



Public Libraries and the Workforce

Stephanie Holcomb

July 8, 2020

2020-07

<https://doi.org/10.29338/wc2020-07>

This *Workforce Currents* article presents the broad range of ways that public libraries are responding to COVID-19. It provides a brief overview of the role of libraries and their range of services, how they responded to workforce needs in the past, and how they are responding and preparing for long-term impacts of the current pandemic. Libraries are mobilizing for the economic fallout associated with COVID-19 such as facilitating unemployment insurance enrollment, referrals to food banks, and other services for immediate needs. Library staff are also thinking longer term about how shelter-in-place orders could expand telework in the future, how libraries can continue to support small businesses and entrepreneurs, and how they will continue to assist job seekers to connect to training opportunities and prepare for job openings.

Libraries are vital institutions in our society, serving as places of resources and refuge for each one of its community members. The American Library Association (ALA) points to myriad examples of the societal role of libraries, showing their positive impact on neighborhoods, quality of life, and civic engagement.¹ One important historic role is their support to the workforce. Libraries provide a range of support to job seekers and entrepreneurs with services like résumé development, computer and Wi-Fi access, meeting spaces, interview preparation, and seminars. In many ways, this role was expanded and institutionalized in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Libraries are once again doing their part to meet both the immediate community needs and long-term workforce needs as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds.

As with the response to the Great Recession, the response to the COVID-19 crisis builds on a foundation of community service that libraries have built since their inception. Libraries remain agile and responsive resources to meet the needs of their communities. Following the Great Recession, local libraries—and their counterparts at the regional, state, and national levels—began to mobilize to get people back to work. They did this through collaborative partnerships and innovative deployments of staff expertise. [A 2018 survey of state libraries from the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development](#) at Rutgers University found that libraries provided classes, online job search support, résumé development, job application assistance, literacy programs, test preparation, and a range of other career services.² Libraries were acknowledged for their efforts when a major funding source for workforce development, the [Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act](#) (WIOA) of 2014, formally recognized libraries as potential partners for the network of U.S. Department of Labor–funded American Job Centers.³

The Heldrich Center study and other resources⁴ point to a range of workforce development services provided by libraries and detail the comparative advantages in their provision of these services. For

instance, libraries have longer operating hours than American Job Centers, staying open at night and on weekends. Libraries serve a wider range of patrons and are embedded in communities, and as such are viewed as hubs of resources and information for a range of needs. In addition, libraries adhere to a standard of serving all community members and collecting little or no information about patrons—depending upon their preferences—while providing services. For these reasons and others, libraries have long served as sources of career services.

Even at the time of the 2018 Heldrich Center study—during a period of strong economic growth and low unemployment—most respondents expected the demand for career services at libraries to increase. Respondents noted the need for more personalized services for job seekers with employment barriers and more workers looking to change occupations or reskill. Now, however, libraries are again faced with a new wave of demand for career services from the record number of their users becoming unemployed during the pandemic. That is something they are already preparing for; a group of workforce-focused state library staff have a long-standing group called Libraries Work,⁵ in which they come together to discuss new initiatives and share resources. This group has started meeting more frequently to discuss how they can respond to their communities' immediate needs and start planning for the long-term economic fallout, building on lessons learned from the Great Recession and thinking of new ways to address the unique challenges this situation presents. Libraries are focusing on the immediate needs of their community members but are thinking of long-term responses such as expanding partnerships and services to meet the needs of the future workforce and job seekers.

Addressing immediate needs

While employment is important, and the focus of this post, communities must first address immediate health and safety concerns. As Deborah Fallows wrote in the *Atlantic*,⁶ “When libraries closed their doors abruptly, they immediately opened their digital communications, collaborations, and creative activity to reach their public in ways as novel as the virus that forced them into it.” Fallows lists novel ways libraries are filling the gaps in this pandemic response: helping to feed the hungry, using makerspaces to print three-D personal protective equipment, offering their spaces to those experiencing homelessness, providing Wi-Fi and hotspot access, and, as always, serving as a hub of information about community resources. According to a recent Public Library Association survey, 98 percent of libraries reported continuing or expanding services or adding additional services such as online renewal policies, online services for ebooks and media, and virtual programming.⁷ Respondents to this survey anticipated that patrons' most urgent needs in the next six months will include access to physical materials, access to computers and internet, and support with applications for government services and job searches.

Libraries are well poised to serve as arbiters of information for the community. The Public Library Association—a division of the ALA—survey found that 17 percent of respondents were providing resources related to COVID-19. Many libraries have developed websites that point visitors to local COVID-19 resources, provide guides to apply for unemployment insurance, and compile “links you can trust” for relevant resources.

Perpetual need: digital equity

Digital equity was a major existing issue exposed during this pandemic; the push to remote learning and work for most Americans left those with no home internet or computers at a disadvantage. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance provides background information on this issue and compiles resources for the current crisis.⁸

Libraries have led on issues of digital equity by providing free use of internet and computer labs to those who need it. CityLab details the negative implications of library closures on the digital divide, focusing on the “homework gap” for students without home internet access.⁹ The homework gap also highlights the ways library services typically help close inequities across race and class. Library staff are pushing for ways to continue bridging the digital divide; the ALA recommended that libraries leave their Wi-Fi on so patrons can access internet from the parking lots.¹⁰ The ALA also requested guidance from the Federal Communications Commission to extend Wi-Fi using bookmobiles. Similarly, the Public Library Association created the Digital Lead project, partnering with Microsoft to target digital access in rural areas.

Digital access is a fundamental service from libraries, and they remain committed to improving digital equity through this crisis and beyond. A recent statement from the ALA concluded, “We will continue to advocate for digital inclusion for all today and in the future.”¹¹

Important partnerships

Libraries are reigniting and further developing existing partnerships with community workforce partners. Libraries acknowledge their embeddedness in the community as a strength, noting that job seekers come in for a range of services and that they can serve as a hub of information for their own services and referrals to related resources. The 2018 Heldrich Center survey found that most libraries already partner with a wide range of organizations to provide career services, including nonprofits, colleges, One-Stop Career Centers, literacy organizations, local schools, and workforce development boards. Libraries are sensitive to the fact that they may be seen as funding competitors from their workforce peers, and often stress that they seek to complement and not compete for such opportunities. Nonetheless, library staff acknowledge that they could fill a gap in the capacity of the workforce system in addressing this historic period of unemployment. In the United States, there are approximately 2,400 American Job Centers, or One-Stop Career Centers, and nearly 17,000 public library branches. Libraries could be a valuable partner to workforce development providers seeking to expand their reach and capacity.

In a time when state and local budgets may see massive shortfalls, such partnerships will be mutually beneficial for myriad reasons. The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities projects significant budget shortfalls for state and local governments in the near future, estimating a cumulative fallout of \$615 billion through the 2022 state fiscal year for state governments alone.¹² Based on responses to the Public Library Association survey, at least half of the respondents expected decreases in planned hiring, professional development, print collection, and programming as a response to financial challenges associated with the crisis.¹³ These historic fiscal challenges could necessitate the partnerships that have proven to be successful in the past.

In New Jersey, a partnership was formed at the New Jersey Department of Labor and Workforce Development that sought to train library staff and, where possible, designate one staff member as the workforce development provider within a local library. That helps address a main concern of library staff: there are some career services they do not have the expertise to provide, and they also may not have the time, given their other job responsibilities to provide the necessary individualized services. This partnership can serve as a model for preparing sustainable services after the pandemic to be better prepared for economic crises.

In 2018, WIOA services provided by Southern Nevada Workforce Connections were co-located at 10 public libraries in the region. Such a partnership leverages the strengths of both systems to meet a wide range of needs of job seekers and breaks down silos and duplicative services.

Libraries and the future of work

Like many others during this time, library staff are discussing what this crisis means for the state of the workforce when we return to our “new normal.” Members of the Libraries Work group discussed what this crisis could mean for the future of work and how they will have to adapt some of their services and responses to the unique aspects of the pandemic. One concern: with the reliance on telework for those fortunate enough to work from home, the post-pandemic workforce may have a naturally higher rate of flexibility in working from home. This could cause a larger demand for library meeting space, the need for no-cost/low-cost virtual meeting tools and training, greater use of the internet, and demand for access to equipment such as computers and printers.

In addition, the Libraries Work members were thinking about how demand occupations in health care may affect their career services. They pointed to Nevada as a model worth expanding, where libraries have implemented a virtual reality health care training model for the work environment such as kidney dialysis clinics.¹⁴ In addition, through its Nevada Career Explorer, Nevada offers a secure web-based platform through which users complete self-assessments, research education and occupation information, and receive personalized pathway recommendations.

Conclusion

Libraries should be seen as a valuable resource to government agencies, educational institutions, business membership organizations, and workforce development providers as all strive to support the economic recovery. Libraries can provide essential digital services to job seekers and those needing to upskill as they transition to new occupations. Libraries can use their public spaces for existing and aspiring small business owners, and serve as a critical hub for information for all community members. However, libraries are not without their own challenges in this crisis, as they too have suffered from layoffs and furloughs as the result of stressed state and local government budgets.¹⁵ Even before the economic downturn, library staff reported that a lack of funding affects their programming and staff time needed to meet the demand for career services. In the 2018 Heldrich Center survey, 92 percent of respondents noted that more funding would better support library career services.

It is likely we will enter a period of high demand for workforce services following the public health and economic crisis we are experiencing. If that is the case, the current place-based public workforce system

will be overwhelmed with a huge demand for services across the country. Through established partnerships and existing knowledge and resources, libraries will continue to be an important actor and partner as the country assesses and begins to address the damage COVID-19 has caused the labor market. The extent of their impact will depend on policymakers and program leaders finding ways to integrate the library system as an important delivery and service institution for job seekers and learners in an increasingly changing workforce development environment.

Stephanie Holcomb is a research associate at the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University.

¹ [“Libraries Have Value to Neighborhoods;”](#) [“Patrons Find That Public Libraries Improve Quality of Life and Are a Good Use of Tax Revenue;”](#) and [“Public Libraries Support Personal Productivity and Cultural Engagement.”](#)

American Library Association.

² Holcomb, Stephanie, Amy Dunford, and Fopefoluwa Idowu. (2019). [Public Libraries: A Community’s Connection for Career Services](#). New Brunswick, NJ: John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University.

³ [“Libraries and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.”](#) (2014). U.S. Department of Education.

⁴ Gutsche, Beth. (2012). [“Library Partnerships with Workforce Agencies.”](#) WebJunction; [“Workforce Development.”](#) American Library Association.

⁵ Dankowski, Terra. (2018). [“Careers over Jobs.”](#) American Libraries.

⁶ Fallows, Deborah. (2020). [“Public Libraries’ Novel Response to a Novel Virus.”](#) *The Atlantic*.

⁷ [“Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19: Survey of Response & Activities.”](#) (2020). American Library Association.

⁸ [“Awareness.”](#) (2020). National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

⁹ Poon, Linda. (2020). [“Coronavirus Exposes How Bad America’s Homework Gap Really Is.”](#) CityLab.

¹⁰ [“American Library Association Recommends Libraries Leave WiFi Open during Closures while Continuing to Follow Any Applicable Local, State and Federal Health and Safety Guidelines.”](#) (2020). American Library Association.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² McNichol, Elizabeth and Michael Leachman. (2020). [“States Continue to Face Large Shortfalls due to COVID-19 Effects.”](#) Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

¹³ [“Public Libraries Respond to COVID-19: Survey of Response & Activities.”](#) (2020). American Library Association.

¹⁴ Ennis, Matt. (2019). [“Nevada State Library Enters New Phase of Virtual Reality Project.”](#) *Library Journal*.

¹⁵ [“Business, Government, Education Leaders Call for Emergency Funding for Libraries Impacted by COVID-19.”](#) (2020). American Library Association.