FDLP Libraries Reopening After COVID-19
How Libraries Are Rapidly Adapting and Moving Toward Reopening

The digital age has transformed libraries into busy places, hubs in their communities, with the sounds of printers printing and various program activities. The silence in local libraries over the past few months has been deafening, like the days of old. Libraries, those sanctuaries of silence where book lovers could browse and borrow titles at leisure and students could peacefully prepare for exams away from their hectic home and school lives, have felt the impact of the lockdown triggered by coronavirus (COVID-19). As the extent of the pandemic became clear, librarians rapidly adapted to meet the needs of their communities and are reopening.

Even before librarians closed their doors due to the pandemic, they began shifting regular programming online; distributing stockpiles of mobile technology to the digitally needy; developing pick-up and drop-off services, and more. As valued parts of the community, libraries also began strengthening partnerships with schools and food donation sites; activating their maker-technology to produce PPE;

helping prepare the homeless population with alternatives for shelter, and easing the public transition to lockdown.

Perhaps one upside to the pandemic is that libraries began to push their online capabilities farther and faster than ever before. Libraries turned quickly to familiarizing their users with their vast holdings of online content, purchasing and sharing even more content, assembling collections of COVID-19 related links and information, shifting regular events like real-life concerts and group picnics to virtual performances with backyard family-only events. When libraries closed their doors, they immediately opened their digital communications, collaborations, and creative activity to reach their public in new and novel ways.

"The State Library has certainly seen an increase in the use of digital content by our primary users, Pennsylvania Commonwealth employees," said Kathy Hale, Supervisor for Public Services – Government Documents Librarian, State Library of Pennsylvania. "The public still uses materials available from GPO from

Book Bundles of children's books for parents/children to "grab and go" according to various topics.

our online catalog, and our Makerspace is offering classes all summer to elementary and middle school levels in a virtual environment."

Across the world, many countries have begun a gradual reopening of public life in an attempt to return a sense of normalcy to residents' lives and diminish the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Amid all the talk of the country reopening, libraries across the nation are now working to reopen their doors. Nearly 40 percent of libraries have planned to reopen this summer.

Librarians and library patrons say it is an especially difficult time for libraries to be closed. Many students might not have internet access at home and more than 44 million Americans have filed jobless claims, many of whom would normally be able to seek assistance at their local library branch. Communities have come to rely on libraries not just for books, videos and reading hours, but also for an array of social services, including literacy programs, U.S. citizenship classes, housing and tax assistance, and public bathrooms.

As public libraries begin drafting plans for reopening, they are often struggling with determining the best course of action to safely resume services to their communities. Initially classified as "low-risk" for reopening in a previously published report by Johns Hopkins (April 20, 2020), Johns Hopkins has amended their report, based on feedback from librarians, to recognize the role libraries

Becki White, MLS, Head Reference Librarian, works with the new normal at Pottsville Free Public Library in Pennsylvania where she has been employed for over 25 years.

play in the community to "medium to high-risk" similar to restaurants and retail stores.

America's public libraries have led the ranks of "first and second responders," stepping up for their communities in times of natural or manmade disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, shootings, fires, and major traumatic events in individual lives.

Libraries represent unique challenges to reopening and differ from restaurants and museums, which have only a limited number of high-touch items to disinfect. Libraries must contend with thousands of materials, many of which cannot be wiped down with disinfectant. To help with these challenges, the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP), Government Publishing Office (GPO), and other Federal and State agencies are working to provide guidance and a framework for a safe return to operations.

"All returned library materials are put aside in crates for three days before being checked in; library staff do not handle those materials without gloves," said Becki White, MLS, Head Reference Librarian, Pottsville Free Public Library, Pennsylvania. "After three days, materials are wiped down by staff and checked in. Any materials that were pulled off the shelves by browsers are treated the same way, and we have crates in every area for this purpose. Library staff wearing gloves go around the building to collect those materials at the end of the day. Signs have been put up in multiple areas explaining this practice."

FDLP shipments resumed on July 7 from GPO's warehouse facilities and vendor facilities that were stored since March 13, 2020. By August, 474 libraries have indicated they are reopening and can receive these shipments. Approximately 730 shipments were sent to those libraries. The majority of materials processed consist of the Congressional hearings, Federal Register, daily Congressional Record, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), and a Special Selection Offer of Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19.
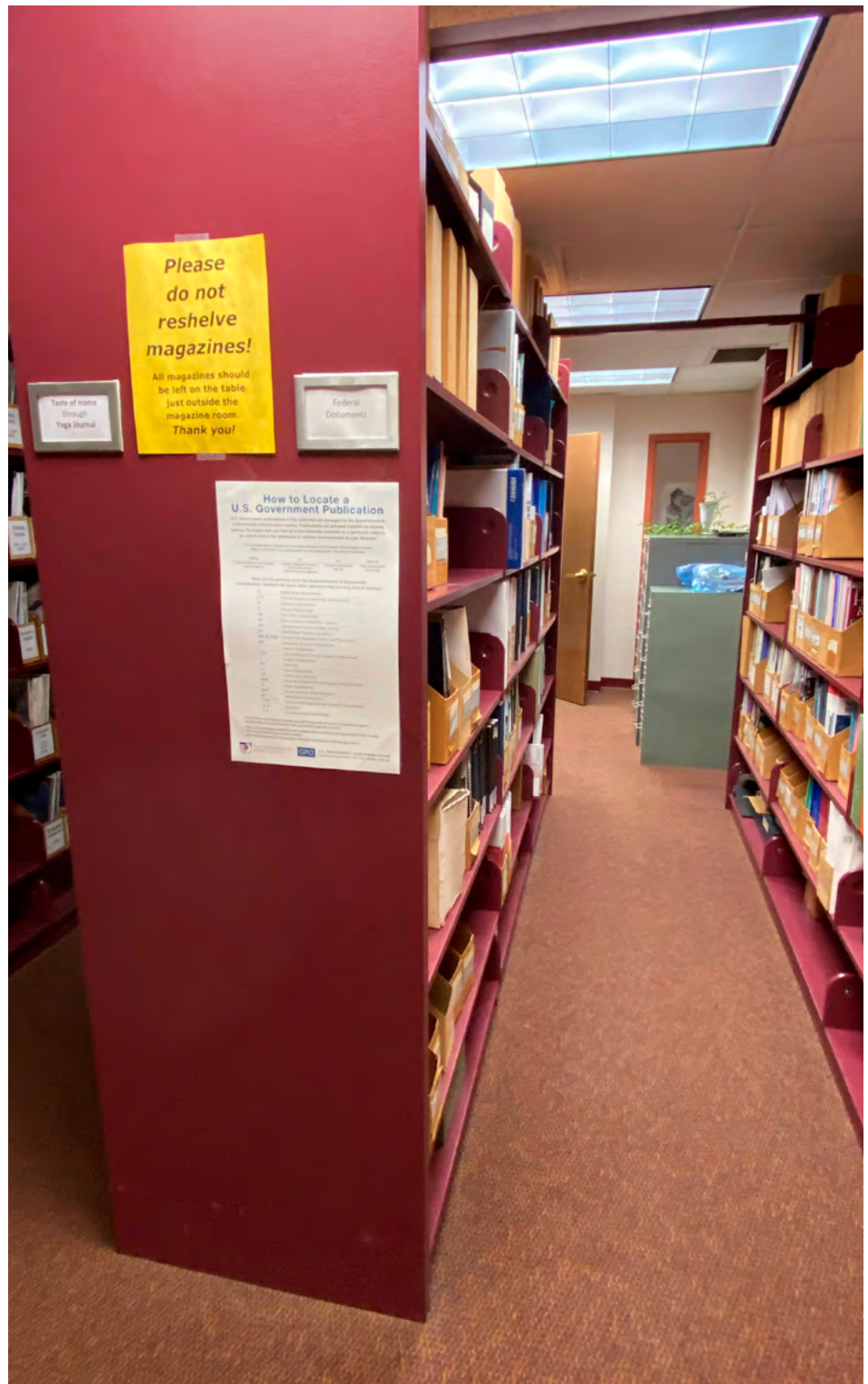
Aisles of library books and signage advising patrons to only handle items they plan on checking out. It was built with a combination of a Carnegie Foundation grant and gifts from the Sheafer family, a Pottsville family whose fortune had been made in coal and iron.

FDLP Libraries Reopening

Children's area of the library with furniture and toys removed and proper signage posted regarding handling of the library materials.

In July, the FDLP held a webinar titled, "Planning for Reopening: FDLP Libraries Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic." The webinar featured staff members from GPO, along with the Depository Library Council, and presented services and resources available including a COVID-19 FDLP Toolkit. GPO's available products in the Toolkit include FDLP facemasks; signage; and posters on handling of books and library materials, social distancing, coronavirus and flu prevention, room capacity notification, and best practices for proper mask use. The webinar finished with a forum to discuss reopening challenges, services, staff health and safety, and more.

GPO Superintendent of Documents, Laurie Hall, opened the webinar by saying, "I'm glad the library community can come together to share, collaborate, and work together to solve very complex problems, things we've never dealt with before in our libraries and our communities. I'm very glad you are here to share your solution and your creative ways of thinking as we deal with these challenges."

As an example of the information provided by FDLP, the website and COVID-19 FDLP Toolkit includes, "Guidance for Managing Federal Depository Library Collections Safely During COVID-19." This document is based on the latest scientific research, frequently updated and provides the latest information for coordinators and staff on how to safely maintain service to users and safeguard collections. The information includes quarantine for library materials and disinfection for library surfaces including keyboards, tables, and door handles.

"Early on the global experience with this new virus was readily apparent that it was easily transferable to all sorts of materials including the kind of materials we work with and use every day in libraries," said GPO Preservation Librarian David Walls. "The issue of how to handle library materials safely, as we look to open up, is something we decided to monitor and try to find the latest information on and put in a concise document for you. So there is a single place to go for all the latest information on the COVID-19 pandemic, effectiveness of

how to deal the materials, and safety for yourselves as well as your patrons."

In Pennsylvania, the Department of Education is working on a framework to help local libraries. This framework will include mandatory health and safety guidelines, recommendations on how to secure COVID-19-related supplies, and lists of resources for federal and state guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for community organizations and businesses.

This framework seeks to explore several possible reopening scenarios, each dependent on factors, such as recommendations from local and national health agencies, social distancing protocols, and critical community needs. The primary consideration is to maintain the safety of library patrons and staff while finding ways to provide necessary services that the library is uniquely positioned to perform. The most likely scenario may be a scaled reopening with an incremental easing of physical distancing measures.

While libraries are working to address the physical challenges caused by the pandemic, many wonder how to address the psychological fallout for both patrons and library staff. Patrons will need to feel comfortable visiting public spaces, while staff will need to adapt to a new way of working. These plans include quarantine of items that have been returned to libraries during the pandemic, staff and patron safety measures such as masks and gloves, limiting access to buildings, acrylic or plexiglas barriers for service desks, and managing foot traffic.

"Our first step in re-opening was to offer curbside pick-up and online services only, plus limited in-library computer and microfilm use by appointment only," said White. "When we opened for limited browsing in the library, we set aside 8:30–9:30 a.m. every day for vulnerable population members and increased the time limit on the public computers and microfilm machines. The Pottsville Free Public Library is now back to its normal hours, with most regular services available again. We continue to offer curbside pick-up for those who are

not comfortable with the idea of coming in to the library yet. Staffing levels do not permit us to offer delivery, but we allow people to have someone else pick up their materials for them with prior arrangement."

Continued social distancing concerns mean it will be a while before libraries are again the bustling centers of community activity, full of story time tots, book clubs, and study groups. Through remarkable fortitude, creativity, and resilience during this crisis, librarians and library staff have worked to restore service without the benefit of physical buildings and materials. Libraries have continued to serve their communities by offering digital collections, video-conference book clubs, recorded and broadcast story times, webinars, and online consulting. As libraries around the globe begin to reopen and provide traditional services, these new virtual ways of connecting and communicating will no doubt, become an ever more important part of the library landscape in service to their communities.

Reading areas with reduced furniture to provide social distancing.

Returned books placed in quarantine for 3 days prior to re-shelving in library.

Library patron returns items to the library for 3 day quarantine. The Pottsville Free Public Library opened its door for the first time November 9, 1911, in a 3 story building with the facade modeled after Independence Hall in Philadelphia.