

Depository Libraries in a COVID-19 Pandemic Environment

*Lessons Learned from Depository Library Council's Open Forums
April 22 and July 27, 2020*

Depository Library Council
Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group

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Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group

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The recording, chat transcripts, and the slides from the Open Forums are available at:

April 22: <https://www.fdlp.gov/spring-2020-depository-library-council-virtual-meeting>

July 27: <https://www.fdlp.gov/planning-for-reopening-fdlp-libraries-recovering-from-the-covid-19-pandemic>

INTRODUCTION

As the 2020 Spring Meeting of the Depository Library Council (DLC) neared, we found ourselves in the midst of the Coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic. Many states had issued stay-at-home orders, and libraries of all types faced what is likely one of the biggest operational changes they have ever experienced.

The DLC wanted to hear from the depository library community and to provide an opportunity for them to share their stories of how they were working, facing challenges, and coping during this anything but normal time. The schedule of the April 22, 2020 meeting was rearranged to allow one hour, or 25%, of the time to be devoted to the open forum: *Depository Libraries in a Time of Stay-at-Home Orders*. There were more than 400 people in attendance for the open forum portion of the meeting, the community willingly spoke up, and there was a steady stream of chat that addressed the five questions that were posed to them.

The Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group was convened to review the Open Forum recording and chat transcripts and provide a summary and report of the findings from the Open Forum. Much was learned, and shared in the [report of the open forum](#).

Resulting from the report was a spring 2020 DLC recommendation for the Government Publishing Office (GPO) to conduct another open forum during the summer to discuss library reopening planning. In response to the recommendation, on July 27, 2020 a two hour program was held: *Planning for Reopening: FDLP Libraries Recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic*. There were 247 in attendance at this second open forum.

The Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group reviewed the depository community's comments from the two open forums with an eye toward providing guidance to and best practices for libraries in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). This report conveys lessons learned and provides recommendations for moving forward. Though the questions posed to attendees during the two open forums differed, the general topics of their responses were well-matched and organized into five categories:

1. Public Services;
2. Technical Services;
3. Communication;
4. Wellbeing and Equilibrium; and
5. Government Publishing Office.

OPEN FORUM LESSONS LEARNED

PUBLIC SERVICES

Based on careful examination of the Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group's Final Report, "Depository Libraries in a Time of Stay-at-Home Orders" in April, and feedback from the FDLP community during the open forums and webinars in July, a pattern emerged, substantiating

best practices for Federal depository libraries in rendering effective public services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond:

Public Services Specific to the FDLP

- Updating library webpages, including home pages with links to Government documents has received positive feedback from both on-line and in-person customers for libraries that have reopened.
- Creating more LibGuides has proven essential during this time for providing quality service now and beyond.
- Providing searching and data entry help with Needs & Offers for FDLP Exchange while working remotely has proven to be good use of staff and student workers' time.
- Offering virtual chat and online reference has been effective and could extend beyond the pandemic.
- Utilizing this opportunity for cataloging, and other holdings cleanup projects has proven to be an effective use of staff time.

Public Services Offered by the Library

- Libraries have seen an increase in card-carrying patrons with their implementation of online library card registration and renewal services. In some cases the increases have been dramatic.
- More resources are delivered online, such as blog posts, children's activities, and electronic-only course reserves.
- Libraries of all types have ramped up virtual programming for people of all ages, including tutoring for K-12 students.
- Implementing practices for the health and safety of all:
 - Signage for social distancing, sanitizing, and COVID-19 throughout the library
 - Plexiglas shields at circulation and reference desks
 - Sanitizing surfaces, e.g., tables, keyboards
 - Quarantining returned materials
 - Wearing of masks mandated for all library staff and the public
- Facing additional challenges of reopening:
 - Obtaining appropriate cleaning products is difficult, and not timely
 - Dealing with patron expectations of availability of materials
 - Questioning the need to create new, or revise, existing library policies, for example, allowing food and drinks in the library; although several expressed that bans were implemented

Overlapping Services

- Extending Wi-Fi service beyond the library's walls, allows Internet access for library patrons who might not otherwise have it.
- Libraries are discovering, and making use of, digital repositories like Internet Archive and HathiTrust for access to e-books and Government documents.

- Libraries have ramped up their online, phone, and email reference assistance, and even expanded it to include chat services via social media. Further they are creating discussion groups, blogs, and tutorials on social media.
- Virtual meeting platforms are being used for teaching and training purposes, as well as to conduct reference service and academic research consults by appointment.
- Though some libraries had patrons sign-up to use computers prior to the pandemic, more libraries now are implementing computer usage and seat reservations as safety measures. Curbside services are being offered for this reason as well.

TECHNICAL SERVICES

While library services are one aspect, depository libraries have a significant amount of work outside of providing services to patrons. Work that is often behind the scenes in libraries is continuing with activities such as conducting data cleanup in catalogs, updating catalog records by adding links to digital content, and more. These efforts will result in improved search precision, increased discoverability, and greater access to Government information.

Cataloging and Link Pointing

- Responding to many more requests about the online availability of Government information, even for items such as National Park maps and guides. Promotion of these materials was widespread.
- Completion of legacy projects like metadata additions and clean-up, retrospective cataloging, weeding of electronic items, catalog cleanup (widely noted in spring and continuing), and analysis of selection profile.
- Government information links and FDLP LibGuide links were added to webpages and library access points. Some difficulty locating the correct links or a freely available version of certain government information sources.
- Cataloging and processing of technology tools to allow our users to access the internet—hotspots, laptops, and webcams. Set-up of Wi-Fi outside of libraries to allow for access to the internet. A noted digital divide becomes more pronounced with the closure of libraries.
- Some print projects were started or continued when building access was permitted or staff could take home materials. Weeding, inventory, shelf-reading, and processing of items occurred at some libraries.

Processing Materials

- New workflows, including those utilizing fewer staff and taking more time, were established to conform to the REALM (Reopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums) Project guidelines, local guidelines, or other recommendations. The FDLP COVID-19 Toolkit was noted as a valuable resource by many.
- Concerns about the holds placed on shipments from GPO and what might be required of depository libraries and the staff processing those items were expressed. There were many questions about how to process the potential backlogs, storage concerns, and how to handle out-of-date and superseded materials.

- For many in technical services there was the challenge of finding projects that could be completed remotely. Some staff were allowed to work in their building, even when the institutions were closed to the public, but some were not.

Staffing Issues

- More time for professional development was available to some staff, but on the opposite end of the spectrum were the large numbers of staff furloughed or whose positions were eliminated.
- Widespread morale issues due to the pandemic, remote working, loss of positions and changes in work dynamics. Divide between those staff for whom it is easier to work remotely and those for whom work involves being in the building. Concern about masks and health and childcare were mentioned as libraries plan to reopen.
- A digital divide exist for our library employees and there were many who had issues with bandwidth, VPNs, computers, and internet issues that created difficulties and stress.
- Many librarians expressed excitement about getting back into their buildings and working with the tangible collections and shipments from GPO.
- Keeping personnel safe, especially older staff members who are more vulnerable to COVID-19, was a major concern. As libraries plan for and begin to reopen new and different safety protocols need to be developed and implemented.
- Flexibility was a key characteristic that was noted over and over. Staff have shown resilience, creativity and strength. New innovations and opportunities for collaboration emerged and will be incorporated into our organizations and lives.

COMMUNICATION

In going through the recent open forums, some trends became apparent. Below are ways in which libraries have tried their best to adapt to the current situation while still meeting their mission and communicating their services to users.

People Libraries Serve

- Increased use of signage to communicate to library users certain things such as distancing requirements and cleaning measures. One good example is the library that has created a sign that can be placed on tables to communicate to patrons that a table has been recently cleaned.
- Increased communication and collaboration with faculty to assist them as they prepare to virtually teach by providing training and tips on applications such as WebEx, Canvas, Zoom, etc.
- Communication with patrons via mail delivery of materials that include features like pre-printed return labels.
- Willingness to allow academic faculty browse the library stacks before the semester begins.
- Offering faculty appointments.
- Providing a system of timed, reserved seating for student patrons.
- Providing in-person training with limited capacity.

- Training on de-escalation tactics and shared language to assist in communication with patrons.
- Some libraries have limited public patron access for the safety of their primary clientele and staff. Other libraries have limited the amount of time patrons can spend in the library or placed caps on the amount of patrons in the library at any one time.

People Supervised and Coworkers

- Continued use of Work From Home (WFH) for many employees, especially those with health conditions or age. Communicating with employees that if they can work from home, to please continue doing so. However, some are finding it difficult in continuing to come up with enough telework to keep employees busy with things other than responding to emails or calls.
- Providing counseling sessions or virtual therapy for employees, mainly in academic settings, who are dealing with stress and anxiety during this time.
- Training on de-escalation tactics and shared language to assist in communication with patrons.

With these initiatives that librarians have taken on, the overall lesson learned is to be adaptable and willing to communicate to others with new methods. These methods can be as simple as a sign or as detailed as an in-person, socially distanced training that may need to be limited to one person at a time. Not quite six months into the shutdown, libraries are still learning and adapting at what might work best in communicating the library's services.

WELLBEING AND EQUILIBRIUM

From the open forum reviews it was learned that the following have been effective in fostering personal well-being and equilibrium:

- Flexibility is key. Suggestions from the community include providing library staff with the freedom to pace themselves, work flexible hours, and to complete tasks remotely when possible.
- Engage with hobbies, community, and interpersonal connections. The community offered possibilities—recreational writing, volunteer activities, gardening, cooking, personal and professional correspondences, and participating in social events (virtual and in-person).
- Physical activity is essential. Depository library staff take daily walks, exercise, do yoga, meditate, and frequently get up from their workstations to move about.
- Maintain a work-life balance. Attendees shared what works for them: keeping normal work hours, establishing a designated workspace at home (if working remotely), and limiting work correspondences to normal hours.
- Continuing personal and professional social interactions is important. Virtual gatherings, check-in sessions, scheduled activities, correspondences (via email, slack, chat, and video), and discussion forums were mentioned as options.

- Institutional support services. Suggestions from the community include utilizing employers' counseling programs, mental health and self-care resources, union and staff services, and resource guides.

GOVERNMENT PUBLISHING OFFICE

In the months since the spring DLC meeting, GPO has hosted webinars and forums to address some of the most-mentioned topics of interest. These include COVID-19 and Collections Care, Teaching from Home, REopening Archives, Libraries, and Museums (REALM): An overview of the COVID-19 research project, and Promoting Government Information via Library Websites. There also were two sessions devoted to planning for reopening libraries as pandemic recovery continues. The events have been well received with record breaking attendance, a testament that GPO has been responsive to this stated desire of the community. Feedback during these sessions indicated what's on the mind of the collective community, much of which could be addressed or supported by GPO:

Staffing

- Challenges of continuing to work remotely
- Fostering teamwork and maintaining morale
- Need for normalcy
- Reduced staffing and ability to hire students
- Telework best practices

Services/Projects

- Creative approaches to resuming services
- Limited library access
- Promotion via library websites
- Repurposing space
- Tackling long overdue projects, such as converting forms to digital

Communication

- Current operating status of all FDLP libraries
- Guidelines and COVID toolkit
- Promotional materials
- Value of GPO social media
- Webinars helpful for/while teleworking

Collections

- Appreciating access to free electronic resources from vendors
- Challenges imposed by library administrators
- Challenges of resuming print distribution
- Closed stacks
- Desire to discard physical items sooner

- Handling materials
- Mail opening procedures
- Need to stop collecting tangible items
- Possible electronic distribution of National Parks and other maps
- Quarantined materials; holding materials before processing
- Taking boxes home/mailing tangible items to catalogers

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

At the time of the DLC virtual spring meeting in April, doubtless few imagined that the COVID-19 pandemic would continue to rock our world with no end in sight. Probably the greatest lesson learned is that the situation we find ourselves in is likely to remain unpredictable and uncontrollable for the foreseeable future. In such an environment, there can be little consistency, as some libraries attempt reopening, others test waters more carefully, and still others remain largely closed to users. There will be an ongoing need to recognize the unique situations depository libraries are in and to respond to individual needs.

Across categories, some consistent messages emerged. One is the clear desire for depository libraries to meet the needs of the citizenry where they are and in ways that are most meaningful and relevant, especially as times continue to change. A second is that depository library staff themselves are resilient—flexible, creative, and adaptable, willing and able to turn the challenge of this extraordinary moment into opportunities and to look ahead for ways to best serve constituents. As always, they are committed to excellence. Finally, the presence of technology solutions—be they digital resources, integrated systems for more effectively accessing content, or platforms for connecting to real-time training, dialogue, and support—is recognized and strong.

Another lesson is that the depository library community relies on GPO as much as if not more than ever, for ongoing guidance and support during this unprecedented time. The question is whether this moment may be an opportune one to consider an intentional exploration of the concept of an entirely digital FDLP—an idea that is not new but whose time may finally have come. Feedback from the community indicates considerations and concerns that revolve around receiving, handling, and processing tangible collections, housing them, and maintaining them amid a disrupted reality defined by shrinking budgets, limited staff, and perhaps even less-certain support from library administrators. With many depository libraries now closed to users for six months yet continuing to function and fulfill their mandate virtually, it is a reasonable question to ask. Pandemic aside, trends in recent years, including dwindling participation in the program, consolidation of areas served by regionals, and more libraries leaning toward digital-only deposit also would suggest that the time may be right to take the temperature of the community regarding this. Although many crave a return to normalcy, it seems unlikely that there will be a normal to return to—but there can be a better normal to build for the future. This may be the time to begin that conversation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group offers, for the Depository Library Council's consideration, the following recommendations:

1. GPO encourage Federal depository libraries to examine lessons they have learned while working in a remote and digital environment, and during their reopening process. They should consider what COVID-19 initiatives can be incorporated into their new normal environment that would enhance and strengthen their overall public service experience. This includes but is not limited to the FDLP online resources.

Justification:

Federal depository libraries have developed consistent protocols for providing creative and effective public services amid COVID-19 pandemic. They are on the forefront of *Keeping America Informed* through dedicated and skilled librarians and information specialists. By adapting the lessons learned from their COVID-19 experiences, they can only enhance the quality as well as quantity of services provided and offered to their customers, especially their digital programs and resources.

2. GPO encourage flexibility for depository library staff that enables a healthy work-life balance.

Justification:

The wide variety of suggestions offered by the FDLP community demonstrate that individuals seek balance and wellness through many different activities and mechanisms. The unifying theme within the feedback is the argument that flexibility allows individuals to establish routines and activities that support their personal well-being and equilibrium. Such well-being is a professional necessity, as it allows library staff to better carry out their duties and serve their communities.

3. GPO, working with the DLC, begin to explore and discuss with the FDLP community the possibility of an all-digital FDLP. To facilitate this discussion, Council further recommends GPO develop a white paper defining what an all-digital FDLP or, in the alternative, a primarily digital FDLP might look like. The resulting white paper is to be shared with Council and the community for comments with GPO reporting on the resulting comments at the proper time.

Justification:

The COVID-19 Pandemic has altered the norm of the FDLP community. Many Federal depository libraries remain closed to the public. Those that are open provide limited services and rely heavily upon digital resources. Currently, only 55% of depository libraries are receiving depository shipments. Based on the Centers for Disease Control and other health professionals, this pandemic is on-going, at least, for the foreseeable future. Therefore, libraries continue to face an unprecedented dilemma regarding staffing issues

and receipt and processing of tangible materials. Individual libraries are also having to continually evaluate and adjust to required health and safety precautions as the pandemic impacts certain parts of the country differently. This is an opportune time for the GPO to begin what the Digital Only Depository Libraries Working Group believes to be a timely discussion.