronavirus pandemic is an excellent example of how libraries in general, and especially public libraries, can support community wellness and wellbeing. When positive cases of COVID-19 began to climb back in March of this year public libraries were temporarily shuttered like so many other entities. Only in mid-June did public library staff begin to return to their buildings. However, upon their return, staff quickly adapted many of the programs and services that they had provided in the past to continue serving their patrons while additionally doing everything possible to ensure patron and staff safety.

Throughout the time that libraries were closed, many staff members were diligently working from home to provide patron access to critical information and updates regarding the pandemic using pre-existing Web sites and social media accounts. As the pandemic continued to unfold, staff turned to Web based platforms such as Zoom to offer virtual programming focused on pandemic related information, and highlighting ways in which the public could continue to stay healthy and well while limiting the virus’ spread. But libraries did not limit themselves to providing these critical resources. Their focus has also included supporting good mental health.

One of the most evident public health concerns resulting from the current coronavirus pandemic is a significantly increased level of stress. As a recent article published in the New England Journal of Medicine points out, current major stressors such as lack of routine, economic concerns, conflicting guidance from authority sources, and mandated public health measures that are unfamiliar will undoubtedly “contribute to widespread emotional distress...associated with COVID-19.”<sup>2</sup> Libraries have long been a mental and emotional sanctuary for many users. Patrons often seek out their local library to connect with others through activities and programs, to tap into staff expertise on a wide range of subjects, or simply to take a break from life’s often hectic pace by finding a comfortable spot to read. During times of elevated stress such as the current pandemic, libraries have been able to continue offering a mental and emotional haven in new and creative ways. Examples include:

- Providing programming that provides patrons with essential social and mental diversions such as virtual art classes, virtual story times for children, virtual book discussion groups, and similar activities;
- Providing access to reading material that serves as a mental diversion or break from current stressful situations;
- Providing physically safe activities in outdoor spaces to engage patrons of all ages such as window scavenger hunts;
- Providing informational resources that help enable patrons impacted by public health crises, emergencies, and disasters to be resilient;

These programs can engage patrons and help support their desire to stay fulfilled and productive during stay-at-home ordered periods in healthful ways. In addition, libraries are making every effort to provide elements of “normal” library use as it was experienced prior to the current pandemic. For example, the library-based statewide Summer Reading Program is taking place just as it has for over forty years. And although some elements are slightly different – participation is completely online, goals are focused on total time spent reading rather than total number of books read (due to patrons possibly having more limited access to books) – participating in the program enables patrons to feel that this summer is at least somewhat more similar to past virus-free summers.

Recovering from emergencies or catastrophic events can be extremely challenging and is critically important to sound mental health. Resilience – the ability to face and overcome traumatic experiences – is an essential skill in recovering well and resilience is more easily fostered and developed through social contacts and in social settings. Since libraries are inherently social places, they can serve as vital resources during this stage for their patrons as well. One of the many functions libraries serve during non-crisis times is as a physical place for people to gather to enjoy common experiences. In post-crisis times, libraries can provide gathering spaces for people who have shared a common crisis to work through their collective experience together. Also, often members of the public may find themselves without reliable Internet access in the wake of a disaster. This can cause additional stress because many critical resources are available exclusively online. Such examples might include key forms and documents necessary for FEMA financial assistance or necessary insurance forms and documents. Libraries can fill this overwhelming void by providing free public computer access. In addition, libraries can offer safe, comfortable spaces for those impacted by disasters to meet with representatives from organizations that can facilitate their recovery.

To better enable libraries to serve as partners in emergency and disaster preparedness, response, and recovery, the Delaware Libraries and Disasters summit was held in 2017. This event brought together library staff members, first responders, disaster planning experts and others to discuss, explore and consider ways in which libraries can assist their users and communities in being better prepared and better able to respond to and recover from various types of emergencies and disasters. Over time and as a result of the initial summit, the Delaware Libraries and Disasters Initiative (DLDI) developed. Currently the DLDI hosts a quarterly Roundtable meeting of library staff, emergency managers, and representatives from other interested organizations to exchange ideas and resources. Through this exchange, libraries can continue to develop and foster partnerships that will support and enhance patrons' abilities to be as prepared as possible for different types of crises, including pandemics and natural disasters. In addition, the DLDI Roundtable provides an important opportunity to broaden the perspective of all involved when considering critical and unique ways that libraries can collaborate effectively with emergency managers and others.

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## References

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