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Manitoba Public Libraries Response to the Early Stages of COVID-19

La réaction des bibliothèques publiques du Manitoba au début de la COVID-19

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Article abstract

Like many libraries across Canada, Manitoba public libraries have grappled with the challenges that COVID-19 has presented. Libraries have struggled to remain operational and offer a high level of service to patrons within the constraint of public health orders, all the while ensuring the safety and employment of their staff. Within the ever-changing environment of COVID-19, the Manitoba Library Association recognized the need to gather information from the library community in order to better position themselves to lend support and in an attempt to bridge information gaps. This article describes a study conducted by the Manitoba Library Association whereby fifty-five Manitoba public libraries were surveyed to identify how they were responding to COVID-19 and what their needs might be. The survey questions were divided into 6 sections (facilities, services, communications, staffing, connecting, wrap-up) and the results provide information and insight into how the Manitoba library community has dealt with the pandemic. More importantly, the results can serve to guide other libraries in decision-making and preparation for a pandemic.

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Manitoba Public Libraries response to the early stages of COVID-19

La réaction des bibliothèques publiques du Manitoba au début de la COVID-19

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Abstract / Résumé

Like many libraries across Canada, Manitoba public libraries have grappled with the challenges that COVID-19 has presented. Libraries have struggled to remain operational and offer a high level of service to patrons within the constraint of public health orders, all the while ensuring the safety and employment of their staff. Within the ever-changing environment of COVID-19, the Manitoba Library Association recognized the need to gather information from the library community to better position themselves to lend support and in an attempt to bridge information gaps. This article describes a study conducted by the Manitoba Library Association whereby 55 Manitoba public libraries were surveyed to identify how they were responding to COVID-19 and what their needs might be. The survey questions were divided into six sections (facilities, services, communications, staffing, connecting, and wrap-up) and the results provide information and insight into how the Manitoba library community has dealt with the pandemic. More importantly, the results can serve to guide other libraries in decision-making and preparation for a pandemic.

Comme plusieurs bibliothèques au Canada, les bibliothèques publiques du Manitoba ont dû faire face aux défis présentés par la COVID-19. Les bibliothèques ont tenté de demeurer opérationnelles et d'offrir un niveau élevé de service aux usagers en respectant les contraintes des ordonnances de santé publique tout en assurant la sécurité et les emplois de leur personnel. Compte tenu de la constante évolution de la situation de la COVID-19, la Manitoba Library Association a reconnu le besoin de recueillir de l'information pour la communauté des bibliothèques afin qu'elles puissent

mieux se positionner pour offrir du soutien et afin de tenter de combler le manque d'information. Cet article décrit une étude menée par la Manitoba Library Association par laquelle 55 bibliothèques publiques du Manitoba ont été sondées afin d'identifier comment elles ont réagi à la COVID-19 et de connaître leurs besoins. Le sondage comportait six sections (installations, services, communications, personnel, relations, sommaire) et les résultats fournissent des informations et un aperçu sur la façon dont la communauté des bibliothèques du Manitoba a réagi à la pandémie. Plus important encore, les résultats peuvent guider les autres bibliothèques dans la prise de décision et la préparation face à une pandémie.

Keywords / Mots-clés

COVID-19, pandemic, pandemic response, libraries, public libraries, Manitoba

COVID-19, pandémie, réponse à la pandémie, bibliothèques, bibliothèques publiques, Manitoba

Public libraries in Manitoba faced the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic like many other businesses and service providers across Manitoba and Canada—struggling to operate within the constraints of public health orders, while attempting to ensure the safety and employment of their employees. This is likely true of public libraries across Canada and internationally. The purpose of this article is to consider some of the activities and concerns that arose in Manitoba, with particular emphasis on the survey of public libraries' canvassing needs and issues identified in the initial stages of the pandemic response.

Libraries in Manitoba

There are 54 public library systems in Manitoba funded by the Province. All but one of these are regulated under *The Public Libraries Act*, and are governed by a Board of Trustees, composed of municipal councillors and citizen representatives. These public libraries are either regional libraries comprising more than one municipality or municipal libraries serving only one municipality. Three of these libraries operate on First Nation Indian Reserves, associated with University College of the North. The largest public library, the Winnipeg Public Library, regulated under *The City of Winnipeg Act*, is governed by City Council, with the assistance of an advisory Board. The Public Library Services Board (PLSB) reports to the Minister of Sport, Culture and Heritage and is the provincial government agency responsible for ensuring that public libraries are following relevant laws and standards and “to foster and strengthen a network of community-based public library services in Manitoba” (Public Library Services Branch, n.d.). The Manitoba Library Association (MLA) works closely with many public libraries across Manitoba. MLA has been in existence since 1936; however, in 2018 it amalgamated with Manitoba Library Trustees Association and the Manitoba Association of Library Technicians (Stefanko, 2020, p. 2). The MLA now represents, serves, and collaborates with professional librarians, library staff, library technicians and library trustees in various library sectors, including public, academic, and special libraries.

Unfolding of a pandemic in Manitoba

The first COVID-19 case in Canada was reported on January 25, 2020 (Canadian Healthcare Network, 2020). In late February and early March there were increasing news reports and Federal Government announcements about the virus, restrictions on travel, and increased planning for widespread testing (Canadian Healthcare Network, 2020). COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11 (Canadian Healthcare Network, 2020). Things unfolded quickly in Manitoba, just as they did across Canada, and as cases rose in the first wave of the pandemic, organizations, businesses, and Government attempted to move quickly and make the decisions necessary to slow or prevent spread and instate public health measures. Many library events across Canada were cancelled, including the National Forum of the Canadian Federation of Library Associations and the Manitoba Libraries Conference, a joint event scheduled for April 6 to 8, 2020 in Winnipeg (Librarianship.ca, 2020).

On March 18, PLSB issued a communication encouraging libraries to monitor the quickly evolving situation closely and coordinate local response options with municipal authorities and public health offices (personal communication, March 18, 2020). In its discussions with member libraries, MLA understood there was confusion and uncertainty as to whether libraries should remain open to the public. An informal survey was conducted and, in conjunction with information obtained from PLSB, MLA was able to determine that as of March 19, 50 of 54 Manitoba public library systems had, or were preparing to, shut their doors to the public. Given this uncertainty, MLA issued a notice recommending that all public libraries close to the public (Manitoba Library Association, n.d.).

Manitoba declared a province-wide State of Emergency under The Emergency Measures Act on March 20 (Manitoba Government, March 20, 2020). In light of this, MLA quickly distributed a special edition of MLA News devoted entirely to COVID-19 issues including important resources and a list of public libraries that remained open or had closed (Manitoba Library Association, March 20, 2020). The PLSB also distributed a special edition newsletter article on developing library-specific response plans to virus-related health concerns and service delivery (Public Library Services Branch, n.d.).

On March 30, the Province issued an Order under The Public Health Act, restricting the size of public gatherings and requiring the closure to the public of any businesses not deemed essential and exempted from the order (Manitoba Government, March 30, 2020). As the Order did not expressly refer to public libraries, confusion again arose within the library community as to its applicability. Clarification was obtained from the Province's pandemic inquiry portal and, indeed, public libraries were not exempt and were required to close their doors to the public. However, the order did not prevent public libraries from operating, including curbside pickup, access to online resources, and reference and information services via telephone, internet, and email (Manitoba Government, n.d.). Many public libraries did continue to operate and provide valuable

services to patrons: managing and providing access to online and web resources; responding to phone and internet inquiries; updating social media and websites; performing acquisition and cataloging functions; and cleaning, rearranging and organizing spaces.

Eventually, on April 29, the Province announced a gradual reopening plan to begin May 4, as part of Restoring Services. Specific direction was provided to public libraries as follows:

Libraries may reopen if the organization can maintain an occupancy level to allow staff and customers to maintain a physical distance of at least two metres, except for brief exchanges. All organizations will be required to limit occupancy to 50 per cent of normal business levels or one person per 10 square metres, whichever is lower. (Manitoba Government, April 29, 2020)

During this time, public libraries began having discussions among themselves. MLA organized calls with several libraries in an effort to help library staff connect, discuss their needs and ask questions. One of the biggest concerns MLA heard from library administrators and public library staff was regarding human resources. Library administrators and Library Boards were addressing issues such as layoffs, Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy and Canada Emergency Business Account - Interest Free Loan. The MLA promoted a free webinar by Volunteer Manitoba, presented on April 15, on employment matters.

Designing the survey

The MLA and PLSB had ongoing communications during the early days of the pandemic in Manitoba. Of particular importance were their discussions on the status of public library operations across Manitoba and to clarify how the public health order applies to library operation. The PLSB provided answers and research on technical information, such as sanitizing paper library materials, which was of particular interest to public libraries. Both organizations recognized that more information from public libraries would help them better understand the current and evolving situation. In early April, PLSB reached out to MLA about the possibility of collaborating to gather information from public libraries. The PLSB was particularly interested in potential feedback to help support local planning and fill information gaps.

Early survey design considered the planning and ultimate roll out of the Public Library Association (PLA) survey, augmented by library surveys done in Ontario, by the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries, and in Alberta, by the Library Association of Alberta. In the case of PLA, a survey was conducted of the public library community very early in the pandemic, between March 24 and April 1, 2020. The focus of the survey was “to understand the immediate impacts the crisis is having on their operations, staffing, programs and services” (American Library Association, March 2020, para 1). Over 2,500 unique library systems responded to the survey, representing a nearly 30% response rate (American Library Association, March 2020). Highlights of

the survey included facility closures, innovative approaches to providing services, and continued and expanded services.

Survey design also took into consideration best practices, including favoring an approach to request participants to self-identify after completion of the survey, rather than before commencement. This encouraged both initial participation and later self-identification after investing in the process. Also taken into account was the interplay, particularly for small libraries, between the library administrator, Board Chair, and the Board itself. This related to who, procedurally, might complete the survey, but also substantive questions in respect of communications. Questions were designed, and in some cases broadened, to allow for different scenarios.

With the aforementioned eye to design, the focus of the Manitoba survey was how public libraries were responding to COVID-19. The survey was divided into six sections: Facilities, Services, Communications, Staffing, Connecting, and a Wrap Up for a total of 28 questions. It was important to the authors to create a survey that included both multiple choice and open-ended questions. Multiple choice answers resulted in data that could be easily analyzed, but open-ended textual questions allowed libraries to express themselves more fully. In the end, the survey consisted of 24 multiple choice questions and four open-ended textual questions. The four open-ended textual questions were purposefully added to the end of the survey to encourage participation and survey completion. The full survey can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/y2h7uh3o>.

The authors distributed the survey by a direct email to members and also through the MLA website and social media platforms. The survey opened on May 11 and closed May 21, 2020, providing a ten day window to complete. The results of the survey were announced to the Manitoba library community on June 2, 2020. A total of 44 public libraries (81%) participated in the survey.

Results of Survey

Survey results found that prior to May 4, 91% of libraries were closed to the public, but still operating in some capacity. After May 4, and based upon Phase I COVID-19 Provincial requirements, 38% remained open, 60% closed to the public but operating, and 1 public library remained closed. Tables 1 and 2 disclose significant changes in participants' answers with respect to service offerings before and after May 4. Public libraries utilizing all staff jumped from 14% to 41% after May 4.

Table 1*Prior to May 4th, how was your library continuing to offer services?*

Providing some level of services, all staff	14%
Providing some level of services, essential staff	48%
Providing digital services / not requiring staff	16%
All services suspended	23%

Table 2*On or after May 4th, how is your library continuing to offer services?*

Providing some level of services, all staff	41%
Providing some level of services, essential staff	50%
Providing digital services / not requiring staff	2%
All services suspended	7%

Participants were asked how their services have changed in response to COVID-19. Table 3 discloses that many public libraries expanded their service offering for online checkout (33%) and online renewals (56%). Combining expanded service with 'same level of service' shows that the majority of libraries were successfully able to provide their patrons access to resources. A new service of curbside pickup was being offered by 70% of public libraries.

Table 3*Please check any of the following services that have changed in response to COVID-19*

	<i>Online Checkout Services</i>	<i>Online Renewal Policies</i>	<i>Virtual Programming</i>	<i>Online / Virtual Reference</i>	<i>Phone Reference</i>	<i>Item Delivery</i>	<i>Curbside Pickup</i>
<i>Expanded Services</i>	33%	56%	34%	28%	28%	26%	70%
<i>Same Level of Services</i>	35%	28%	12%	43%	47%	5%	0%
<i>Decreased Level of Services</i>	13%	5%	12%	5%	19%	24%	3%
<i>Not Applicable</i>	20%	12%	41%	25%	7%	45%	28%

Interestingly, 65% of participants indicated that they did not have a business continuity plan or policy that addressed employees working remotely or from home. A further

question that could be posed is whether these libraries have a BCP at all, or whether it simply didn't address staff working remotely or from home.

Public libraries reported regular internal communications, with 66% of library administrators and their Board communicating, on average, at least once per week or more than monthly, and 34% communicating only once a month or less. In respect of communications with other library systems, 67% communicated weekly or at least more than monthly, with 33% monthly or less.

The survey identified that public libraries most needed support in the areas of human resources (32%), communications (22%), technology (15%) and finance (15%). Table 4 provides the full list of supports.

Table 4

What aspect(s) of library operations would you want the most support with during the pandemic?

Human Resources (including Workplace Health & Safety)	32%
Collection Development	3%
Facility	14%
Finance	15%
Communications	22%
Technology	15%

The open-ended questions in the survey provided the opportunity for participants to put issues and challenges into their own words. These textual comments provide an interesting snapshot of the struggles libraries faced, but more importantly they speak to the resiliency of libraries and they offer inspiration during a challenging pandemic. A sample of answers are provided in Tables 5, 6, 7.

Table 5

How is the library supporting your community's COVID-19 response?

We are providing digital resources to all community members free of charge, assisting with signing up and accessing these, and we are planning to provide physical library materials through a curbside pickup approach soon (still ironing out the details and waiting for approvals). We have been sharing resources and activity ideas through social media channels as well.
Encouraging residents to stay home as much as possible while trying virtual connections. Increasing access to electronic books has been appreciated for individuals and families.
Sharing Social media of Health authority and City posts to our large group of Facebook and Instagram followers. Providing a WiFi hot spot in parking lot

Table 6

What are the greatest challenges you are facing as your library responds to COVID-19?

Staying on top of the continual changes and managing communication to the Board, staff and patrons.
Not having information on how long the virus lasts on library material. Not having access to PPE
We have had to re-invent ourselves, and figure out how to serve our communities with the doors shut to the public. With very little direction, we have basically been "going it alone." Also, preparing and buying supplies to keep ourselves and patrons safe for when we do reopen to the public is getting quite costly.

Table 7

What is your greatest success story during this pandemic that might inspire other libraries?

We are very proud to say that we implemented Curbside pick-up service with all protocols 7 safety measures in place prior to May 4th. The community has shown great thanks and support.
Story time programming via Zoom. Providing guidance to other libraries, as we tended to be the first to have a Pandemic plan, track down PPE, start Curbside services as a larger library.
Maintaining staff morale (for the most part) and keeping everyone busy and working. We also did a good job promoting ourselves virtually.

Conclusion

It is crucial that the library community shares pertinent and current information and the results of this survey are no exception. It is important to share information so that libraries in Manitoba and across Canada can understand what actions were taken during 2020 and in relation to COVID-19. This evidence-based approach allows for good decision making now and in the future. The survey results, in a variety of formats, were shared widely via the MLA website, social media, as well as via member emails. The hope is that this publication will also be an avenue for further sharing. Certainly, this pandemic is not yet behind us and it is predicted that COVID-19 will continue well into 2021 despite the availability of vaccines. As of November 12, Manitoba has returned to Code Red in the COVID-19 response status and has extended its state of emergency status for the seventh time since March 2020. The second wave seems to have hit Manitoba earlier than other provinces. Thankfully, we have learned from the first wave and announcements in this second wave have addressed Manitoba libraries and have more clearly stated when a closure to the public is required. Libraries can, and do, continue to operate, particularly curbside service, if employees adhere to public safety guidelines including use of personal protective equipment and practicing social distancing. Other provinces are now entering their second wave of the pandemic. Sharing of information will be crucial during these second waves and throughout 2021.

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