

April 30, 2020

Dear Governor Inslee,

Like every other industry in Washington State, public libraries have had to adapt to the profound disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. While our buildings have been closed, library staff have quickly developed innovative ways to continue to deliver library services remotely. Wherever possible, we have expanded digital resource offerings, continued to serve the public online and by telephone, made Wi-Fi accessible in our parking lots, and offered both educational and entertainment opportunities for students, families, and people staying at home.

And like every other industry, public libraries across Washington State are focused on what comes next. We are hard at work developing re-opening plans that align with public health directives and guidelines to protect the health and well-being of library employees and the public. We are doing so in order to return to our primary mission: to support and provide access to the educational, recreational and informational needs of our communities and to contribute to the quality of life of our individual cities and counties.

Re-opening Plans

Libraries are high-contact, busy public places and will need to go through metered re-opening stages in order to safely provide service to the public while supporting continued progress in reducing the spread of COVID-19. Like other businesses, our re-opening plans will resemble the turning of a dial rather than the flip of a switch.

The particulars of these plans will ultimately be determined and enacted on a local level, working with our local jurisdictions and following the guidance of both state and local public health agencies. But as we plan and return to service, public libraries are generally following a re-opening plan that involves the following sequential stages:

- Employees return to work at the libraries behind closed doors to prepare spaces and services for new modes of service delivery and eventual public use, as well as managing quarantined items that have been returned to the library.
- Initial services are offered outside of library buildings, such as curbside pick-up, expanded Wi-Fi available in parking lots, ongoing emphasis on downloadable books and resources, and educational programs like story times offered online.
- Basic library services are offered inside the buildings with extra precautions, following social distancing and transmission mitigation guidelines. This stage could potentially include limited or no availability of shared accommodations like seating, collaborative work spaces, and public computers.
- Expanded services are offered inside the buildings with the restoration of some suspended services, such as library educational programs or the use of public meeting rooms, if allowed by public health directives and guidelines.
- Eventual restoration of full library services.

Transmission Mitigation Strategies for Library Materials

Public libraries are facing some unique challenges in response to COVID-19. First, library materials are not primarily paper-based. The majority of the items we loan have plastic covers, such as DVD cases or protective Mylar covers on books. We are eagerly awaiting test results from a new partnership between the Institute of Museum & Library Services and Batelle Labs that will assess the potential for virus transmission on library materials.

In the meantime, we are collectively sharing and implementing material handling strategies involving quarantining library materials. Unlike the typical retail model, the items people take home from our libraries come back to us. We want to do our part to minimize any potential virus transmission via those items coming back from one person and going out again to someone new.

Reorganizing Programs of Service

The second challenge is aligning core elements of our shared resource service model with public health directives and guidelines. Computers stations, in-library Wi-Fi, early learning toys in children's areas, publicly available meeting rooms, and collaborative work spaces have traditionally been offered to encourage people to make the library "their place" when they visit. This model doesn't work in our current reality, so libraries are tasked with fundamentally restructuring spaces in order to discourage or eliminate some or all of those opportunities for the time being. This challenge is both a practical and philosophical one, as we have defined ourselves as community gathering spaces where shared learning takes place.

Employee and Patron Safety

The additional challenge with both these mitigation and space restructuring strategies is maintaining a sufficient supply of disinfecting products and personal protective equipment, such as disposable gloves and face masks. Cleaning and disinfecting shared surfaces will be a focus for libraries going forward, much like restaurants and other high-contact service industries. While this is by no means a challenge unique to public libraries, there will be considerable cost and effort involved in establishing new hygiene protocols and having sufficient cleaning materials and protective equipment to keep employees and the public safe.

As important community places with services that will be vital to restoring the public's educational, employment, and social support needs, libraries will need to offer services and operate using best practices. We will need the help and cooperation of both staff and patrons in order to demonstrate our commitment to the health and well-being of our employees and communities.

And finally, thank you for your leadership during this unprecedented challenge. Decisions based upon data and credible information are near and dear to both our profession and our hearts, and we are proud to live and work in a state that is leading the way. We are eager to support a thoughtful, careful return to being open, and to support our communities as they do the same.

Respectfully,

The Public Libraries of Washington State