

Covid-19 crisis challenges libraries, nets positive feedback

By Jill Fuller

When the Hartland Public Library began offering curbside pickup of materials this spring, community members sewed masks for the staff to keep them safe. The gesture made Library Director Laura Gest realize how beloved the library is in the Hartland community. "The community support has been wonderful. It was fantastic to hear how grateful patrons were when we opened back up."

Recently, I checked in with a few of the library directors in Waukesha County to find out how public libraries have handled the changing circumstances during the pandemic. While the libraries closed during March and April, all library buildings in Waukesha County are now open in some capacity to the public as of this printing.

If you visit your library today, you'll notice a few differences, since each library is taking precautions for the health and safety of patrons and staff. Most encourage or require mask use (staff are required to wear masks), library materials are quarantined before being reshelved, and some libraries are still offering curbside pickup of holds for anyone not comfortable with coming into the building.

"Our curbside pickup service has been really fantastic during this time," said Stephanie Ramirez, director of the Delafield Public Library. "It was in our plans

to implement this down the road but COVID rapidly accelerated our launching of this service. Patrons have responded incredibly positively and I am hopeful we will be able to continue curbside throughout the COVID crisis."

Even with the changes you may see at the library on your next visit, you'll still find quality help from library staff.

"Our staff is working hard to provide great service," said Bruce Gay, director of the Waukesha Public Library. "You can come in and we'll help find books, DVDs, and CDs for you."

"The look of our building and services may be modified," said Brittany Larson, director of the Muskego Public Library, "but the staff are ready and eager to help you!"

When challenges due to the pandemic arose, librarians and library staff worked to find creative solutions to continue to serve their communities. For example, the Waukesha Public Library created a "Library Care Package" for kids ages birth-12, where librarians pull books for kids based on the books they already love. Parents or guardians can fill out the form on the library's website; so far, the program has been "very popular," according to Gay. Many libraries continue to offer



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virtual programs too.

"Because we had to think differently about how we offered services," said Larson, "we ran our first virtual program that was streamed to a local retirement community's in-residence cable channel!"

As our reality continues to shift and uncertainties lie ahead, it's comforting to know the library and library staff are available to help with whatever you may need. Whether in the building or online, the library offers access to quality information, extensive collections of entertainment and research materials, and services ranging from streaming movies and TV shows on the free Hoopla app, to job resources and early literacy programs. "Libraries are even more necessary in economic hardships, and we are here to help," Gest said. For example, the Hartland Public Library will be offering programs in August for job seekers on resume writing and getting professional headshots.

"During times of crisis, nothing is more needed in society than the library," Ramirez said. "The library is a beacon of hope, positivity, knowledge, and community. Not even a global pandemic can change that."

Visit your local library or check their website for more information on what your library can offer you!

(Jill Fuller is the coordinator of marketing and communications for the Bridges Library System.)