



# COMMUNICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES DURING COVID-19

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## MICHIGAN LIBRARIES - REPOSE TO COVID-19: A MESSAGE TO OUR PUBLIC

Libraries stand together with our communities. We are committed to serving our public with resources and services needed to help with online learning, economic and job-related activities, and engaging and connecting during this difficult time.

Times of crisis show why libraries are such a valuable informational and educational link for the communities and institutions we serve. Building libraries' ability to serve customers remotely through robust broadband networks will guarantee citizens have the information resources they need when they cannot physically reach the library.

We are reshaping how we do business so that we can help you do yours.

Visit us online to learn about our services, programs, and free resources.

Section 1: Overall Messaging – Key Points

Section 2: Communications Planning

Section 3: Action Plans in Five Phases

### Section 1: OVERALL MESSAGING

#### 1.1 Overall Messaging – Key Points

- Libraries connect people.
- Libraries provide essential services.

#### Notes

Don't confuse open vs. closed with essential vs. nonessential.

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Focus on service.

Don't confuse physical access with being essential.

- Libraries serve the needs of communities in good times and in bad.
- Online library resources are available 24-7.
- Libraries are a bridge across the digital divide.
- Libraries are a universal classroom with resources and programs online to support K-12 education, distance learning, workforce skills, and much more.
- Libraries help fuel the economy by supporting small businesses, job seekers, and workforce development.
- The current crisis has demonstrated the need to move toward an information-based workforce that can work remotely via high-speed broadband. Libraries can play a key role in making sure individuals, communities, governments, and businesses can meet this huge societal challenge.

Describe briefly how your library's services and resources fulfill the messaging. Show how you "live" the message.

### 1.2 Quick Tag Lines

- When you can't get to the library, the library can "come" to you.
- Need to find facts and trustworthy information? Visit us online @
- Need access to a library of medical information? Visit us online @
- Do you need resources to help you find a job? Apply for a grant? Train for another profession? You need the library. Visit us online @
- Are you a small business owner and need access to research reports, market information, and legal resources? You need the library. Visit us online @
- X Memorial Library: Online and Ready for Business. URL
- X Memorial Library: Ready for Your Online Business – Open 24-7!
- X School Library – Together with our Community.
- X Memorial Library – Here for our Community!

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## SECTION 2: COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

### 2.1 The Place to Start

#### A. Understand of what you want to communicate and what you do not want to communicate.

Remember, communications are the intentional means by which your library (and you as the representative for your library) articulate and present your decisions, actions, commitments, plans, goals, and products (e.g., information, resources, services).

**In other words, have a concrete plan about what you are going to do. You cannot communicate a plan you do not have.**

#### B. Crisis Communication

##### 1. Some Basics

- Be proactive, compassionate, and honest.
- Remember we represent our public, stakeholders, and coworkers, and they have placed their trust in us.
- Keep in mind that it is harder for people to parse a message when they are stressed; misunderstanding is common (and everyone comes with pre-set judgments and fears).
- Emotions are involved.
- You may have to repeat the message in different ways – we all process more slowly because of the “noise.”
- Be understanding and compassionate as a sender and receiver of messages.
- Communicate frequently and in different ways.

##### 2. Tone and Approach

- Be calm, factual, and direct.
- Stick with what is known and make no guesses or assumptions.
- Don't editorialize.
- Be flexible and ask others to be flexible too in this new and evolving situation.

- Show solidarity. We are all facing a difficult time professionally, personally, and as a society.
- Be positive.

### **3. Speak to all your audiences. Identify to whom must you report and be accountable.**

- The public.
- Your stakeholders – partner institutions (e.g., libraries), local governments, state agencies, professional associations, and more.
- Bosses and state bodies – State and Local authorities or the library Board, for example.

### **4. Some elements to include in your messages**

- Show your commitment to your mission, serving constituents, and promoting safety.
- Describe your available resources and services.
- Detail how the public can access those services.
- Describe your library's ongoing work behind the scenes.
- Underscore the value your library brings to the public and the state.

## **2.2 Challenge assumptions, build on assumptions**

Find new ways of looking at what libraries do, how to deliver those services, and how to reframe the library message.

### **A. Libraries as place**

What does that mean in this environment? One of the most basic values of libraries is their position as a physical gathering place for the community. In addition to the actual books and other resources found in the library, the library is a place for people to gather and connect, experience live programming, and use equipment in the building. These place-based strengths have been a long-standing component of what makes libraries unique and invaluable.

This time of shelter-in-place is proving, in some ways, how much the community needs and values that space. However, we must be ready to translate that “place” into a “virtual place” with online and remote engagement.

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## B. What ARE libraries today?

We all believe that libraries are an essential element of social infrastructure, but the coronavirus crisis has demonstrated that social infrastructure extends to online social infrastructure as well. Libraries that are not prepared to serve their customers online have been at a disadvantage in remaining relevant to their communities during this crisis.

It is time to accept that offering online services is a fundamental requirement in information services. Successful libraries today must operate with meaningful ways of serving their public beyond the walls of the library. If we learn nothing else from this pandemic, we should learn that. Be sure to look at new methods as opportunities in the new environment and not substitutes for what we can go back to at a later date.

Keep in mind, there are ways to serve the public without internet access if needed. Hosting conference call book clubs, publishing lists of reading materials in newspapers, and partnering to support workforce skill development with area groups are all examples of services that can be promoted outside of the library that do not require internet access. If your library cannot deliver online services, use your expertise and creativity to deploy information and programs.

### 1. Challenge what you thought about the future for library services. What will the landscape be like for libraries in the coming months?

- Pent-up demand.
- Fatigue of computer screens.
- Continued concern over large gatherings.
- Public desire for interaction with others that allows for distancing.
- People will expect spaces to be configured for social distancing.
- Concern over physical materials. Consider how to clean and/or quarantine materials. Are your computer systems set up to let you track quarantined items? Does your physical space let you easily quarantine items if needed?
- Can you streamline the book return process?
- How can you distribute materials? Bookmobile service, area partnerships, preorders, packaging, reserving spots in the library?
- Addressing staff concerns regarding patron behavior.

## SECTION 3: ACTION PLANS IN FIVE PHASES

### 3.1 Phases and Timeline

*(These are not reopening phases but phases of a communication plan. Timing all depends on what Executive Orders are in place in Michigan.)*

- Phase 1: Dealing with changing situation: this was early spring for Michigan libraries
- Phase 2: Planning around stay-at-home environment: Currently – late spring and into early summer now (generally time students start summer vacation, but this can change depending on your region and Executive Orders specific to Michigan).

*Highlights* – How are you managing staff, public, and officials’ expectations and needs?

- Phase 3: Planning for reopening of services: When Executive Orders are lifted in your region and allow for limited or full service (exact date unknown).

*Highlights* – What in-person services can you resume? How will you need to do them differently?

- Phase 4: Plan for services for when your library is moving to a regular schedule and can consider future service planning (exact date unknown).

*Highlights* – If there is a need for a potential re-closing, will your plan still work? With economic conditions tightening, what will that mean for your service model? How can you prepare? Can you demonstrate your contributions?

- Phase 5: Long term plan: Once you have reopened and are looking to planning for the future in a post-COVID environment and need to have plans prepared around potential issues that curtail your services or necessitate closures in future.

*Highlights* – Again, consider if there is a for a potential re-closing, and determine whether your plan will still work. How are you positioning your library and the library community to shape policies and budgets to help you continue to serve your public?

### 3.2 Messaging and Action Plans

#### 1. Phase 1: Dealing with a changing situation - Ongoing

##### A. Where to start?

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Have a plan. Even if you need to update the plan, start with a framework that allows you, your staff, the public, and your governing authority know how you are responding and what steps you are taking.

What services are you able to deliver? How are you keeping the public and staff safe? How will you continue to conduct business? How can the public reach you? What happens to outstanding business items?

## **B. How to approach**

- Be calm, factual, and direct.
- Communicate your solidarity with the community, articulate your library's mission, and assure that you are establishing the best practices you can to promote safety, comply with directives, and continue to fulfill your library's mission.
- Say what you know and be open about what you don't know.
- Let customers know you need to be flexible and that you appreciate their support and flexibility as well.
- Don't overpromise or editorialize.
- Develop messages for the broad public, your key constituent groups (e.g., staff, board, volunteers, and partners), and your governing authority.
- Distribute over multiple channels – website, social media, other media.

## **C. Messaging – What is it important to convey about libraries serving their communities?**

- Memorial X Library is here to serve our community in good times and in bad.
- The library can “come” to you during this crisis. We have online resources and programs. (List what you have.)
- If you are providing some in-person service, describe that service (e.g., curbside, by-appointment access, or checkout).

## **D. Types and frequency of communications**

- Announcement on your website: It should be updated daily if needed.
- Press release or announcement: You can use your website announcement and reshape it as needed. You should send a copy of your press release to your library board before you send or

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post it if you have been asked for the information or if you are making major policy or procedure changes. It is beneficial for all to keep people and decision makers informed. Send out information when a crisis begins and then again when you make important policy or service updates.

- Email updates to stakeholders and vendors: Send out as needed. You should try to provide some contact with stakeholders weekly if possible.
- Provide updates and status reports to governing authorities as requested, when you have changes in service/policies, and at least once a week if possible.
- Social media posts: at least two post daily.
- Voicemail: Be sure you and your staff update voice greetings to reflect your library's status and how to best reach you.
- Make signs for your building as needed with updated information.

## **2. Phase 2: Planning around stay-at-home environment: Currently – late spring and into early summer now (generally time students start summer vacation, but this can change depending on your region and Executive Orders in Michigan)**

### **A. Where to start**

At this point, you have or are transitioning staff to work through your new model. In addition to the challenges of managing staff and workflow, you are also likely dealing with new questions.

- Sustainability: How long will the situation last, what if you cannot continue to operate in the same fashion for much longer?
- Safety: How does the evolving understanding of the virus affect your operations in new ways?
- Customer service: Are you able to serve your public in the ways you planned? Do you need to reframe the model? What is working and not working? What are you hearing from your constituents?
- Staff issues: Are you able to provide staff working at home with meaningful activities to perform? How is morale? How are you staying in contact with staff and helping them cope?
- Tracking and measuring: How are you keeping track of what you are doing and not able to do? How are you tracking success and obstacles?



- **Accountability:** All public organizations will be asked to account for time spent. Think about what you want to say about your library's response and how you can demonstrate what you have done. Also, be prepared to show why some operations were not possible.

## **B. How to Approach**

- Remain calm and show solidarity.
- Respect your position of trust in the community.
- Focus on the services you are able to provide.
- Be receptive to public input. Don't be defensive if people recommend you do certain things or do things differently. Even if you cannot deliver certain services, take the communication and input people offer you as a sign of engagement. You will need and want that in coming days. Remember, you are seen as an authority figure. Keep that trust.
- Continue to be direct and stick to what you know and can do.
- Remain positive and, where you can, give people a reason to celebrate (e.g., "20 readers completed x project" or whatever). Praise your public. Cheer them on. They need it, and so do you.
- Be informed about what is going nationally to support libraries. Your public will want to know – and will look to you – to provide information about how potential stimulus funding for libraries can support their needs.

## **C. Messaging**

- Focus on your role providing services and being a source of community engagement and connection.
- Provide updated information on services and programs.
- Focus on special services or resources that are especially useful during this time – tutoring programs, virtual storybook, Facebook events with authors, small business research materials on databases, links to other community programs, etc.
- Personalize your library and staff. What are you all doing? Can you have a daily Facebook posting of what your staff is doing (either onsite or from home) to serve the public?

- Be a voice for factual information. Libraries offer reliable sources of news and data. We do not add to panic or uncertainty. Underscore that reliability.
- Celebrate your community. Cheer on what you see is going on locally. Continue to be a feel-good place – even online!
- Ask for feedback. You may want to consider creating a survey of what your users need most. It's also a good time to scan the community on what engages them the most online. Everyone is at home – give them something fun and productive to do.

#### **D. Types of Communication**

- Website update – daily if possible.
- Facebook – daily if possible. • Other social media (Twitter, other) – multiple times a week.
- News releases – as needed.
- Email updates to partners – every week if possible.
- Newsletter or other public updates – weekly if possible.
- Updates to decision makers – at least weekly if possible. Include information both on your work serving the public and other ongoing work (e.g., collections development, planning programming, developing grant proposals, etc.).
- Media – weekly feel good stories about your library

### **3. Phase 3: Planning for reopening of services – When Executive Orders are lifted in your region and allow for limited or full service (exact date unknown)**

#### **A. Where to start**

A change to stay-at-home orders may involve ending the order completely or may likely involve a model of re-opening some services and organizations but not all. You will need to monitor state and local orders to determine what applies to your library location. There may be phased in openings or services.

- How will you ensure safe public spaces and workspaces (e.g., cleaning, spacing, etc.)?
- If you need to stagger staff times, how will that shift approach change your customer service plans? You will need to know these details to prepare your communications.

- Your community will be suffering both from a pent-up need to gather and resume normal life WHILE they are also likely to remain wary of social gatherings and coming into contact with materials. How will you address concerns in your service model?
- How will you engage and re-engage your public? Remember, you are doing more than going-back-to business. You are showing solidarity with your public and giving them a chance to re-enter normal life. Be positive and give people a chance to celebrate that with you.
- Which library services can you restart? What online services developed during quarantine should remain? How can you build on them? What technology do you need to find, repair, or purchase to continue operating remotely? Keep in mind that shelter-in-place orders may resume again if health and government officials deem it necessary.
- As demand may start to ease off from delivery services in other sectors, are there potential local partners to approach for help in the future? Create those partnerships now.
- How can you partner with local groups to promote a resurgence of your community? How can you reach out to these folks?

## **B. How to Approach**

- Be positive but do not imply that health concerns relating to the coronavirus are ending. People will still be wary, and the opening of services and retail may be slow.
- Begin healing and recovery. Many people will be out of a job and looking for support and opportunities. The public has experienced trauma. Be sensitive to that and look to how your library can help.
- Be calm and flexible.
- Praise your public.
- Praise your staff and the work you have done.
- Show solidarity with your community and frontline responders. How can you continue working together to rebuild your community?
- Emphasize the ongoing priority to keep your community safe.
- Be informed about what is going nationally to support libraries. Your public will want to know – and will look to you – to provide information about how potential stimulus funding for libraries can support their needs.

### C. Messaging

- Solidarity and praise – together we are strong and support each other. Together, we come through.
- Healing together.
- Engaging and reinventing in community.
- Working together to reinvigorate our economy through training and tools.
- Rebuilding your community, the state, and the nation stronger than before.
- Resetting our services to continue making sure our public has what they need to work, learn, and thrive from any location.

### D. Types of Communication

- Website update – daily if possible.
- Facebook – daily if possible.
- Other social media (Twitter, other) – multiple times a week.
- News releases – as needed.
- Email updates to partners – every week if possible.
- Newsletter or other public updates – weekly if possible.
- Updates to decision makers – at least weekly if possible. Include information both on your work serving the public your efforts to rebuild your community.
- Develop a special “Services Under COVID-19” two-to-four-page report that you can have available on your website and distribute to stakeholders. Formalize in writing and in a print-ready piece what actions and services your library has taken. How are you connecting with your public? How are your supporting community efforts? You will need this narrative in the months to come.
- Media – weekly feel good stories about your library.
- Plan for a way for your public to share their stories online or in person. People want to share what they know, learned, or did. Create an online form or forum, welcome postcards, or create a thread on Facebook. Be “the place” people share their stories.

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#### **4. Phase 4: Plan for services for when your library is moving to a regular schedule and can consider future service planning (exact date unknown).**

##### **A. Where to start**

Along with the relief of getting back to normal, the summer will also be a time for health officials and government to monitor the spread of the virus and determine what strategies should be implemented. Social distancing and limited additional shelter-in-place orders may continue to be part of social operations for the foreseeable future.

- What do you need to do to equip your library for implementing social distancing capacity over time?
- Are you able to implement a remote services model again? What would you do differently? What do you need?
- Is your library able to offer robust online services and programs?
- Do you have a way of making your public aware of these online resources?
- If not, what do you need to make that happen?
- What can your library do to support student's re-entry? Will more "catch-up" reading material help? Extra tutoring sessions?
- With the economic impact of the virus likely to affect public spending, have you tracked what your library has been able to provide? Do you have a means to find out what your public needs from you? You will need that to build your case for what your community/stakeholders needs from you.
- How are you preparing your budget? What should decision-makers and your public know about what your library services should look like and do over the next year?

##### **B. How to Approach**

- Factual and getting-down-to business.
- Focusing on what the public needs most.
- Maintain standards for safety and cleanliness.
- Continue to show solidarity and interest/participation in community healing.

- Support local economic redevelopment efforts.
- Highlight the trustworthiness of libraries.
- Be informed about what is going nationally and statewide to support libraries. Your public will want to know – and will look to you – to provide information about funding for libraries and how that translates into services for them.

### **C. Messaging**

- Libraries are preparing for the long-term needs of the community to recover economically and emotionally.
- Libraries provide essential services.
- Libraries adapt to the needs of the community and respond to a variety of needs.
- Libraries provide an infrastructure for education and workforce readiness and activity.
- Libraries can serve the public and diverse constituencies within their communities through online services, resources, and other outreach strategies.

### **D. Types of Communication**

- Website update – daily if possible.
- Facebook – daily if possible. • Other social media (Twitter, other) – multiple times a week.
- News releases – as needed.
- Email updates to partners – every week if possible.
- Newsletter or other public updates – weekly if possible.
- Updates to decision makers – at least weekly if possible. Include information both on your work serving the public and your efforts to rebuild your community.
- Develop a special report on how your library will assist in helping students reintegrate into school and make up any lost skills (e.g., reading) or missed coursework and training.
- Develop a special report on how your will assist job seekers and small businesses.

- Media – Try to submit weekly feel good stories about how your library is assisting in economic recovery (e.g., workforce development training, etc.) and community resurgence.
- If you are preparing a budget, be sure to include fact sheets about what services you created or adapted. Use the information you gathered from the public and the reports you created. Describe the demand you documented for your services.

**5. Phase 5: Long term plan: Once you have reopened and are looking at planning for the future in a post-COVID environment where you need plans prepared around potential issues that curtail your services or necessitate closures in the future.**

**A. Where to start**

Have a plan. With the start of the fall, some health officials are warning of a resurgence of the virus. As with the summer months, the potential for re-closing exists. Will your plan still work? At this time, libraries should be pivoting to longer term planning. The priorities for viability include:

- Robust provisions of online services and resources.
- Robust infrastructure for online and outreach services – broadband, mobile services.
- Equipping the public (to the extent possible) to access the internet from home – Wi-Fi hotspots, device lending.
- Training for staff to deploy these technologies.
- Documenting and showing the essential work of libraries beyond the physical setting.
- Partnering with other groups to promote community wellness – health, economic, workforce, and educational activities. How can your library be a bigger player in such efforts?
- Small business resurgence – how can you help?
- Look at your own budget but also look to opportunities from state and federal resources, as well as workforce development programs.

**B. How to Approach**

- Show your leadership and ongoing commitment to support your community.
- Be compassionate for suffering in your community but show command of your library's strategies to provide resources and services to help. People will be looking for reassurance.

- Point to your long-term commitment to safety and recovery.
- Stick to what you know and the priorities you want to emphasize.
- Show that you are part of the local team – demonstrate support for local initiatives and celebrate successes.
- Highlight the trustworthiness of libraries.
- Show your willingness to listen to the public and engage them in conversations about the future of the community, school, or local institutions.
- Be informed about what is going nationally to support libraries. Your public will want to know – and will look to you – to provide information about how funding and support for libraries can help them.

### **C. Messaging**

- Libraries are accessible to the public beyond the physical space of the libraries.
- Online library resources are available 24-7.
- Libraries hold communities together.
- Libraries are a bridge across the digital divide.
- Libraries are a universal classroom with resources and programs online to support K-12 education, distance learning, workforce skills, and much more.
- Libraries help fuel the economy by supporting small businesses, job seekers, and workforce development.
- Libraries provide essential services in good times and in bad.
- Libraries are trusted and safe place for community connections and engagement.

### **D. Types of Communication**

- Website update – daily if possible.
- Facebook – daily if possible.
- Other social media – multiple times per day/weekly.



- News releases – as needed.
- Email updates to partners – every week if possible.
- Newsletter or other public updates – weekly if possible.
- Updates to decision makers – at least monthly, more frequently if possible. Include information both on your work serving the public and your efforts to rebuild your community. Show also your plans for long-term service, especially if crisis situations arise again.
- Budget and support documents.
- Focus groups (in person or online) – Gather information on what the public needs from the library.
- Joint statements (press releases, reports) on shared initiatives and strategies with partnering institutions.
- Media – monthly. Submit stories, opinion pieces, and host a virtual “tour of services.”

**This document is provided as a resource only. A library may opt to use or adapt any elements of these suggestions. As you know information and requirements change frequently in this environment. Please be aware and reach out to the Library of Michigan with questions.**

*Acknowledgement given to the:  
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