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## Libraries are open - only the buildings are closed

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## *Technology Matters*

# Libraries are Open - Only the Buildings are Closed

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### Abstract

Libraries should be developing solutions for effectively working remotely and expanding their ability to provide virtual services during closures and make sure the messaging matches the reality - that libraries are open and providing important services to their communities even when the buildings are closed.

Keywords: future of libraries, covid-19, messaging, remote workforce

As we write this column, we are several weeks into the coronavirus lockdown with some states still seeing rising numbers of cases – even as their governors are easing up on restrictions. As this disaster has continued to unfold, the library response has been fairly consistent. For example, most libraries are promoting ebooks and other electronic resources. They are increasing the number of programs they deliver online – or delivering programming online for the first time ever, in the case of many libraries. By now, most public libraries generally have information about COVID-19, or at least some links to key resources, prominently displayed on their websites. A few libraries have used their maker spaces to make face shields and masks. And virtually all have a big banner on their website reading "THE LIBRARY IS CLOSED!"

Many libraries seem to be simply waiting for things to return to normal. They seem to anticipate being able to go back to doing all the things

they did before COVID-19, despite the looming austerity and budget cuts that will likely face every city and county government in the next couple of years. This group jumped on the idea to offer curbside delivery because it was a way to do the things they are most comfortable doing – getting books into the patrons' hands – despite the clear risk to both patrons and staff from this practice.

Some libraries have been working closely with their communities' official emergency operations departments. At these libraries, staff have been redeployed to help provide services deemed necessary by their emergency response leadership. In many cases, these tasks have nothing to do with conventional library services but they do take advantage of some of the unique training and skills of librarians such as understanding how to work with the public, interviewing techniques, paying attention to details, and helping people find the information



they need. Library staff have been put to work supporting the city or county communications teams, helping the Red Cross implement emergency income benefits, checking in on residents by phone, distributing food, and working in shelters. In one library, the existing reference phone number was converted to a COVID-19 information line. Regardless of what staff are doing, the messaging on the website is still the same: THE LIBRARY IS CLOSED.

### Staff Serving Patrons During Closures

Despite the primary messaging that the Library is closed, patrons can still communicate with library staff in many communities – even despite the furloughs and layoffs that have reduced the number of staff available. Virtually all libraries provide some sort of asynchronous communication for their patrons: a form to email library staff, or a voicemail box, for instance. This is useful for non-urgent questions, but it doesn't help a patron when they need it most. In addition, patrons can't make any kind of meaningful connection with their library staff using these methods. And with so many library websites declaring their libraries closed, why would patrons expect a reply even if they bothered to reach out?

Many libraries have a staff person monitoring the social media channels, providing some kind of active presence there even if it is simply responding to tweets or posting on the library's Facebook timeline. However, patrons who don't already communicate with their library through these channels are likely not aware of them now absent a specific outreach effort on the part of the library.

Many libraries provide a chat widget for patrons to use to communicate with a library person in real-time. According to Springshare, which provides the popular LibAnswers chat software, people are making very good use of the library chat system. Springshare recorded an increase

of 119% over last year's usage (see <https://librarytechnology.org/pr/25116>). It is clear that patrons are reaching out for help. They want to connect to their local librarians!

But not all libraries use their own staff to answer incoming chats. Some use a third-party service or share "chat" duty among consortia members. But doesn't it seem important to have local library staff be "present" for chat as long as they are working from home anyway? What a difference it would make to patrons reaching out to their library staff if they end up chatting with someone they know like Jane or Jim from the service desk, rather than Generic Librarian from a service. Especially as libraries across the country continue to furlough and layoff staff, connecting your safe-at-home staff with your safe-at-home patrons seems like an obvious solution.

In most cases, library websites don't clearly indicate whether patrons can still call the library and expect assistance. After all, if the website says the library is closed, then presumably there isn't anyone there to answer the phone – but that isn't always true. Some libraries have made it possible to call the library and get a human being on the line even if they haven't made that clear to their patrons.

There are a couple of notable exceptions where libraries are doing an excellent job of making it clear they are still open. A modest improvement is the libraries that include a phone number on their "the library is closed" website banner suggesting that maybe someone really is still available during the closure.

An even better example comes from Monmouth County Library (<https://monmouthcountylib.org/>) which indicates staff availability on its event calendar:

- May 5: Staff Available by Phone and Email: Buildings Closed

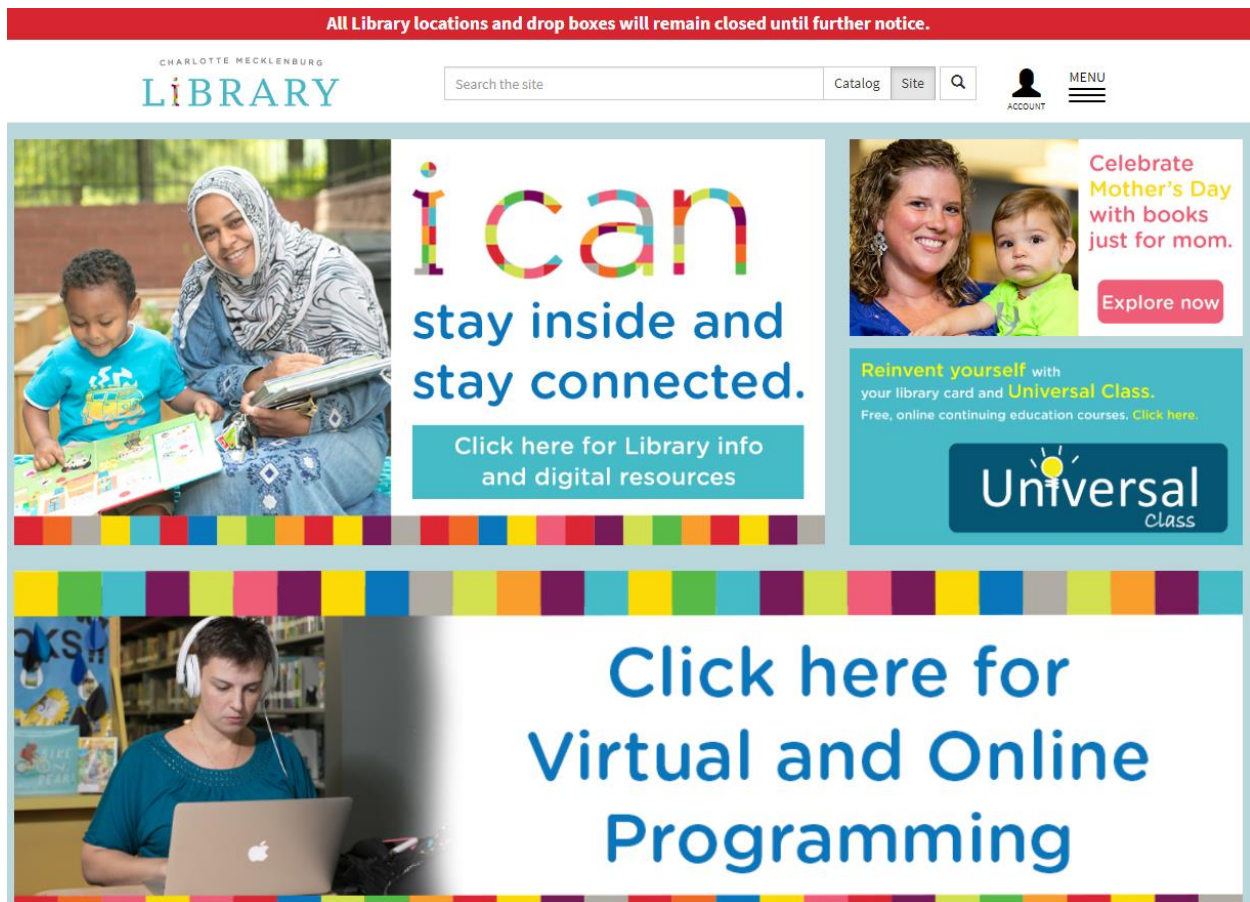


- May 6: Staff Available by Phone and Email: Buildings Closed
- May 7: Staff Available by Phone and Email: Buildings Closed

And in a shining example of how to ramp up new virtual services and do a good job of messaging, please visit the Charlotte Mecklenburg

website (<https://www.cmlibrary.org/>). They too have a banner about the closure, but it is small and clearly states that it is the *locations* that are closed rather than the *library*. The main part of the website highlights their virtual programming and services.

**Figure 1.** Virtual Services Messaging on the Charlotte Mecklenburg Library website.



Source: <https://www.cmlibrary.org/>

Even better, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Library offers one-on-one, virtual face-to-virtual face interaction with librarians. This is exactly the kind of service libraries should be providing right now.

### **Messaging and Public Perceptions**

So, even though libraries are clearly providing services to their patrons and the community, the websites still shout out that they are closed. But it is really only the building that is closed for now. The library – as an institution – continues to function and staff continue to work. Ebooks and other e-resources are obviously still available and access to these services requires ongoing effort and support by library staff. Libraries have seen a huge increase in requests for library cards from community members stuck at home, eager to augment their entertainment options. This means library staff are hard at work providing patrons with e-cards, resetting PINs and passwords, helping people make sense of OverDrive and Kanopy – all the things they've always done to support e-resource users. It's too early to have collected much data but it's clear that both the number of users and the amount of use of these e-services has grown significantly during this outbreak. Librarians are negotiating new deals for more titles, more licenses, more everything. They are definitely doing more virtual programs.

But the work they are doing isn't easy to find. At least not on the library websites. One library that is doing a lot of great work while closed told me they have a big sign in front of the library with information about their availability and their phone number. This is great if you are driving by but not so great if you are sheltering in place at home and visiting their website!

The point is that libraries should be highlighting their ability to serve their communities during lockdown rather than highlighting the closure of the building. The library building may be closed

but staff are still hard at work! That's the messaging that says we are still here for you.

### **What Services Are Most Important to Provide Right Now**

And while we applaud the things that libraries are doing during lockdown, the offerings are pretty limited to services that were already delivered virtually: online programming, chat reference, email questions, WiFi (in the parking lot), and e-resources. But the needs of library patrons go way beyond these service responses. Many have no Internet access while sheltering in place, no place to go for a human connection, and no one to ask for help about how to *get* help. The number of people applying for unemployment is staggering, overloading traditional government websites and call centers – think how many more there would be if everyone who usually relies on the library's public access computers and help from library staff to do so had also applied! Imagine how worried and confused the elderly that are cooped up in their homes must be as they watch cable news and try to make sense of everything. These people aren't going to "chat" to get answers. They need something more personal.

There are lots of things that library staff could be doing right now that address these kinds of needs while staff remain safely sheltered in place. All it takes is employing state-of-the-art technology and a little creativity. Doing these things would demonstrate that the library is still there for the community – even if the library doors are temporarily closed.

To address these other, more urgent, patron needs, libraries need to innovate and not wait for the status quo to return. Libraries must creatively find ways to provide the services they know that their communities need. Libraries must be proactive about remaining visible in their communities. Libraries must work with community partners to deploy mobile hotspots



out into communities like Newport News is doing (<https://www.library.nnva.gov/310/WiFi-Hotspots>), bringing Internet access to neighborhoods instead of expecting people to drive to their parking lots.

Libraries must adopt technology that teleworkers have been using for years to enable library staff to connect in real-time (like Zoom and Slack) so they can talk *virtually* face-to-face with their patrons now, rather than limiting communication options to phone or email. Why not start beefing up our ability to deliver more services virtually now? Help desk tools like ZenDesk make it easy for staff to use their computer to library calls, to route calls to other workers also working at home, and to switch from a chat to a videochat if necessary – to get that much-needed face time with patrons. What are we waiting for? These services are going to be necessary going forward as we deal with wave after wave of lockdowns. And even if COVID-19 doesn't require further lockdowns, isn't it just a good idea to expand upon the services that we can provide to telecommuting staff?

### The Cost of Our Messaging

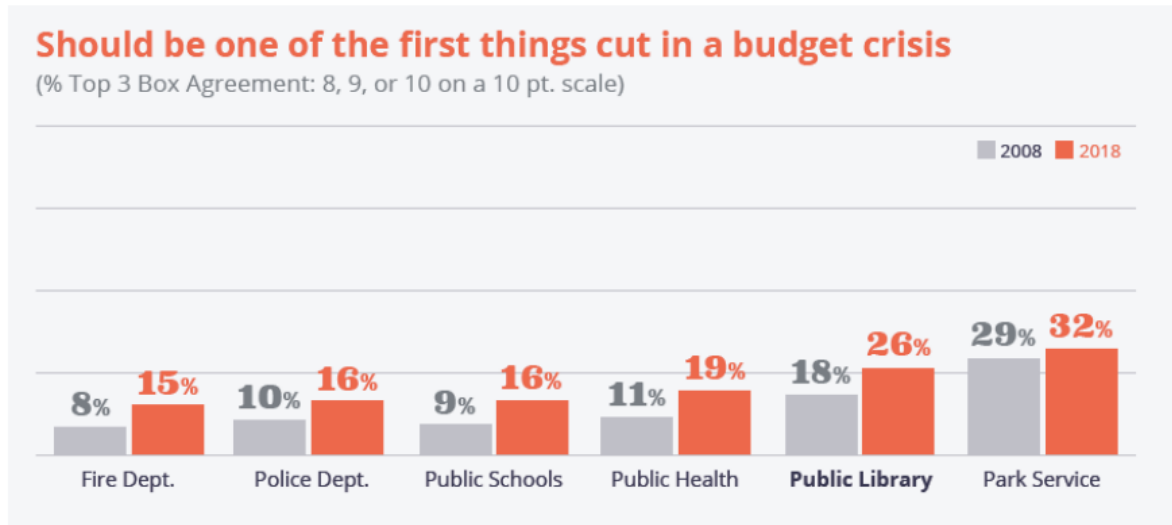
There is an obvious danger inherent in remaining "closed" and not actively strengthening and promoting the work currently being done: it is weakening the case for libraries in our communities. If we can close for several weeks and “no one” notices, how important can we be? And by "no one," we mean the politicians and policy makers – especially at the federal level. Libraries almost lost IMLS funding again this year, and even the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) barely acknowledges that libraries exist. In the recent CDC report, *Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Business, Schools, and Homes*, libraries are nowhere to be seen except to suggest that university students should use online libraries at some point.

We all know we are important to the community, especially to those community members falling through the cracks of poor public policy and the digital divide. But we need to remain visible to the people that control the budgets because in times of austerity, libraries are among the first things to get cut. See the graphic from OCLC's 2018 From Awareness to Funding report below.



Figure 2. Graphic from OCLC's 2018 From Awareness to Funding report about public services funding.

# Attitudes toward public services funding



Source: [https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/awareness-to-funding-2018/2018 From Awareness to Funding Report.pdf](https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/oclc/reports/awareness-to-funding-2018/2018%20From%20Awareness%20to%20Funding%20Report.pdf)

We know libraries are already seen as irrelevant to too many policy makers. Increasingly, libraries are struggling to maintain local funding sources. In a blog post about the above-mentioned OCLC report, Patrick Sweeney of EveryLibrary explains that our inability to make the public aware of our service offerings is one reason local funding is getting hard and harder to come by (see <https://pcsweney.com/2018/04/18/the-data-is-clear-its-time-to-move-beyond-storytelling->

[for-library-advocacy/](#)). Being closed AND invisible during this crisis is going to delay our goal of increasing public awareness.

This is a time for rethinking what libraries will be doing in a post-COVID-19 world. We can't expect to keep doing the same things the same way. And most importantly, we must tend to our messaging. Everyone needs to know what we are doing especially when it is less obvious because the building is closed.