Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19

PublicLibrary ASSOCIATION

SURVEY METHOD

Conducted March 24–April 1, 2020, by the Public Library Association (PLA),
in partnership with other Public Library Data Alliance members

SURVEY

Hosted in Survey Monkey;
17 questions total,
including contact
information

DISTRIBUTION

Survey link
distributed via email,
social media and
public library listservs

SAMPLE

Public library directors
or their designees
responding on behalf
of their library system

ANALYTICS

Data were cleaned,
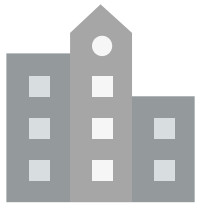de-duplicated, and
anonymized

SURVEY RESULTS

The results in this report represent aggregate responses from a convenience survey

RESPONDENTS*

2,545 public libraries

RESPONSE RATE

28% of US public library systems**

STATES

- 50 US states + Washington, DC with at least 1 response
- 43 states with more than 10% of public libraries responding

LEGAL SERVICE AREA POPULATION***

- 44% serve <10k
- 23% serve 10k-24,999
- 23% serve 25k-99,999
- 10% serve >100k

PUBLIC LIBRARY BUILDING STATUS

CLOSURES*

98%
Closed to the public

1% of respondents reported that their library is still open to the public, and less than 1% reported that their library is mostly closed to the public with some exceptions.

EXPECTED LENGTH OF TIME FOR CLOSURE

Other
18%

Indefinite
35%

2 wks–1 mo
32%

1 mo–2 mos
15%
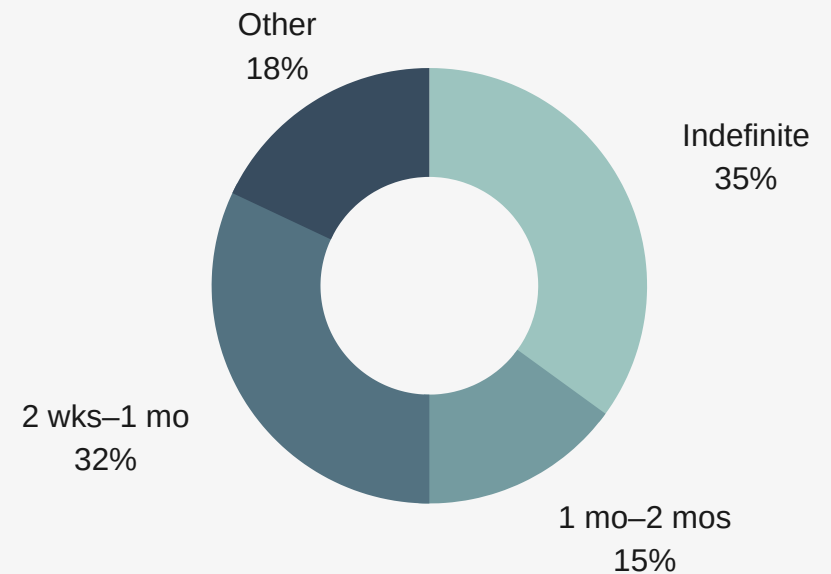
*Status of closures continues to change based on state and local shelter-in-place orders.
Because data are rounded and the lowest response categories are removed, data may not sum to 100%.

PUBLIC LIBRARY ACTIVITIES

Activity	Percentage
Extending online renewal policies	76%
Expanding online check-out services	74%
Adding virtual programming	61%
Expanding online virtual reference/help	41%
Expanding phone reference/help	38%
Making curbside pick-up available*	22%
Delivering collection items to patrons*	6%

(x-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80)
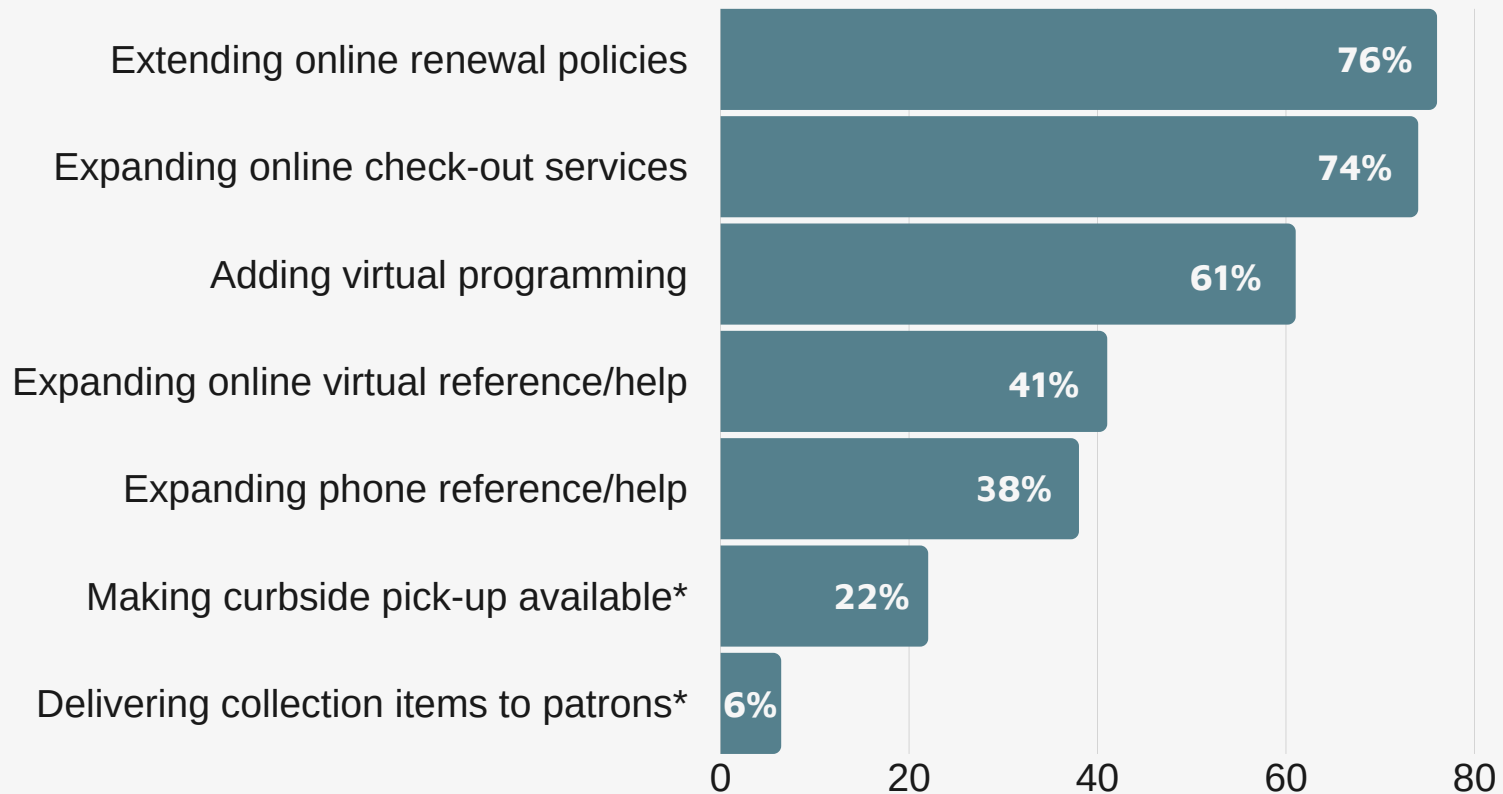
"We have issued 418 library cards in 3 weeks (since we closed)! Customers can apply on our website, and their barcode number will be emailed to them. We are adding several hundred e-books and e-audiobooks per week. We fully expect our digital collection to receive heavy use."
- Central Rappahannock Regional Library (Fredericksburg, VA)

The survey provided both a list of response options (above) and an open-ended item for libraries to describe new or expanded services (next page).

*Status of handling and distributing physical materials also continues to shift. Related guidance is here: www.ala.org/tools/atoz/pandemic-preparedness.

PUBLIC LIBRARY ACTIVITIES

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES*

21% • Providing non-COVID online resources (activities to do at home, unemployment resources)

21% • Expanding access to services (e-cards, deaf/blind/disabled expanded options, fine forgiveness, upping checkout limits, providing online assistance, setting up a helpline)

17% • Distributing library materials (free craft supplies, kits for various activities such as games and STEM, mailing items)

17% • Providing resources related to COVID (online and physically posted)

13% • Providing technology (laptop and hotspot checkout, expanding wifi, print/scan/copy/fax services)

12% • Using makerspace equipment to create medical supplies

10% • Creating virtual exhibits/programs

10% • Reallocating staff/resources (staff to other government entities for support, allowing other entities to use library meeting space)

7% • Supporting distance learning (materials, internet access, resources)

7% • Coordinating distribution of emergency supplies (distribution of masks for hospitals, first aid supplies for community, meals)

"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."
- El Dorado County Library (El Dorado Hills, CA)

*n=763

Percentages sum to more than 100% because responses may address multiple topics.

PROVIDING PUBLIC INTERNET ACCESS

LEAVING ON PUBLIC WIFI WHEN THE BUILDING IS CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC

81% of libraries offered this as a service prior to COVID-19 and continue to do so during this time

12% of libraries expanded or added this service in response to COVID-19

LOCATING WIFI ACCESS POINTS TO IMPROVE ACCESS OUTSIDE OF THE BUILDING

36% of libraries offered this as a service prior to COVID-19 and continue to do so during this time

8% of libraries expanded or added this service in response to COVID-19

CHECKING OUT HOTSPOTS

21% of libraries offered this as a service prior to COVID-19 and continue to do so during this time

2% of libraries expanded or added this service in response to COVID-19

Because data are rounded and the lowest response categories are removed, data may not sum to 100%.

COMMUNICATION

THE MAJORITY OF RESPONDENTS ARE UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR COMMUNICATIONS, INCLUDING:

95% To share changes in library services

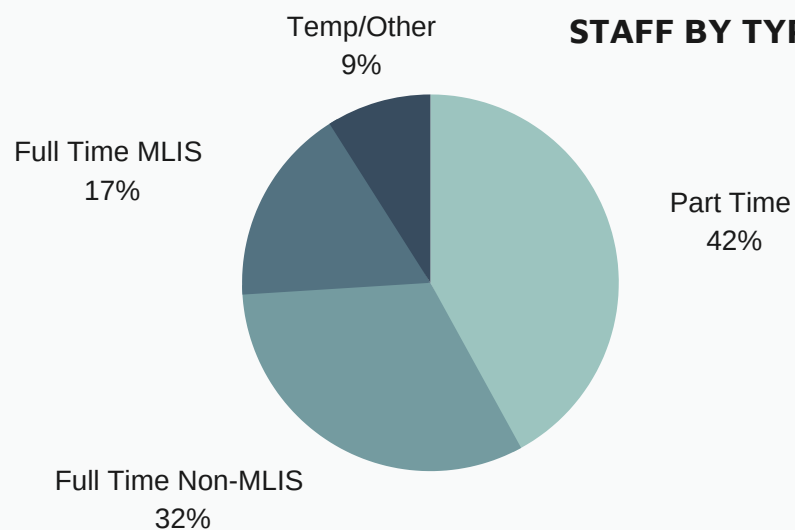**89%** To promote library services

74% To share COVID-19 information

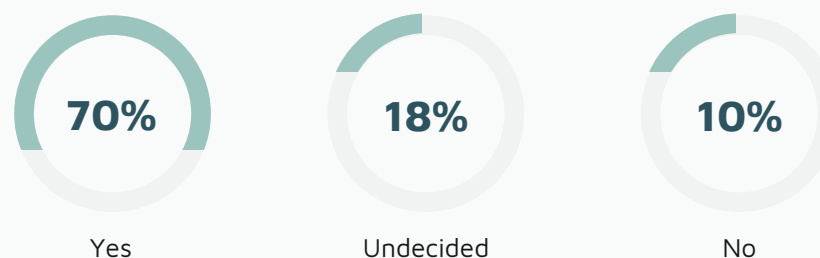**62%** To promote participation in the 2020 Census

PUBLIC LIBRARY STAFF

STAFF BY TYPE

Temp/Other
9%

Full Time MLIS
17%

Part Time
42%

Full Time Non-MLIS
32%

WORK FROM HOME POLICY

70%
Yes

18%
Undecided

10%
No

THE MAJORITY OF STAFF REPORTED TO BE <u>NOT WORKING</u> ARE STILL BEING PAID A SALARY OR HOURLY WAGE

Depending on staff type, between 1% and 5% were taking vacation or sick leave. Respondents were more likely to report that part-time and temporary staff were not being paid as compared with the other staff types (10% and 7% respectively, vs. 1% each for full time MLIS and non-MLIS staff).

MLIS = Master's in Library and Information Science

PLANNING FOR RECOVERY: TOP ACTIVITIES

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES*

NEW & EXPANDED SERVICES

Continuing to offer new virtual programs and outreach/remote services developed in response to COVID-19

HEALTH & SAFETY

Implementing library policies and practices for social distancing and materials sanitation

PHASED REOPENING

Prioritizing staff return, materials, and programs and services to open in phases

"

We are introducing many services which will likely become permanent when we are open again. We have really been heartened by the response to virtual storytimes, read-alouds and cooking demos.
- McArthur Public Library (Biddeford, ME)

"

We developed a very detailed procedure for handling books, materials and money to keep both staff and public safe.
- Bertha Bartlett Public Library, (Story City, IA)

"

We are hoping for a soft opening, allowing full staff to return to work before we are open to the public. This will allow staff space to emotionally process what we have just experienced and begin to get caught up on tasks before we jump back into face-to-face services.
– Carnegie Public Library (Washington Court House, OH)

*n=894

LIBRARIES' GREATEST NEEDS

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES*

FUNDING

Secure funding for pre-crisis budgets, including staff salaries and new funding for response work

HEALTH & SAFETY

Obtain cleaning supplies and protective wear for staff, and rebuild trust in the community that the library is safe

ONLINE ACCESS

Expand e-services to patrons, especially those with limited internet access

PATRON SERVICES

Meet anticipated higher demand for services for those most impacted by the crisis

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"Funding will drop because of decreased tax revenue. I think funding will be the most important need.
– Wilkinsburg (PA) Public Library

"We need to know when to reopen, how to safely reopen, and how to clean our collections.
– Bedford (TX) Public Library

"We are trying to get hotspots available for our community but they are at a premium at the moment. Helping our patrons stay informed and providing access to the internet are key in rural areas.
– William B. Harlan Memorial Library (Tompkinsville, KY)

"I foresee libraries needing professionals that can help with filing paperwork necessary for resident recompense, job searching/application, unemployment, benefits/401k, and other issues that arise.
– Carroll County Library (Huntingdon, TN)

*n=1,431

ADVOCACY NEEDS FROM STATE & NATIONAL ORGS.

OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES*

COMMUNICATING VALUE

Continued/increased advocacy about the value of libraries during the crisis and the essential roles they will play in recovery

FUNDING

Active efforts to protect, restore or expand library funding during the recovery process, as well as support for paying staff during building closures

GUIDANCE

Clear guidance and training for developing or expanding pandemic, emergency and sanitation policies

"

Get the word out that libraries are still here and virtually open...We need to toot our own horns!
– Grimes (IA) Public Library

"

We will need state and federal financial support since local governments will have very strapped budgets due to a huge decrease in tax revenue.
- Central Rappahannock Regional Library (Fredericksburg, VA)

"

Keep sending out information, access to webinars on a variety of topics, and best practices you are seeing.
– Laramie County Library System (Cheyenne, WY)

*n=1,181

Acknowledgments

PUBLIC LIBRARIES RESPOND TO COVID-19: SURVEY OF RESPONSE & ACTIVITIES

The Public Library Association (PLA) wants to thank all of the public libraries that responded so quickly to this survey. Your responses are informing work by library organizations like PLA, help advance national policy advocacy for libraries, and increase our shared knowledge across the field and with the media.

PLA would also like to thank the Library Research Service, an office of the Colorado State Library, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services for their work in helping clean and validate the survey data. We would also like to acknowledge the Canadian public libraries that responded to this survey but were excluded from the aggregate results.

PLA plans on distributing a second survey to continue measuring the rapidly-evolving changes happening across the field and to further address the changing needs of our libraries.

To learn more about the survey and view the full set of questions, please visit: www.ala.org/pla/issues/covid-19/surveyoverview.