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## **Social Isolation Interventions for Older, Underrepresented and Vulnerable Americans: A Descriptive Study of Public Library Outreach Services During the COVID Pandemic**

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Social Isolation Interventions for Older, Underrepresented and Vulnerable Americans:  
A Descriptive Study of Public Library Outreach Services During the COVID Pandemic

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the Department of Leadership Education  
College of Education  
of Winona State University

by

Sally Mathews Inglett

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for the Degree of  
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## Abstract

The United States entered a state of lockdown in March 2020 in order to slow the spread of the COVID-19 Novel Coronavirus. With this lockdown came mandatory social isolation, which was especially impactful for older, underrepresented and vulnerable Americans. Public libraries acted as community information centers and took on many unexpected roles to benefit the common good. This study identified these interventions through research and survey, and their relationship to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). This study also brought to light collaborative relationships between agencies, the redeployment of library staff and resources to meet these needs, the impact of the digital disparity, and the future of maintaining the interventions and services to continue to support the older, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations in the United States.

*Keywords:* COVID-19, Coronavirus, public library, outreach, underrepresented, pandemic, social isolation, loneliness, elderly

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In March 2020, the United States entered a state of lockdown to slow the spread of the 2019 Novel Coronavirus. This included a nationwide closure of 95% of public libraries and a 98% suspension of programs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. (Wang & Lund, 2020). This chapter describes the series of events leading to the shutdown and the isolation of public library patrons and personnel. It documents the purpose of the study and describes how data was gathered and analyzed. Featherstone, Lyon, and Ruffin (2008) interviewed library professionals with direct disaster response experience following Hurricane Katrina and found that these professionals served in critical support roles for both the community and government partners. “Future plans to publish the stories will give librarians a forum to share their disaster response experiences and provide them with the opportunity to learn from their colleagues” (Featherstone et al., p. 344).

Throughout the pandemic, public libraries have been a trusted source of information much like they were during Hurricane Katrina, but on a larger scale. The new normal for public libraries included redeploying staff in roles such as running day centers for the homeless, offering emergency meals for patrons, producing personal protective equipment with 3D printers, contact tracing, and many more public health and emergency operation roles. The ingenuity and ability of outreach staff to pivot in their roles to provide much needed public services and to create and implement interventions for older, underrepresented, and vulnerable Americans was honorable and worthy of documentation for future reference and research.

### **Problem Statement**

The Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a press release on January 30, 2020, which confirmed that the United States had its first instance of person to person spread of the new 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) (2020). As of March 22, 2021, the CDC

COVID Data Tracker revealed that in the United States alone there had been 29,652,483 total cases of the virus, 539,517 deaths because of it, and 127 million vaccines administered (2021). This virus, also known as COVID-19, has changed almost every aspect of American life.

When former President Trump issued national guidelines to slow the spread of COVID-19 on March 16, 2020, it included such measures as curtailing visits to nursing homes, closing schools, avoiding bars and restaurants, and stopping unnecessary travel (Rogers & Cochrane, 2020). Concurrently, individual states issued lock-down orders requiring social distancing, closure of non-essential businesses, and required those who could work at home to do so (Kates et al., 2020). Individual states created their own mandates, and the wearing of facial coverings or masks became a highly controversial subject. (Lyu & Wehby, 2020). Ultimately all states required facial coverings.

During this time, most public libraries in the U.S. were completely shut down. Hennepin County, Minnesota administrator, David J. Hough said that the county was trying to innovate in difficult circumstances to protect workers and fulfill fiduciary obligations, adding: “We’re building the plane as we’re flying it” (Moynihan, p. 3). This was the sentiment for many public library leaders. With doors closed, and patrons socially isolated, library outreach was more important than ever, and those with boots on the ground were asked to take a hands-off approach in their hands on area. Librarians were concerned that they would be impacted by a reduction in city or county governmental services, knowing that thousands of librarians have already been furloughed or laid off (Vinopal, 2020). While library staff were aware that post-pandemic library budgets and services were uncertain, they didn’t let this stand in the way of providing critical services for the public.



This study informed the reader of interventions created or implemented by public libraries throughout the United States, with specific focus on library outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in areas where social isolation was mandated. With citizens locked down to their homes, elderly sequestered in the rooms of their nursing homes, and children of the nation learning from home, there were many disparities. The places that the elderly gathered pre-pandemic such as memory cafes, and senior centers were no longer open and those aging in place were deeply and immediately affected by the isolation (Delpo et al., 2021). Whether patrons were trying to learn from home without the Internet, or homeless were on the streets without masks, outreach leadership and staff found ways to keep barriers up while they still offered much needed services from their closed-door libraries.

Humans are social beings. Little is known of the impact of social isolation and extended lock down, which made it very important that its effect on individuals and groups were understood. Given the lack of understanding, it is important to research how the actions of outreach professionals made a difference in the socially isolated lives of many Americans, especially those that were underrepresented including those with disabilities, elderly, homeless and low income populations.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to document the actions of outreach leadership and professionals during a global pandemic. While many of the workarounds, innovations and interventions created by public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic may become standard operating procedures, all were worthy of recalling and documenting. As we reached the time when libraries re-opened their doors and the population gathered again for programs or to bring home a book, we should not lose sight of pandemic innovation. As we

documented and investigated the interventions taken during times of social isolation, which included the mishaps, mistakes, and successes, leadership could use this information for the development and implementation of programs that continued to serve those who live in a long term state of isolation. These practices may be suitable for use during future restricted times such as natural disasters, times of war, civil unrest, or future pandemics.

The ingenuity and ability of outreach personnel that resurfaced strategically and provided interventions to the elderly, underrepresented and vulnerable may otherwise not have been captured. While medical research captures bodily aspects of a pandemic we should also look back at the hard-earned lessons from past pandemics for guidance on outdoor schooling, mask wearing and powder rooms (Rotondi, 2020). Even though many of those lessons were still relevant, they did not take into account the technological advances, lifestyle differences, attitudes and choices of the 21<sup>st</sup> century American.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: Public library staff were deployed as disaster service workers (DSWs) to aid in COVID-19 response efforts. What critical roles did they fill?

RQ2: Public library assets were used to the fill basic human needs of patrons. How were physical assets reallocated to serve communities?

RQ3: What interventions were created or employed to assist the older, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations while in social isolation?

RQ4: Which social isolation interventions have potential to become standard practices post-pandemic?

## **Limitations/Delimitations**

This research was limited to a national perspective of U.S. public library activities during the March 2020 shutdown through the Spring 2021 progressive reopening of public libraries. Publication of scholarly writing on the subject of social isolation interventions by public library staff was limited due to ongoing pandemic recovery efforts. It should be noted that there was limited sampling of the elderly who were living within the general public in their own homes or with family. There would be survey questions regarding this population, but due to privacy and the COVID-19 pandemic this senior population was not addressed at length in this study.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Aging in place:* This is a term used to describe those who choose to grow old in their own homes for as long as they were able. They may have utilized home care, meal or medical services depending on their needs. This would also be called home bound.

*COVID-19:* A name for a new disease and an abbreviation for coronavirus disease 2019.

Defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, “a mild to severe respiratory illness that is caused by a coronavirus (*Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2* of the genus *Betacoronavirus*), is transmitted chiefly by contact with infectious material (such as respiratory droplets) or with objects or surfaces contaminated by the causative virus, and is characterized especially by fever, cough, and shortness of breath and may progress to pneumonia and respiratory failure” (2020).

*COVID-19 pandemic:* Also known as the coronavirus pandemic, or in the study timeframe, the pandemic.

*Essential Activities:* As they pertained to the pandemic, include activities like grocery shopping, doctor appointments, filling prescriptions, and outdoor exercise with social distancing.

*Library Outreach:* Initiatives and programs geared to promote access to library services to users.

*Library Staff:* For the purpose of this study, only U.S. public library staff are mentioned. This did not include, school, law, medical, or private library staff.

*Lockdown:* As it pertained to the pandemic, is synonymous with, “shelter in place”, or “stay in place”, which allowed for only essential activities. During the pandemic it included physical closure of schools, entertainment venues, sit down restaurants, and other daily living that brought people together in groups. This also included the requirement to work from home if possible.

*Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):* Personal protective equipment, was defined by The United States Department of Labor, Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) as "equipment worn to minimize exposure to hazards that cause serious workplace injuries and illnesses" (2021). The extraordinary volume of PPE used during the pandemic created worldwide shortages which resulted in use of non-traditional makeshift PPE such as garbage bags, hand sewn face masks and 3D printed items which created face shields and adjustments for face masks.

*Social Distancing:* Defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as, “the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance (such as six feet or more) from other people or of avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection” (2020). Social distancing was also referred to as physical distancing.

*Social Isolation:* “The voluntary or involuntary absence of having contact with others” (Pam, 2013). During the pandemic, social isolation was mandated for individuals, communities, and businesses worldwide in response to slowing the spread of the virus. The term social isolation used in this research speaks to the widespread and long-term isolation specific to the pandemic

which included, “the absence of social interactions, contacts, and relationships with family and friends, with neighbors on an individual level, and with “society at large” on a broader level” (Berg et al., p 243).

### **Summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought immediate and long-term social isolation to people throughout the U.S. and much of the world. The purpose of this study was to research and document the actions of outreach leadership and professionals during a global pandemic and how their actions impacted older, underrepresented, and vulnerable community members. It was important to research and document the immediate and thoughtful actions taken by library staff to lessen the effects of social isolation of their community members. This research could be used to strengthen current library services and to share creative solutions with the library community. When outreach personnel would collaborate and share ideas, they could positively impact the lives of the elderly, underrepresented and vulnerable population. In the next chapter we reviewed the literature related to this study and connected them to the study’s research questions.

## **Review of the Literature**

This chapter contained a literature review of scholarly research and pertinent publications as they related to social isolation and loneliness of the most vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Interventions were taken by public library outreach leadership and staff to relieve this community during a time of mandated isolation. This literature review examined social isolation and took into account not only public library and medical professionals, but individuals, communities and the national perspective in its findings. To better understand social isolation, its impact, and interventions created during the COVID-19 pandemic, this literature review acted as a framework and guided the reader through history related to this case study and the research questions herein. This study was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery efforts, which limited the availability of published research.

### **Historical Perspective**

The Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA) reported that 43% of seniors felt lonely on a regular basis and that there is a 45% increased risk of mortality in seniors who reported feeling lonely. Connectedness through social support of family, friends and community could reduce the risk of mortality, and speed the recovery of those that are ill. Loneliness itself was said to be just as dangerous to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and it was estimated that \$6.7 billion in federal spending was attributable annually to social isolation of older adults (2019). Social isolation has long been an issue in the lives of the elderly population. Nicholson defined social isolation as, “A state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has minimal number of social contacts and they are deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships” (Nicholson, 2009, p. 1346).

While social isolation and loneliness are distinctly different, for the purpose of this research we referred to social isolation as encompassing both terms with social isolation being the cause and loneliness being an effect. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened the impact on Americans through mandated social isolation, most of which was immediate, and nondiscriminatory. Social isolation was dictated and while all were expected to comply, many of the elderly, underrepresented and vulnerable who were already socially isolated were severely impacted. On October 14, 2020, the National Institute for Health Care Management (NIHCM) hosted a webinar titled, “The Health Impact of Loneliness: Emerging Evidence and Interventions”. They explained that “The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated these challenges, with worsening social isolation and loneliness among those who live alone or are frail and even declines in the well-being of older adults with previously active or healthy social lives” (2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The global pandemic brought clarity to the most basic needs of society. The theoretical framework of this research was in part based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and his definitions of basic human needs (Maslow, 1943). The first basic needs were physiological, consisting of food, shelter, and sleep. The literature showed how libraries became homeless shelters and provided meals and beds to the homeless. The second were safety, consisting of security, stability and order which included medical security or health. The literature revealed that library buildings and mobile libraries became coronavirus testing and immunization sites, telemedicine locations, information call centers, and contact tracing stations.

The third basic needs were social, such as the need for love, companionship, belonging and friendship. The literature showed that the first two basic needs needed to be met before social isolation could be addressed (Maslow, 1943). The research showed that physical and

mobile libraries created interventions by becoming providers of technology training, internet access and internet appliances, created letter writing and phone campaigns to the elderly, kitted books and created activities for pickup or drop off, created online content such as storytelling and live entertainment among other things. Prior to the global pandemic, library staff were already assisting the elderly, homeless, impoverished, incarcerated, secluded, other underrepresented people, and the general public. The pandemic not only made the underrepresented population more vulnerable, but some of the general population instantly fell into the underrepresented population as they lost their jobs, their homes, and hope for recovery. It is difficult to worry about higher-level needs when your physiological and safety needs need to be addressed (Geher, 2020).

The review brought to light decisions made by library leadership to redeploy not only personnel but buildings, vehicles, and physical assets for the greater good of their communities. Hitt, Arregle, and Holmes explained that most managers lack pandemic experience which makes it difficult to identify and maximize strategic decisions (2021). The review of literature supported Couris' theory that, "COVID-19 has underscored the importance of being vulnerable and showing authentic compassion for others in the workplace" (Couris, 2020, p. 250). Library staff throughout the country, stepped back from their daily work, and were redeployed to fill the basic needs of the population. Challenges, big or small, were opportunities to grow and learn, and the pandemic should remind us that we should always be willing to be kind as a person and a leader (Couris, 2020). This literature review reflected on the courage and kindness exhibited by library staff and leadership as they responded to the needs of the underrepresented. The research showed that once basic needs were being met, library staff created interventions to confront social isolation and brought some semblance of normalcy to their communities.



## **Closures and Reallocation**

The Public Library Association (PLA) conducted a survey of 2,545 public library directors or their designees from March 14 – April 1, 2020. The response rate was reported as 28% of US public library systems. Of the reporting libraries, 98% reported that their library was closed to the public (2020).

When there is crisis, libraries have been a source of comfort and offer resources and suggestions to their communities (Kuni, 2020). Libraries across America created, improvised, and deployed interventions to assist the older, underrepresented and vulnerable populations while in social isolation. Prior to the pandemic, many libraries housed an outreach department or person who focused on traditionally underserved populations. These included, “poor and homeless people, ethnically diverse people, older adults, adult new and non-readers, incarcerated people and ex-offenders, people with disabilities, GLBTQ populations, and rural and geographically isolated communities” (Petrov, pp. 2-3). Social isolation was mandated for public library staff alike and as COVID-19 related budget cuts were made, library leadership had to prioritize by what was most needed in their communities. While scenarios may differ between libraries, there was a need for, “nimble, thoughtful responses – and a hard look at priorities” (Peet, p.1).

At the Madison Public Library in Wisconsin, director Greg Mickells, along with all other city departments were directed to cut their budgets by 5%, which for the library was one million dollars, while also intending to eliminate revenue generating fines. The city departments all took on the challenge using a very intentional focus on equity. Mickells explained that, “The proposed budget....[prioritized] the neighborhood libraries that are serving the most underserved populations” (Peet, p. 2). Most budgets were set prior to the pandemic and throughout the

country, leadership responded moment-by-moment to deliver as many services as possible and dealt with budget repercussions later. The pandemic forced boards and directors to make hard calls about which employees were laid off and which were kept for frontline work when the libraries had closed their doors (Peet, 2021). With unknown budgets and certain cuts, cities not only prioritized who would be first to receive services, but also determined that services could only go so far without collaboration between agencies. Public library staff were deployed as disaster service workers (DSWs) to aid in COVID-19 response efforts and other physical library resources were distributed as needed within communities.

### **Physical Assets**

Because libraries have always been a source of information and education, the public counted on them for credible information amongst a plethora of mis-information and controversies. Within states, mandates such as face masks and social distancing differed between counties. In addition to dissemination of mandate information, questions about the coronavirus itself and pandemic related health information was of high demand. Libraries posted signs on their doors with information about the coronavirus and how to stop the spread. Other signs gave information about local food banks, resources for the homeless and unemployment information.

Many libraries provided printed forms for those who needed to apply for unemployment assistance. Miami-Dade County in Florida provided unemployment forms in English, Spanish or Creole and were available for pickup on tables outside of the library seven days a week. Community members could take the forms home, fill them out, and drop the completed forms in library drop boxes. The library would in turn gather these and securely send them overnight to Tallahassee for processing (Batchelor, 2020). Hillsborough County, also in Florida, did the same but offered drive-through service.

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), libraries wanted to provide key resources for their communities. The Indianapolis Public Library and St. Louis County Library set an example by providing drive-thru meals for children and the Cincinnati Public Library acted as a food bank (2020). Libraries throughout the country used their 3D printers to print personal protective equipment (PPE) such as door handle openers (2020). Columbia University librarians released their Guide and Design for Rapidly Manufacturing Face Shields with a 3D printer and household tools, which was followed by libraries worldwide to create face shields for front line workers (Price, 2020). Early in the pandemic there was a desperate need for PPE such as safety goggles, disposable gloves, surgical masks and N95 respirator masks. Many libraries utilized this same equipment when restoring century-old texts or mold-damaged paper and had inventory on hand. The items were in turn donated for the greater good (Inkleboger, 2020).

In June 2020, Reader's Digest reported that the executive director of the Toledo Lucas County Public Library, Jason Kuscma, inventoried any useful supplies that their twenty buildings had, to find that they had medical grade gloves, disinfectant wipes, and hand sanitizer. It made sense to put them towards to community use by donating it to the local emergency center. Kuscma also offered the use of their 200,000 square foot facility in downtown Toledo, and use of their fleet of cars. The Richland County Public Library System librarians knew that they had forty stand up hand sanitizer stations sitting in empty buildings and worked with the United Way to distribute them to homeless shelters (2020).

In Anchorage, Alaska the library was turned into the municipality's emergency operations center, primarily because it was a large municipal building that was closed and had an existing infrastructure to support their operations (Holmes, 2020). On March 13, 2020, a press

release by London N. Breed, Mayor of San Francisco, announced that the San Francisco Public Library and Recreation and Park Department would suspend regular activities and begin to use libraries and indoor recreation facilities as emergency care facilities for the children of front line workers and low-income families. The downtown Spokane Public Library was converted to a 140 bed homeless shelter to help house the overflow from existing shelters (Robinson, 2020). The shelter also included an outdoor space, handwashing stations, and several showers, one of which was portable. They also distributed meals (Shanks, 2020). Reader's Digest reported that the Cincinnati Public Library, like many others distributed meals for families whose children had normally received free or reduced price lunch at school (2020). Some in quarantine were housed in state-funded hotels and housing communities. The King County Library System (KCLS) was recipient of a grant that allowed them to loan out Wi-Fi hot spots. They were also able to offer not only computers to older adults but also a phone hotline for assistance. Rachel Beckman of the KCLS, had been sending care packages of books, crafts, and snacks to people in state funded hotels due to their lack of fixed addresses (R. Beckman, personal communication, March 31, 2021).

Another intervention to assist the homeless was in the parking lot of the Los Osos Library in California where San Luis Obispo County offered a program to help the homeless have safe, clean parking lots to camp overnight in their cars. They also offered restrooms, some of which had showers (Showalter, 2020). Also in California, Cathy Billings, South Pasadena Library Director, shared her concern about the need for access to restrooms, especially for the homeless, with the City Council and the community. The library staff worked with the Public Works and arranged installation of an ADA accessible port-a-potty and hand washing station to be installed in the library park the same week (Khubesrian, 2020).

Libraries across America were used as COVID-19 test sites. The Rancho Mirage Library was just one example. They performed drive through COVID-19 testing at no cost to its residents and surrounding communities (2021). In Washington, DC, Mayor Bowser announced the launch of a Test Yourself DC at-home testing program. The program includes onsite testing at one of the 16 libraries in the district, with the option to take the test with you and drop off their test sample at any of the library location's drop boxes (2021). In addition to COVID-19 testing, libraries were utilized to host vaccination sites. On March 9, 2021, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced a partnership with the Queens Public Library to host vaccinations with plans to open more sites (2021). In order to serve the hard to reach and underserved communities throughout Sussex County, they partnered with several agencies and used their bookmobile to administer COVID-19 vaccines. The Sussex County Library staff transported and setup the unit while the county paramedics administer the shots (McNaught, 2021).

### **Human Resources**

Library staff were also redeployed to other positions in support of COVID-19 recovery. Jana De Brauwere, a program manager for the San Francisco Public Library's business, science and technology department was redeployed as a COVID-19 contact tracer. She was one of the thousands of public employees that were deployed as disaster service workers (DSW) during a declared citywide emergency (Jagannathan, 2020). At the San Francisco Public Library, librarians were asked to staff homeless shelters, answered nonemergency calls for the city, distributed food and made wellness checks to citizens. Others distributed groceries to those in need, staffed food pantries, and helped their city's health department with communications (Ford, 2020). At the Rochester Public Library in Minnesota, librarians staffed a COVID-19 nonemergency hotline and chat line. Two of their library workers staffed a day shelter for the

homeless (Ford, 2020). In Spokane, Washington, twenty library workers worked from home and staffed a regional helpline, which was designed to help residents and businesses navigate coronavirus assistance programs (Shanks, 2020). Urbanlibraries.org reported that Salt Lake City library staff wanted to contribute and were readily willing to redeploy as, “quarantine and isolation coordinators, drivers, vulnerable populations coordinators, business ambassadors, contact tracers, interpreters, and mask fabrication coordinators to help (2020). COVID-19 was unanticipated, but their staff found it not only challenging, but their experiences were positive and rewarding” (2020).

The American Library Association (ALA) surveyed 3,850 libraries nationwide in May 2020 and found that 99% of libraries were either closed to the public or had reduced access. The survey participants anticipated that of the most urgent needs of their patrons, 60% needed public access to computers and the internet, and 60% needed government applications and job search support. The survey also found that the majority of the respondents who were involved in community crisis response reported they were developing new partnerships, made or distributed PPE, addressed hunger relief efforts, provided family-friendly facilities, or relocated to other department call centers (Carmichael, 2020).

### **Digital Disparity**

Across the country, libraries were urged to leave their internet access open to the public, even though the building itself was closed. Those who had previously used the library computers had no option for access unless their library set up an outdoor computer lab. In many rural communities there was a lack of fast and affordable broadband. An internet connections was as essential to a household as other utilities, especially with students who studied from home, and parents who worked from home. It was also essential for communication during lockdown. The

Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library repurposed their bookmobiles as Wi-Fi hotspots. They worked with the local school district superintendent to identify which areas in the community had the greatest need and in response parked one bookmobile at a mobile home park and the other at a correctional facility. In order to use the service, the user has to park near the bus to connect (Childers, 2020). According to Pew Research, approximately 25% of households did not have a high-speed internet connection.

While libraries cannot provide wireless signal to all people, they made adjustments to their current offerings such as strengthening wireless signals so that it could be accessed from outside of the library. Libraries could also host Wi-Fi drive up locations and worked with schools to distribute Wi-Fi hotspots to families in need (Goddard, 2020). The Southern Oklahoma Library System (SOLS) launched a digital bookmobile service for those patrons who could not physically visit a branch. They offered Wi-Fi service from the bookmobile and took it a step further when they offered Wi-Fi hot spots and laptops for checkout. The services were so popular that a waiting list was created (Enis, 2021). Gail Oehler, the executive director of SOLS noted that when determining where library vehicles would park to provide services it was important that local officials bought in and granted permission to park (Enis, 2021).

### **Interventions**

The first interventions discussed are those created to assist the older and underrepresented populations while in social isolation, specifically those that related directly to technology. While these were examples of providing internet service to those in need, it did not address those who did not have resources or knowledge to connect to Wi-Fi. Librarians served as technical educators in their communities. A library could furnish a laptop to a patron and provided internet service, but if the person receiving the technology did not know how to use it,

the need for technical support and training fell back on the librarian. There have been two major cash infusions from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program as part of the American Rescue Plan Act's Emergency Connectivity Fund. Part of this money supported the ability of libraries to purchase equipment to loan out for home use (Schwartz, 2021). Having more assets available to loan out was an improvement for patrons, but still did not solve accessibility to training that supported those who experienced social isolation.

Many seniors did not have experience with computer technology, and some had no desire to learn. If you combined the lack of computer skills and equipment with unreliable or fraudulent internet sites used to sign up for COVID-19 vaccines it created an extremely frustrating situation. Because most vaccine registration was only available on the internet, many of the most vulnerable population were unable to register for the vaccines that they desperately needed. If they were able to have someone else sign them up for vaccines, and did not have an email address and accessibility, they also would miss last minute opportunities to receive vaccines when there were extra doses available. As vaccines became available California's El Dorado County Library, system director, Carolyn Brooks, explained that 41% of their county is over 65. While libraries were used to helping people use the computers, they do not normally do things for them on the computer. El Dorado and other libraries like the Mabel C. Fry Library in Yukon, Oklahoma worked with visitors to help them sign up but they must come with an email address of their own or of someone who would check it for them (Rea, 2021).

While internet access and technology were necessary for COVID-19 related activities, it was notable that there are other underrepresented who needed technology as well. Prisons around the world also went into lockdown so that the virus would not spread in the already overcrowded



conditions. This meant that inmates could no longer have visitors, which was known to have caused riots. Other prison services such as prison libraries and workshops were suspended as well (Krolak, 2020). In 2020 more than 100,000 returned home from prison in just a few months (Herships, 2021). Many prisoners with minor sentences were released early so that cells could house single prisoners, leading to even further isolation. Some of those who had served their sentence and were released during the pandemic had never used a smart phone, the internet, or knew how to maneuver email. Unfortunately, processes like looking for a place to live, finding a job, applying for benefits, or like others, scheduling a COVID-19 test or immunization, required technology and knowledge. The New Jersey State Library started a program called Fresh Start which provided assistance to the formerly incarcerated. Fresh Start provided training in video conferencing, employment resources, and food banks (Herships, 2021). Even with social distancing in place, Fresh Start had been creative to continue services through open air meetings and telephone counseling.

Our health was impacted by our social well-being and being abruptly separated from those we love and even those who we casually socialize with, especially long term, was an unhealthy way to live. The elderly who lived in care homes were in much the same situation as are those who had to suspend their own activities due to vulnerable family members (Krolak, 2020). One way that libraries have worked to ease the distance between seniors was by utilizing technological solutions for those who chose to age at home. By providing internet access, training, or a device to connect; offering virtual conferencing with their loved ones; or the option of online shopping with home delivery for food, meals, and medicines, they were making a positive impact.

It should be noted that nursing facilities also utilized technology to connect residents to their families. This was not discussed in this literature review unless libraries were involved. Notable interventions for facility residents included window visits where outreach librarians visit nursing homes, sit outside a resident's window, and called them on the phone to visit (Wyatt, 2021). Many outreach librarians had been unable to serve their patrons in person due to low-to-no contact delivery services. The January 2021 edition of the ABOS newsletter contained an excerpt from Aeisha Hearn, who worked as an outreach librarian with the Toledo County Public Library in Ohio. She found an innovative way to connect with her patrons using handwritten notes. When delivering materials to senior patrons, she attached colorful notes sending happy thoughts and warm greetings. This has become a library custom, and they are now referred to Kindness Cards. (2021)

### **Telemedicine**

In 2020 a study on technological readiness of both rural and urban public libraries to provide telemedicine support was completed in Virginia. Of the small or rural libraries that responded, one third were rural or small urban in location. While public libraries were considered safe spaces for vulnerable populations (Real & Bogel, 2019), library staff spent a significant amount of their time assisting post retirement age patrons in accessing their health information online (Real & Rose, 2017). With the pandemic, seniors without the technological resources or knowledge no longer had access to their medical information, making this more difficult for seniors without online skills. In addition, many medical facilities were at some level of lock down, and required virtual appointments. The rural public library in Pottsboro, Texas is housed in a one room open space. The library director, Dianne Connery, explained that during the pandemic, patrons were being told that their doctors didn't want them coming in for

appointments. Because the only private room in the library was her office, she offered it up so that patrons could meet in private with their doctors using video conferencing. Soon after, the library created a separate soundproof room with an enhanced internet connection specifically for this purpose. Connery noted that after an appointment, if needed, she was able to give out information on health related questions on subjects such as diabetes or hypertension (Settles, 2020). The Pottsville library was an example of one rural library among many who were helping patrons connect with their medical providers and information. “Telehealth is promoted as a way to meet health access needs, especially during a pandemic, this luxury is not readily available for all U.S. residents. Recent actions brought about by the government (e.g., the CARES Act) have tried to address the rural–urban gap in telehealth, but more is needed” (Summers-Gabr, 2020, p. S222).

Telemedicine or telehealth was not only meant for connecting with physicians and health care but is also critical for mental health. NIHCM (2020) notes that it increased access to mental health resources especially in a time of pandemic when people are anxious about being confined to their home, or lonely. Libraries have also provided the technology and training to allow members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to attend meetings with their groups or sponsors. With the stress of COVID-19 and addiction, the video connections have been a welcome offering. Assistance with health insurance was offered by Jennifer Peterson of the Jasper Public Library in Indiana. The library provided access to free Medicare guidance counselling through a partnership with Indiana’s state health insurance assistance program (Peterson, 2021). “COVID-19 has made everything harder! But it has helped me to make a couple of contacts with senior apartments in the area that are new and were not really interested

in partnering with us before,” said a respondent from Fox River Valley (Petrov, March 1, 2021, p. 5).

### **Summary**

Due to COVID-19, most libraries changed their means of delivering services, with outreach being hit the hard. “Suddenly the primary concept of outreach – bringing people together – became a threat to public health” (Petrov, p. 5). Even so, librarians across the country created alternative and innovative interventions to combat social isolation. Whether they conducted virtual story time, offered drive-through pickups, handed out cocoa packets, brought warm winter clothing to a food pantry, stocked free book vending machines, did online karaoke, or delivered books by drone, they found or made new ways to reach their patrons. In the ALA 2021 State of America’s Libraries Special Report: COVID-19, Julius C. Jefferson, Jr., ALA President, says that “Libraries kept Americans connected in ways that brought our communities closer. Buildings may not have been open, but libraries were never closed”, (Zalusky, 2021, p. 4).

The literature review has discussed many of the basic physiological and safety needs which were met in part by library leadership and staff. The literature disclosed specific instances of alternative actions and interventions taken by libraries, and acts of selflessness and kindness by individual library staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Felton Thomas, Jr., executive director/CEO of the Cleveland Public Library said, “One thing we’ve been happy to see along this really long year—a bright spot is seeing us really making a difference in our seniors’ lives and how they needed us in ways that we didn’t understand” (Rea, para. 11). The research that follows revealed details of the interventions and innovation provided by library leadership and

staff in an effort to lessen the effects of social isolation and loneliness during the time of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### **Research Methodology**

In March 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 98% of public libraries in the United States closed their doors to patrons, many indefinitely (Shofman, 2020). Library outreach workers typically provide services to the underserved in communities, some of whom were the elderly. This study delved into the ingenuity of public library outreach as a significantly hands-on profession. It was important to recognize their response to social distancing, sheltering in place, and the necessity to take a hands-off approach when responding to and providing interventions to address social isolation and loneliness of older and underrepresented Americans.

The purpose of this study was to determine and document process changes and challenges during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and recognize both short and long term outcomes of the outreach staff and their collaboration with the community and its most vulnerable populations. This chapter introduced the methodology behind this study to include research design and rationale, sample and setting, instrumentation, and data collection procedure.

### **Research Design**

The chosen research design was a descriptive study. The design was selected because the population of library personnel participated by sharing their personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected the participants and those they served differently, and the personal stories told by the participants in conjunction with their response to survey questions revealed a well varied response from the public library community. This researcher

needed to take an unbiased approach to constructing the narrative of the participants' experiences through the pandemic while also taking into account their position within the library and the population that they serve. While primarily intended as a qualitative narrative study, information gathered includes demographics which will be reported quantitatively.

### **Sample & Setting**

The sample used in this study were the members of the Association of Bookmobile and Outreach Services (ABOS), the Association of Small and Rural Libraries (ASRL), and a listing of public librarians compiled by the researcher. These organizations were chosen for the following reasons.

**ABOS** – Members were traditionally the outreach services librarian at a brick and mortar library, or mobile librarian serving patrons with a bookmobile, bikemobile or little free library. (1,214 list-serv subscribers)

**ARSL** – The small or rural library member was likely to have multiple roles in a small or rural library, one of which was outreach. (2,057 annual conference attendees)

**Public Librarians** – A compiled list of public librarians which included public library leadership and personnel. (7,000 librarians compiled from the American Library Association (ALA) conference attendees and public library websites contacts)

In addition to their specific attributes, the researcher had familiarity with populations surveyed, and was a member of both ABOS and ARSL, with access to administer surveys through their leadership. Volunteers were be solicited by E-mail.

The setting for this study were public libraries throughout the United States, during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, commencing on March 16, 2020, when federal guidelines were

issued to slow the spread of the virus. The public libraries studied ranged from stand-alone Little Free Libraries to major metropolitan libraries with multiple branches.

### **Instruments**

Primary data was gathered using an online survey. The survey was directed at public library and outreach staff throughout the United States, with inquiry specific to service offerings and obstacles as they related to serving vulnerable populations during the pandemic. Survey content was gathered using multiple choice questions which included closure and reallocation of physical assets and human resources, the digital disparity of rural and urban patrons, and the expansion and use of telemedicine. The creation of innovations and procedures, collaborative opportunities and relationships born from necessity during the pandemic, were surveyed with written answers with the opportunity for follow up interviews with participants who wished to participate further. Survey questions are listed in Appendix A.

Participation is at the will of the intended and consent was acquired at the commencement of survey. Additional data sources included pre-pandemic and pandemic studies and articles as a means of documenting processes during normal times, as compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Prior to data collection, the researcher completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application which included both the process and research questions. The IRB reviewed and approved this process to ensure that it met the requirements prior to proceeding.

Data was collected using Qualtrics survey software, with the previously described online survey subjects. The survey was offered to designated member groups and did not include confidential information. No personally identifiable information was collected in the survey,

however, participants had the option to provide contact information if they chose to be interviewed. Any follow up would be specific to comments offered by respondent.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis of the Qualtrics online surveys was completed by the researcher using several means. The survey data was compiled by Qualtrics software insights, giving the researcher participant's answers to multiple choice questions in a quantitative format. The data was then categorized to include closure and reallocation of physical assets and human resources, the digital disparity of rural and urban patrons, and the expansion and use of telemedicine. The qualitative survey answers concerning creation of innovations and procedures, and the collaborative opportunities and relationships born from necessity during the pandemic were reviewed individually, compiled, and summarized in the results. Comments made on the survey were analyzed individually. The comparative analysis of pre-pandemic studies or information were taken into consideration and analyzed as it pertained to the subject matter.

Survey data was stored on a secure Qualtrics server which required a username and password to access. After survey completion, the data was compiled and analyzed while being stored on university managed OneDrive cloud storage. Data was deleted when the research study was completed.

### **Summary**

The research subject groups that were identified to survey included ABOS librarians which work primarily in outreach, ARSL librarians from small rural libraries, and a large mix of public library personnel from throughout the staffing structures of libraries of all sizes and locations throughout the United States. It was important that library personnel from all positions were included in the research so that the data compiled gave a thorough representation of the



events experienced and actions taken by library staff during the pandemic. It was also critical to take into account that library staff were tending to the basic needs of the communities that they serve. The following chapter contained the results of the study and while experiences differed, the survey results offered a unique insight into library business that is not at all as usual.

## **Results**

To better understand how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted public libraries, and their ability to provide relief for the social isolation of their patrons, a survey was completed. This chapter shared the results of the survey and described how the data was analyzed. The survey consisted of 14 questions of which the first 10 were multiple choice and many allowed multiple answers, with the option to choose other and to make comments. These questions were presented using graphs to illustrate results. In addition to the graphs, a summary of trends found in the notes provided by the respondents was disclosed.

The final four questions were open ended questions. These answers were analyzed to determine common themes and unique situations.

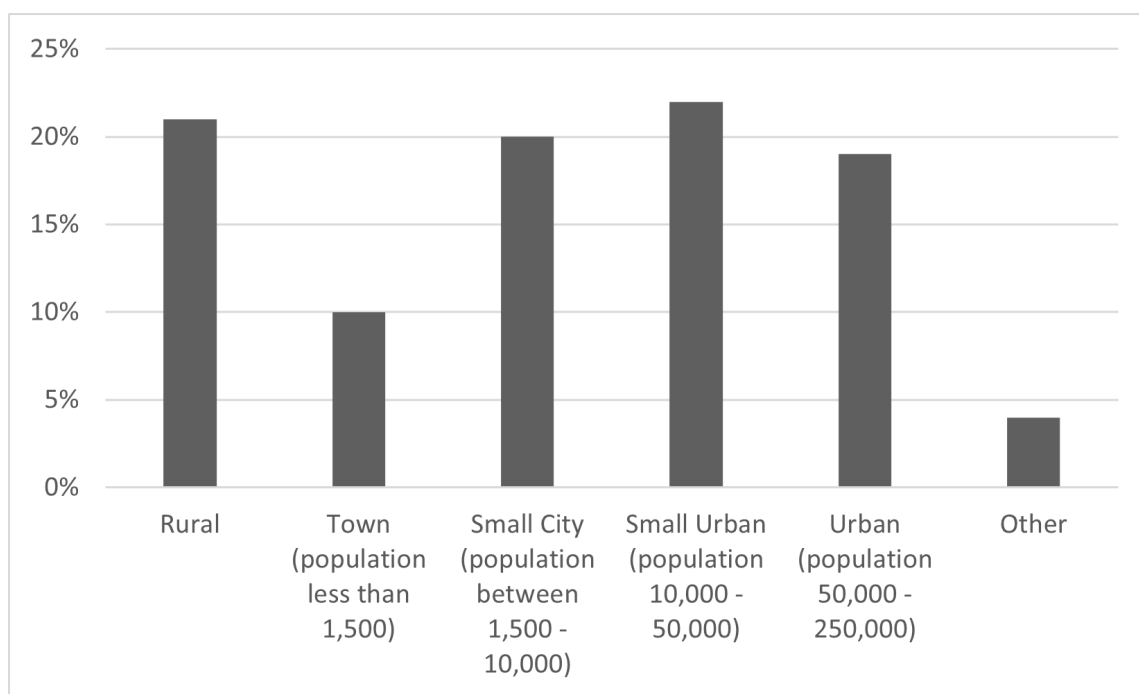
### **Description of Sample**

Study participants included multiple distribution channels. An email solicitation was sent to 3,000 members of ABOS and ARLS and directed specifically to those with careers in public library leadership and other library staff members. Of these participants, 288 started the survey, while 178 completed the survey, netting a 62% completion rate. Of the 3,000 participants that consented to and at least partially completed the survey there was an overall 9.6% response rate. The survey link was also shared on the ABOS newsgroup via an anonymous link, which netted an additional 42 responses. Demographics were gathered regarding both the size of population that was served by the participant's library, and the position in which they served prior to the pandemic.

To determine the demographics of the participants and the patrons that they served, the following survey questions (SQ) were asked:

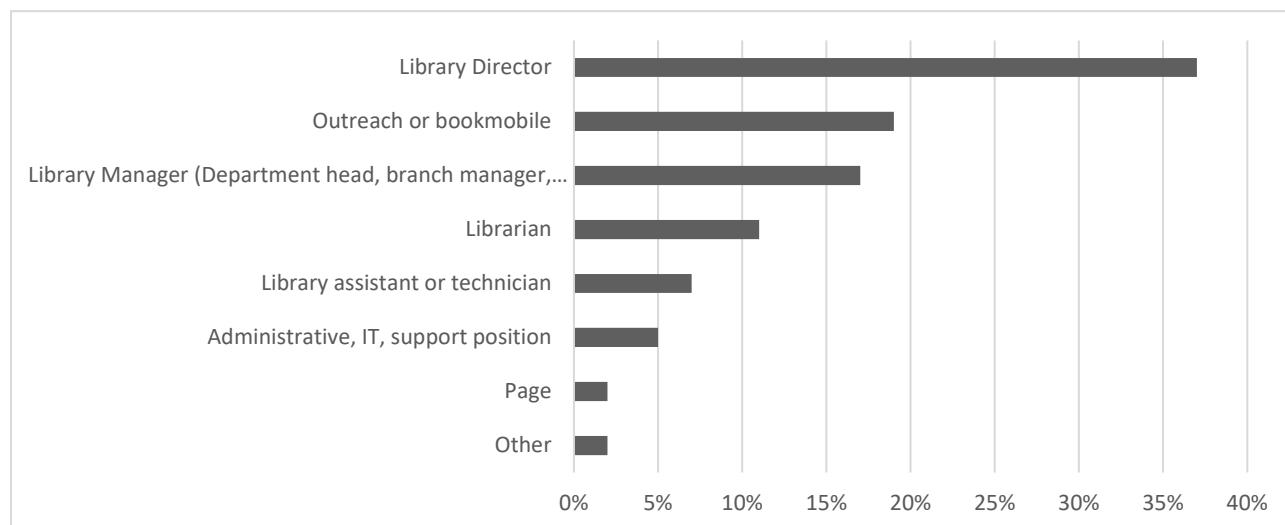
SQ1. Describe the population served by your library. Figure 1 indicated that there was representation of all sizes of public libraries. Survey comments indicated that libraries represented in the group other were primarily libraries in communities with populations of 250,000 with several over one million. Comments identified unique libraries to include a state prison library and a Native American reservation library.

**Figure 1 - Population Served by Library**



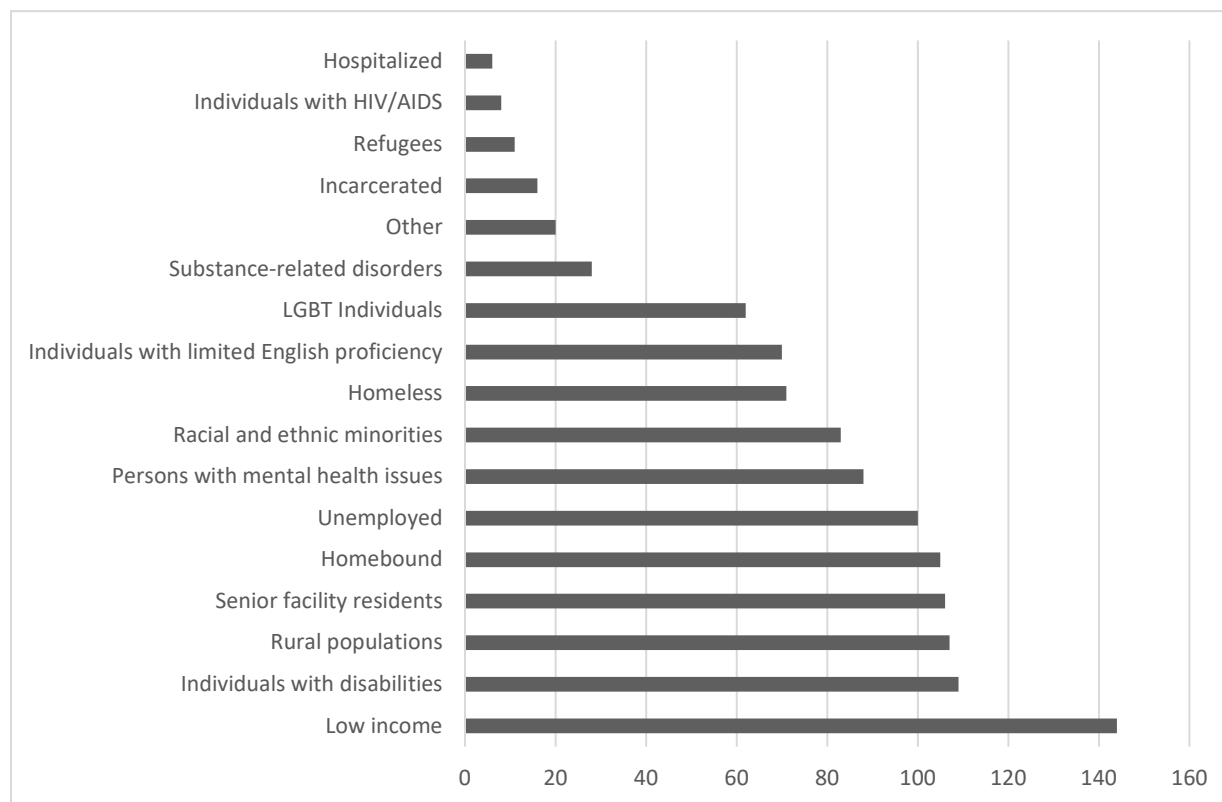
SQ2. What was your position prior to the pandemic? The second demographic surveyed was the position the library staff member was assigned to prior to the pandemic. Because the survey was directed towards those holding leadership or outreach positions, Figure 2 solidified that the intended survey audience was reached. Survey comments included several unique positions including grant administrator and document control in the oil industry.

**Figure 2 - Library Position Held Prior to the Pandemic**



SQ3. Which vulnerable or underserved populations did you serve during the pandemic? It was notable that a total of 1160 answers were selected when identifying patrons served. It is important to understand that some respondents clarified that they serve all populations and do not ask patrons to identify their status. One respondent commented, “We do not question patron’s social, economic, health or housing situation when they enter the library. We take everyone as long as the follow our Patron Code of Conduct.” Survey comments identified several unique populations including Alameda fire victims, mobile seniors, people living with dementia and Title 1 schools.

**Figure 3 - Vulnerable and Underserved Populations Served During the Pandemic**



## Data Analysis

Analysis of the data is organized by the research questions identified in Chapter 1.

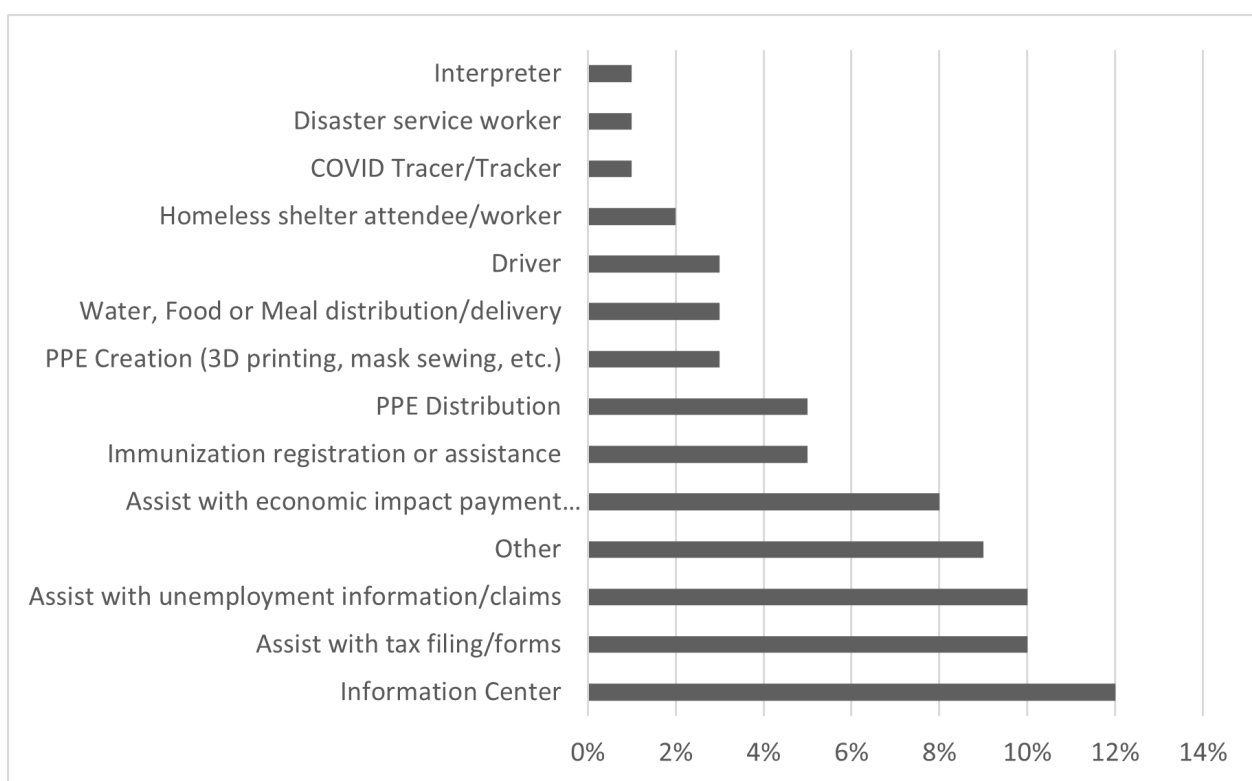
RQ1: Public library staff were deployed as disaster service workers (DSWs) to aid in COVID-19 response efforts. What critical roles did they fill?

SQ4: If you were redeployed during the pandemic, what other roles did you fill?

Analysis of this research question was based on several survey questions which included the previous demographic information. It should be noted that some respondents continued to hold their pre-pandemic positions but took on additional duties while others were not redeployed but worked their original position, but in a different manner such as teleworking or working in a

closed library. Unique answers by comment included public access television, and stress relief through access to reading and information. The director of a small-town library commented, “I am responsible for everything and did my share of everything.” Another performed, “remote Spanish-language IT support; document translation; video editing.” Some were retrained and certified as affordable healthcare customer service representatives.

**Figure 4 - Other Positions Held by Library Staff During the Pandemic**



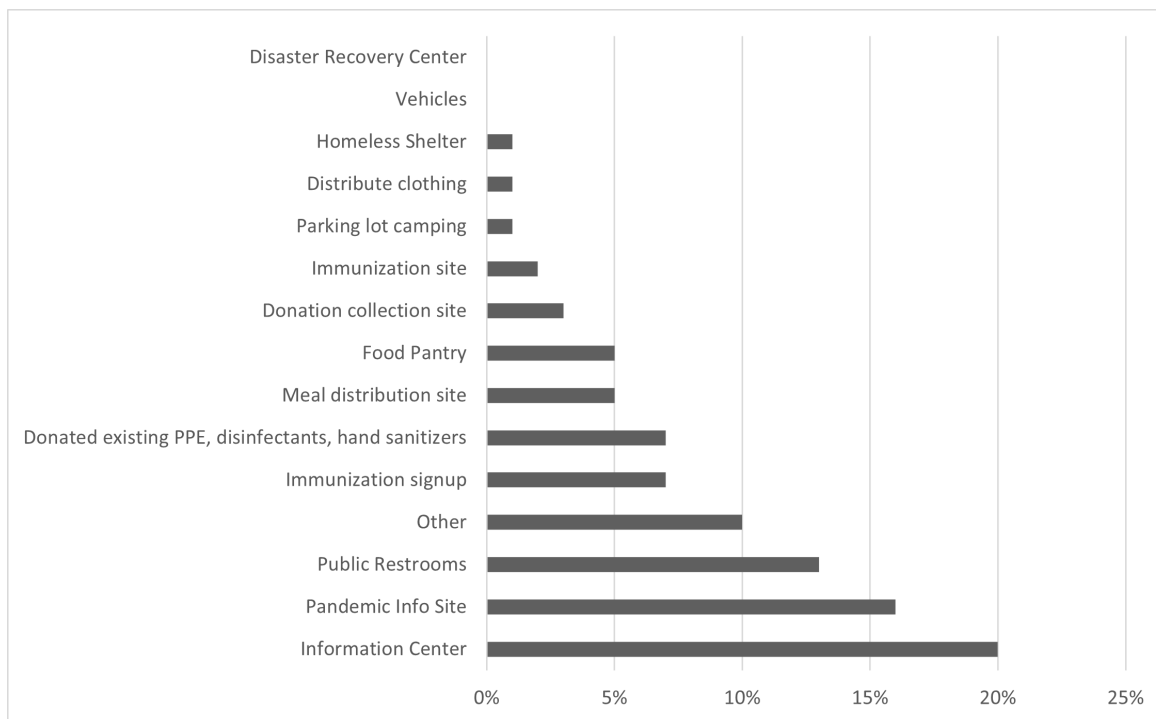
RQ2: Public library assets were used to fill basic human needs of patrons. How were physical assets reallocated to serve communities?

In analyzing how physical assets were reallocated to serve communities it is important to clarify that much of the reallocation occurred through new collaborative relationships with other

libraries and organizations. Data analysis explored the physical assets along with the human interaction and relationship building between organizations. The analysis also described and discussed comments left by respondents in the survey's option of other and in comments.

SQ5: How were your library building or other physical assets redeployed to assist patrons that were homeless, low income, or otherwise impacted during the pandemic? Unique comments included several that offered free books, distributed coats, gloves, and scarves, ran a little free pantry, and several manufactured PPE with library 3D printers. Bookmobiles were used as census mobile units and as WIFI access points. Library rooms were used for students without WIFI. Several staff used their personal resources to sew and distribute masks to low income patrons.

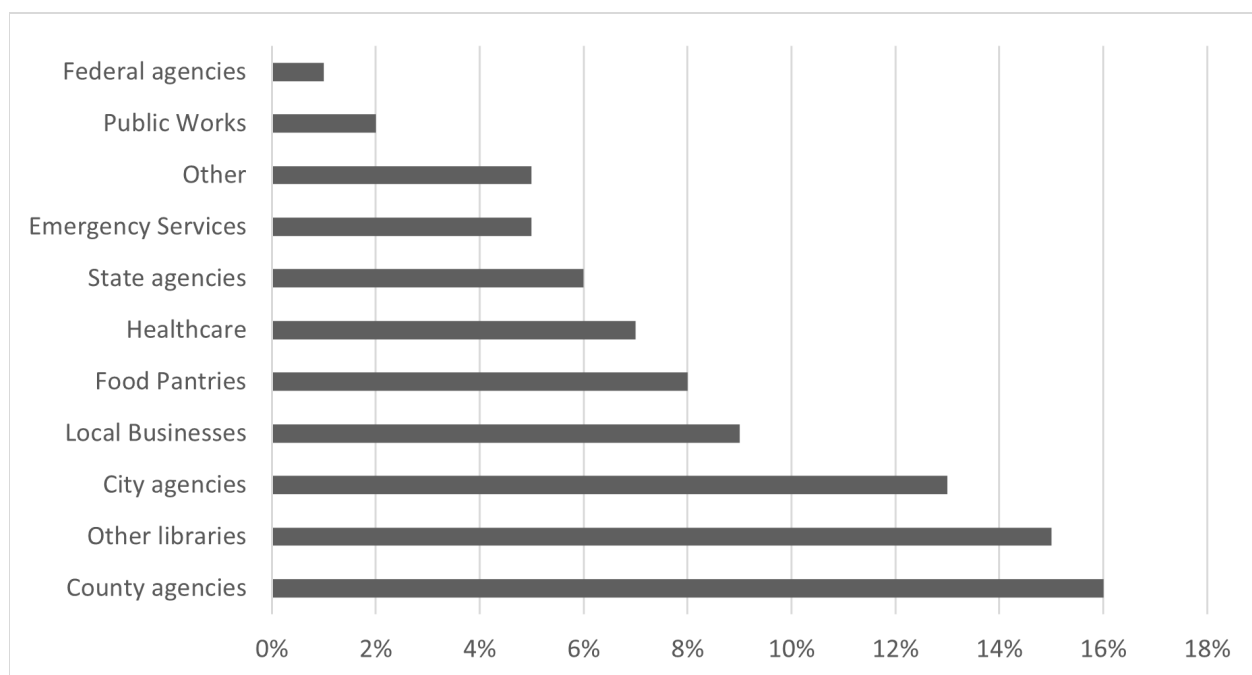
**Figure 5 - Reallocation of Physical Assets**



SQ6: Were new collaborative relationships formed with other agencies during the pandemic? Most libraries had relationships established with other agencies, but collaboration was key during the pandemic. Figure 6 reveals new collaborative relationship not only with government agencies, but also local businesses and healthcare. Comments revealed new relationships with AARP, United Way, housing organizations, non-profits, museums, community based organizations, community development corporation and senior services non-governmental organization Age Options.

Comments indicated that some connections were already in place but became closer. Several respondents collaborated as part of an emergency response team. One responded that, “for the first time collaborated with other libraries to bring higher profile (higher cost) presenters since it was virtual”. One comment indicated an erosion of relationships.

**Figure 6 - New Collaborative Relationships Formed with Other Agencies During the Pandemic**

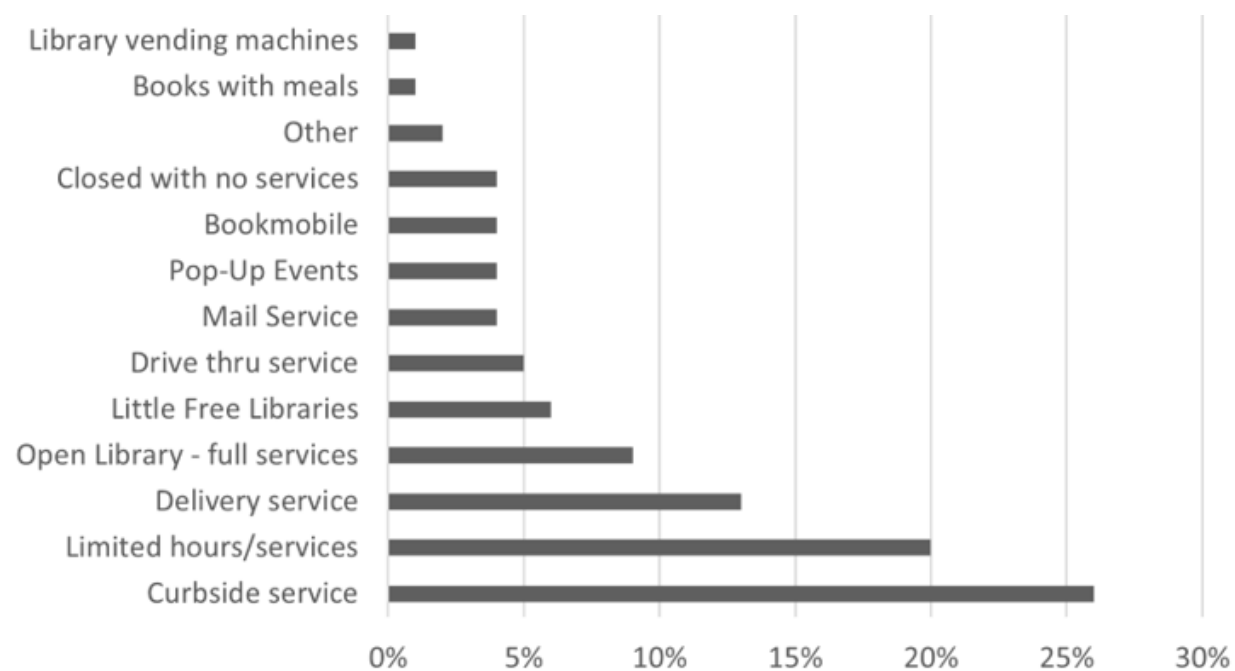




RQ3: What interventions were created or employed to assist the older, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations while in social isolation? In order to analyze the interventions created during the pandemic, we also analyzed how patrons were served during the pandemic and actions taken by library staff to distribute the interventions. These items were surveyed using multiple choice answers.

SQ7: How did you provide library services to your patrons? While curbside service was popular, many libraries had limited services. Other popular services included walk up window service, StoryWalks, downloadable eBooks and audiobooks, and Zoom events. Online library card registration made it possible for previous non-library users to take advantage of library services. Many commented that the level of services varied at different stages of the pandemic and were contingent on emergency mandates and CDC recommendations.

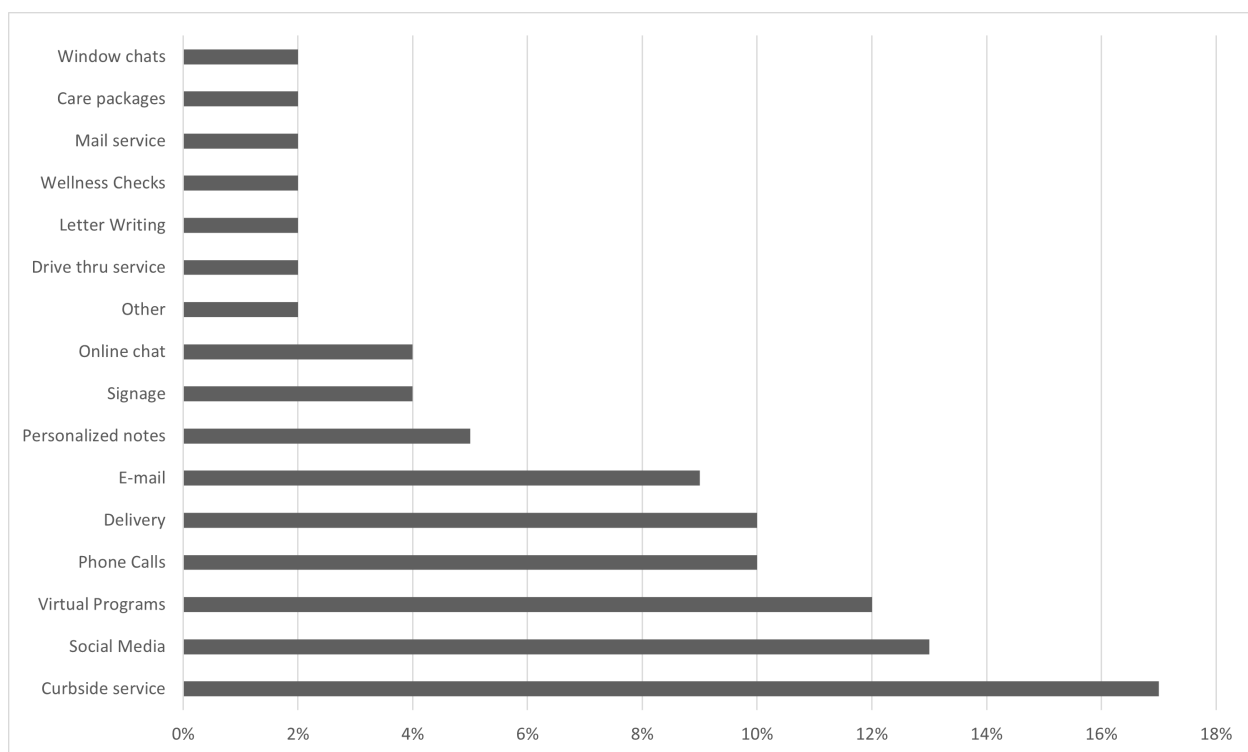
**Figure 7 - How Services Were Provided**



SQ8: What actions did you take to combat loneliness and social isolation of your patrons?

The key to these actions was interacting with patrons. Due to the pandemic a socially distanced line of services was created including curbside, drive through or window pickups. Those who were already delivering items found that delivery service multiplied in usage. Other more personalized communication with patrons such as window chats, care packages, letter writing, personalized notes, personal phone calls and wellness checks brought some relief to the lonely. Care packages were part of a partnership with an Area Agency on Aging. Some created new projects to involve patrons such as a community garden, community cookbook, and a community resource list of phone support services for patrons.

**Figure 8 - Actions Taken to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation of Patrons**



Other items like Grab & Go crafting kits, craft kits for kids, and take and make crafting became popular for both children and adults. Curated items such as subject matter book bundles, book bundles with special items, and Pocket Librarian services were made available. Virtual programming included virtual STEAM classes, virtual fieldtrips, craft programs, sit n stitch, streamed concerts, book groups, and many other online programs such as bingo, trivia, and table talk for adults.

SQ9: What kind of innovations or processes were created to assist the older, underrepresented or vulnerable populations while in social isolation? The answers to this question were open ended and should be considered as additions to many of the actions already documented in SQ8. The majority of the innovations focused on the senior population or those who were medically prevented from physically visiting a library location. Most provided in person delivery for homebound patrons. Due to the expense, only some libraries were able to afford delivery through mail. These services were available pre-pandemic to many patrons however most had to be 65 years of age or older or have health issues to qualify for the service. For many, the qualifications to participate in this program were loosened to accommodate those who needed the service or did not feel comfortable coming to the library. There were several comments from respondents indicating that they provided assistance with tasks like delivering groceries, prescriptions, and pet supplies to patrons on their own time.

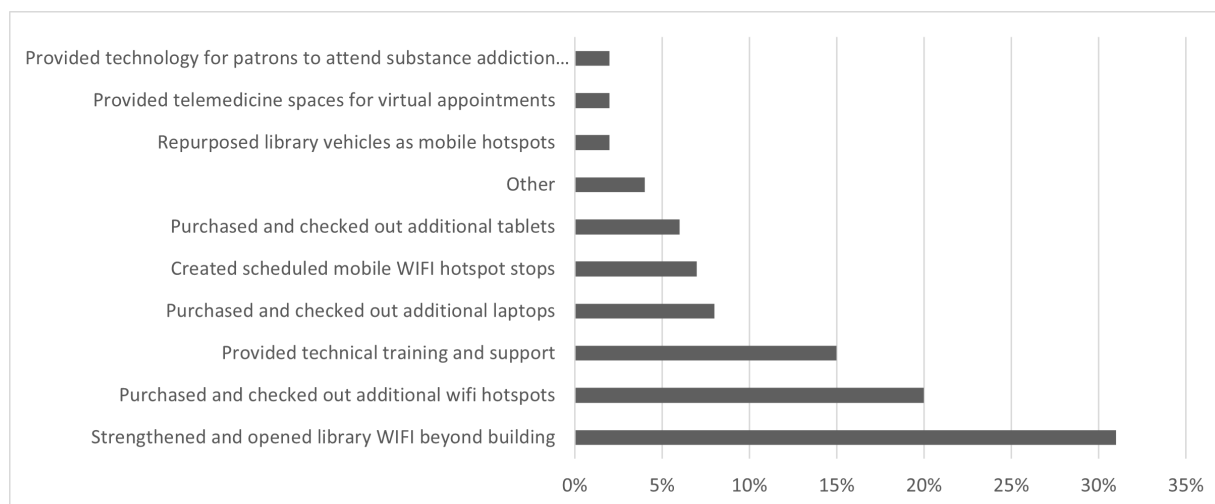
Survey comments identified what were referred to as old school innovations such as hand penned letters and phone calls. One expressed, “Honestly, we all just got used to extra-long reference and reader’s advisory calls. Folks would call in for books or info and would end up talking about everything else under the sun.” Another stated, “We dedicated 12 staff to call all

library card holders over the age of 70 – we have not ceased this service despite reopening – it continues as the staff enjoy it as much as the patrons.”

Much of the innovation revolved around communication of not just library information but also pandemic related information, food pantry hours, unemployment resource, health and mental health resources, domestic violence assistance and community services information such as agencies that offered assistance with housing, healthcare, food, childcare, eldercare, and other general information. Librarians compiled this information and posted it not only on library doors or in their vestibules, but also in post offices, grocery stores, and other high traffic areas. This was a large task at the beginning of the pandemic when information was changing often.

SQ10: How did your library assist with the digital divide? One of the largest disparities between patrons was the availability of adequate resources to access the internet, and knowledge of how to use the internet and online services. Libraries were already providing public use of computers and checkout of devices such as tablets, laptops, WIFI hotspots and free WIFI internet connections. The pandemic created high demand for these devices as patrons worked from home, and their children were learning virtually. Survey results confirm that libraries increased their current technological offerings, in response to patron needs.

**Figure 9 - Digital Disparity**



## Summary

Throughout the pandemic, libraries became information centers for their communities. When businesses and schools closed, and patrons sheltered in place, many did not have the resources to work from home or access virtual resources. Survey results show that library staff pivoted by taking on additional duties or being redeployed. They continued to provide services and created and adopted new innovations to combat social isolation while also resorting to less technological means to make a human connection with their patrons. Some library staff wanted to keep the new innovations, additional technology, and provide services their patrons have come to depend on such as curbside service and virtual programming.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This descriptive study explored the personal experiences of library personnel and how they served their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. It served to document the actions of outreach leadership and professionals during a global pandemic and how their actions impacted older, underrepresented, and vulnerable community members. It was also intended to document and share innovations and solutions that were created out of necessity during the unprecedented times of mandated social isolation, and several themes emerged. The strongest among them was the disproportional disparity and inequity created throughout the pandemic. Because a descriptive study was performed, this researcher could only sense this disproportionality through survey participant comments and referenced readings. A qualitative approach was taken in creating a narrative of the experiences of public library personnel and their quest to lessen the negative impact of social isolation. This chapter will present the theoretical connection, discuss the conclusions, and recommend future research. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

**RQ1 Discussion: Public library staff were deployed as disaster service workers (DSWs) to aid in COVID-19 response efforts. What critical roles did they fill?**

The positions held by library staff during the pandemic varied but the great majority of the respondents noted that reallocation and redeployment occurred through collaborative relationships with both new and existing libraries, governmental agencies, AARP, United Way, housing organizations, non-profits, museums, community based organizations, community development corporation and senior services non-governmental organization Age Options and organizations. While several respondents collaborated as part of an emergency response team, the majority took on roles specific to COVID-19 information dissemination. This information

was not only health related, but subsequential to the other effects of the pandemic such as filing for unemployment and economic impact payments, immunizations, and personal protective equipment.

While many library staff continued to perform their pre-pandemic duties, staff as a whole had additional considerations or duties due to the pandemic. It should be noted that the pandemic brought with it a great need for information not only regarding the pandemic itself, but other issues that were a result of the pandemic such as unemployment, economic impact to their communities, the need for PPE, and immunizations. Several themes became apparent for RQ1, (1) staff reassignments and (2) information was critical.

### ***Theme 1: Staff Reassignment***

Survey results reflected that the greater portion of reassignments were information or administrative related duties such as assisting with unemployment information and claims (10%), assisting with economic impact payments (8%), and immunization registration or assistance (5%). Other survey results reflected more physical tasks related to the pandemic. These included PPE distribution (5%), PPE creation (4%), water, food, or meal distribution/delivery (3%), driver (3%), homeless shelter attendee (1%), COVID tracker/tracer (1%), disaster service worker (1%), or interpreter (1%).

### ***Theme 2: Information was Critical***

The survey results reflected a great variety in the critical roles that library workers were asked to perform, many of which were outside of what would be considered normal day to day duties. With community members stressed by the pandemic, Kuni observed that libraries are a source of comfort which offer resources and suggestions to their communities (Kuni, 2020). Those aging in place were deeply and immediately affected by the isolation (Delpo et al., 2021).

Having a place to go to where informational resources were readily available, to include information about addressing basic human needs, was critical for survival.

**RQ2 Discussion: Public library assets were used to the fill basic human needs of patrons.**

**How were physical assets reallocated to serve communities?**

Libraries were critical in both directing their patrons to where their basic needs could be met, and to filling the basic needs of their patrons themselves. Physical assets were reallocated to fill not just the needs of patrons, but the needs of the community at large. Libraries opened their supply closets and offered restoration supplies such as masks and gloves. They also offered the use of stand up hand sanitizers and other cleaning supplies. Many libraries were already outfitted with 3D printers and used these printers to manufacturer PPE. Bookmobiles were used as mobile census units and WIFI hot spots. Buildings spaces were reallocated not only for individual study rooms and spaces for telemedicine appointments, but some were reconfigured to be used as disaster command centers, homeless shelters, food kitchens, and food pantries. Building parking lots were used as safe campgrounds for the homeless that lived in cars and some provided bathrooms and showers. Maslow's hierarchy of needs was the basis of the theoretical framework of this research (Maslow, 1943). The literature shows that the first two basic needs to be met before social isolation could be addressed (Maslow, 1943). Two themes became apparent for RQ2, (1) physiological needs and (2) need for information.

***Theme 1: Physiological Needs***

The first of those needs is physiological. Survey results show these were met when libraries provided restrooms (13%), distributed meals (5%), became food pantries (5%), collected donations (3%), distributed clothing (1%), and became homeless shelters (1%). The second of Maslow's needs is safety. Survey results show this was provided by providing PPE



and hand sanitizers (7%), signing people up for immunizations (7%), becoming immunization sites (2%), and turning parking lots into campgrounds (1%).

### ***Theme 2: Need for Information***

Survey results identified that 20% of libraries were information centers for their communities with 10% of libraries providing other means of filling the basic needs of patrons. Chmara stated that, “a public library has an obligation to protect the health and safety of its staff. OSHA provides general guidance and recommendations on how to protect workers during the Covid-19 crisis. Courts have held that patrons have a First Amendment right to access the library because the right to receive information is a corollary to the right to speak. However, the library also has the right to establish reasonable rules governing library use” (Chmara, 2020).

Even though the majority of libraries were closed to the public, staff found a way to inform their patrons as to where they can go for their basic needs or provided for those needs themselves by becoming homeless shelters, food pantries, and telemedicine locations. Information was also available to the public when they adapted physical assets such as converting their bookmobiles to mobile hot spots, turning their entrances into information kiosks, or installing a drive through for contactless pickup.

### **RQ3 Discussion: What interventions were created or employed to assist the older, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations while in social isolation?**

Using the data from SQ7, SQ8 and SQ9 it was determined that libraries found multiple ways to serve their patrons. The first was with materials from the library using a walk up window, drive through service and some with delivery services. Additionally, services were made possible through online library card registration and online services like eBooks, audiobooks and Zoom events. New or expanded offerings included ways to minimize digital

disparity through strengthening WIFI signal from library buildings, using bookmobiles as neighborhood hotspots, the availability of WIFI hotspots, and laptops and tablets for checkout. Library staff became neighborhood technical support for devices as well. New types of library materials were launched such as craft bags, grab and go kits, book bundles, and StoryWalks. Library materials were helpful in entertaining or calming those in isolation and gave families and individuals things to take their minds off of the pandemic and their state of isolation. These interventions are along the lines of normal services provided by libraries and their staff.

Other interventions included finding ways to connect people with online visits such as connecting parole officers with parolees, patients with their doctors, and assist in job searches. Library staff created and worked in homeless shelters, created food pantries and distributed food through Little Free Libraries or bookmobiles. Some used their own personal funds and time to sew masks and knit mittens for the homeless. They also collected and distributed clothing and added snacks to bookbags. As an information hub for their communities, the staff provided information and assistance with COVID-19 testing, immunizations and contact tracing. Because local tax offices and government offices were closed, much information and assistance were also provided for the ongoing questions and processes for filing taxes, unemployment, and economic impact payments.

Through the course of daily business, extended phone calls became the norm as both workers and patrons enjoyed the conversation which extended beyond seeking information. While not intended to discount normal services provided by libraries, this researcher found many exceptional interventions mentioned through survey and research. Personalized communication with patrons such as window chats, care packages, letter writing, personalized notes, personal

phone calls and wellness checks not only brought relief to the loneliness caused by social isolation but showed the caring spirit of these workers.

Survey results informed that library staff went beyond the basic needs of their patrons throughout the pandemic and went so far as to meet some of the third level in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). These needs are the themes for RQ3, (1) love and (2) belonging.

### ***Theme 1: Caring***

The consideration and personal attention paid to the patrons went well beyond basic need fulfillment. Survey comments noted that the personal phone calls (10%), wellness checks (2%), letter writing (2%), and care packages (2%) that were provided to vulnerable populations were not only appreciated by patrons and their families, but meaningful to many. One notable intervention for facility residents included window visits (2%) where outreach librarians visited nursing homes, sat outside resident windows, and called them on the phone to visit (Wyatt, 2021).

### ***Theme 2: Belonging***

In this case, belonging is synonymous with becoming the norm. Some more common interventions to bring normalcy and belonging included the addition of curbside service (17%), and delivery service (10%). Libraries also added informative signage (4%) and some mailed materials to patrons (2%). Those with access to the internet had options for information through social media (13%), virtual programming (12%) and for online chats (4%). For those without access to technology, libraries purchased and checked out WIFI hot spots (20%), additional laptops (8%), and tablets (6%). Libraries strengthened and opened WIFI beyond their buildings

(31%) provided technical training and support to patrons (15%), and repurposed library vehicles as mobile hotspots (2%).

#### **RQ4 Discussion: Which social isolation interventions have potential to become standard practices post-pandemic?**

The American Library Association conducted a survey in March of 2020 and found that 99 percent of the public libraries that responded were closed because of the pandemic. Libraries established new remote services almost overnight when the lockdown hit. The patrons want those services to continue (2020). It is important to note that social isolation was compounded by pandemic protocols and the eventual drop of restrictions may not lessen the isolation felt by the older, underrepresented, and vulnerable populations. Survey respondents' comments reflected that many of the interventions that were created could become standard practices if funding was continued. Several themes became apparent with RQ4, (1) continuation of services, (2) new standard practices, and (3) funding.

##### ***Theme 1: Continuation of Services***

Most respondents wanted to keep curbside pickup or drive through service post-pandemic. They would like to see live and recorded virtual programming along with downloadable eBooks and audio books become standard practice. Librarians would also like to keep the increased online access to magazines and newspapers, and online programming. This would not only include programming that could be shared in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, but also workforce readiness programs and public access television story times. Some services have proven to be more effective and impactful via virtual setting. The practice of having an information board or flyer with relevant and up to date information is already becoming a standard practice in some libraries. One librarian remarked that they will continue to

offer storywalks, sidewalk chalk art, reference chat, conferences with a social worker, virtual book clubs and online programs, free and reduced bus passes, food give aways and outreach to homeless shelters.

### ***Theme 2: New Standard Practices***

Some practices are becoming standards out of caution, and to keep both patrons and employees safe. These include sanitizing or quarantining returned items, making more space between people, and leaving barriers in place. Interventions considered for standard practices are online programming, take and make kits, craft kits, interest specific bonus bags, grab-n-go activity bags, books by mail, home delivery and continuing to check out laptops or tablets along with WIFI access points. These were all contingent on the continuation of funding. Many expressed that if funding is cut they may still keep the services but lessen the quantity or availability. Jeske, the City Librarian for Denver Public Library and president of the PLA noted that the pandemic money was not sustainable, and that the vast majority of public libraries are underfunded to meet community needs. Jeske clarified that funding for libraries comes from city or county sales and use taxes, and these fell sharply during the pandemic (Bonner, 2021).

### ***Theme 3: Funding***

While continuation of many services is contingent on having the budget to provide them, it should be noted that many libraries have gone to a fine-free practice. This movement started pre-pandemic but really took off once the pandemic started and library doors closed. While not a major source of library funding, by eliminating fines you are lowering income which could be used to sustain new offerings. The elimination of fines is an intervention that directly impacts low income patrons. Mary Danko of the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington, Vermont explained

that it is an equity issue and that people with limited incomes are many times the people who use the library most, and that things are very tight for Americans right now (Picchi, 2021).

**Leadership Implications**

The results of this study clarify that the pandemic has created an environment where flexibility, transparency and trust are crucial. The actions taken by library leadership are varied and many, as documented in the word cloud below (Clark & Du Val, 2020).

**Figure 10 -Library Leadership Actions Word Cloud**



**Conclusion 1:** To create this chart Clark & Du Val gathered words and phrases in response to asking four library directors how they navigated the pandemic. While this chart refers to academic library leadership rather than public library leadership, it is pertinent to this study. Many of the comments describe not only the type of leader this researcher would like to become, but also reflections on how to lead during a pandemic. The phrases listed below were some of the most meaningful to the researcher and reflect characteristics that are needed during crisis leadership (Clark & Du Val, 2020):

- Be honest, transparent, over-communicate, and be sincere.
- Reimagine strategic plans, directions & priorities.
- Be resilient, go boldly and take risks.
- Be able to turn on a dime.
- Support a sense of belonging.
- Retain human interaction, even via a screen.

**Implication.** Leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic meant leading in uncharted waters for most part. Even the most rigid of leaders had to learn to be flexible and take risks. Flexibility entailed a great deal of trust as many workers were on their honor to work from home or in the field as they never had in the past. Leaders had to tap into their staff's strengths not only in workday knowledge, but rally them to take on more than ever, and to learn as they go. In addition to burdening their staff with additional duties, all staff were under significant restrictions and were leaned on for creative, yet low cost solutions to reach not only their patrons but all of their community members.

**Conclusion 2:** Leadership and staff were expected to be authorities in pandemic information dissemination as people reached out to them from their community and beyond. Local libraries

were by default destined to be the information and resource center for all things dealing with the pandemic, due to their authoritative standing in the community, and as a government agency that was essential during the pandemic.

**Implication.** With most businesses closed, and unemployment at an all-time high, many looked to their local government for answers. Because public libraries are usually part of local government, they were the first line of information for most. Leadership had to make decisions regarding where information would come from, what information could be trusted, and how to share information with it changing frequently without notice. It should be noted that some of this information was life threatening or lifesaving in nature due to the pandemic.

**Conclusion 3:** Leadership was humbled by the selfless work done by their employees. Much of the work done by staff was heartfelt and gratitude should be forthcoming.

**Implication.** Employees in the field were using some of their own time and resources to reach and assist patrons who needed assistance. The assistance they gave was from the heart, and not something that leadership could necessarily expect to come from their employees. Workers reached out through the phone, online, handwritten notes and letters, and in person to make sure that their patrons were well during the pandemic. They weren't just delivering books but delivering a helping hand and heart during times when so many were frightened and alone. Leadership should find a way to personally recognize their teams and individual employee actions.

**Conclusion 4:** Leadership needs to take time to discuss and document findings during the pandemic and take a fresh approach to services post-pandemic.

**Implication.** Things may never go back to business as usual. Employees and patrons have a new view of library services and personnel. Many new or adjusted services were created



during the pandemic. How many of these can and should remain, and which have been replaced? Many decisions may be budget driven but should also be impact driven. What do short term services, personnel, and budget look like compared to long term? What new populations have become patrons and how can you continue to serve all populations of your community? There are many tough decisions to be made and leadership should spend time listening to their employees and patrons to determine the best path to take into the future.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

While this study delved into public libraries and their ability to impact the effects of social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are other areas for future research in a post-pandemic environment. Future research should include a post pandemic survey to the same groups of respondents with the same or similar questions focused on the entire pandemic timeline. The digital disparity experienced by those who are older, underrepresented, vulnerable and socially isolated was impacted by the pandemic. Research should be performed on the impact of new technological offerings to these groups who were previously devoid or lacking technology training, devices, or internet service.

The lifeline of services offered during the pandemic needs further research to understand the impact of the specific services versus cost and how the most impactful services can be continued and enhanced as needed. Research could lead to additional or continued funding to sustain these services. While this study concentrated on social isolation, it brought forward other new interventions that have opportunities for serving more specific populations that can be assisted with newly adopted remote practices. Examples are connecting parole officers with parolees, substance abuse counselling for addicts, and telemedicine services for home bound, homeless or rural populations.

## Summary

The study identified several key findings regarding social isolation interventions for older, underrepresented and vulnerable Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical framework was based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) and how basic human needs were met before others, to ensure the livelihood of mankind. These included shelter, food, clothing through turning libraries into homeless shelters, food pantries and clothing distribution sites, and safety through the manufacture and donation of PPE, contact tracing and immunization. The need to belong was met not only through delivery of library items such as books and kits, but also through in person window visits to nursing homes, personal phone calls to check in, personalized letters and notes, and other communications just to check in and relay information or bring joy to a patron.

Remaining informed was of utmost importance and libraries became information centers for communities during the pandemic. Whether making their vestibule an information resource center, creating internet or public access television content, publishing newsletters, social media posts, and many other means, valuable and credible information was relayed to individuals and communities. Library staffs' ability to collaborate with other libraries and agencies for the common good was commendable and invaluable.

By March 18, 2022, the United States has suffered the loss of 966,575 lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic and 81% of people 5 years and older were vaccinated (*CDC Covid Data tracker 2022*). Some things will start to go back to normal, but things will never be the same. Much like Hurricane Katrina, it will be important to learn from experiences. "Future plans to publish the stories will give librarians a forum to share their disaster response experiences and provide them with the opportunity to learn from their colleagues" (Featherstone et al., p. 344).

We have to be careful to not move on too quickly and take the time to document experiences so that staff and the community can learn and plan.

Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, Chair of UCSF's Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics explained that the pandemic exposed inequities along age, economic, racial, and ethnic lines. These factors fueled the spread of the virus, leading to disproportionate harms to the same communities that also were experiencing the effects of the economic crisis (Reynolds, 2022). This study looked specifically at social isolation for the older, underrepresented and vulnerable populations in the United States. The pandemic brought many more into the ranks of these vulnerabilities not only through job loss but what follows when businesses and schools close, there is an imminent chance of hospitalization or death within a family, and how we as a population can move on after suffering such substantial loss.

Many conclusions will be made as the United States recovers from the pandemic. It is this researcher's opinion that we have an opportunity to come together and embrace the successes, learn from the mistakes, and know that it will take patience with each other as we go through the ups and downs of new variants, treatments, and further loss. The compassion exhibited by library personnel is an example that can be followed by all as we learn to navigate the post-pandemic world. The partnerships that have developed between libraries and agencies have the opportunity to have a long lasting effect on communities. The Health Committee Chair of the Latino Task Force at University of California San Francisco, Jon Jacobo, spoke of partnerships as a dance. "We have all learned to dance together, at first there was a lot of stubbing of toes, but I think at this point, we can waltz, we can do some bachata, we can do a little bit of salsa, we can do it all" (Reynolds, 2022). We have to walk before we run and run before we dance. We are on our way.

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## Appendix A

### Survey of Public Library Employees

*Survey Preface* - I am conducting a survey as part of a case study on public library services during the COVID-19 pandemic and their impact on social isolation of older, underrepresented and vulnerable Americans as part of the requirement of my master of science degree in Leadership Education.

By completing the survey you are giving implied consent to participate in the survey. The survey should take less than five minutes to complete and includes nine multiple choice questions, three short written answers, and the option to be included in a follow up interview.

The research is designed to identify the reallocation of physical assets and human resources, the digital disparity of rural and urban patrons, and the expansion and use of telemedicine during the pandemic. It will also bring to light the creation of innovations and procedures, collaborative opportunities and relationships born from necessity during the pandemic. Participation in this survey is voluntary and you may stop at any time while taking the survey, without consequences.

### ***Survey Questions:***

Q1

Describe the population served by your library

- Rural
- Town (population less than 1,500)
- Small City (population between 1,500 - 10,000)
- Small Urban (population 10,000 - 50,000)
- Urban (population 50,000 - 250,000)
- Other
- Comment

Q2

What was your position prior to the pandemic?

- Administrative, IT, support position
- Custodial/Groundskeeping
- Library Director
- Library Manager (Department head, branch manager, assistant/associate director)
- Librarian
- Library assistant or technician
- Outreach or bookmobile
- Page
- Other
- Comment

Q3

If you were redeployed during the pandemic, what other roles did you fill? (Select as many as apply)

- Assist with economic impact payment (stimulus) information
- Assist with tax filing/forms
- Assist with unemployment information/claims
- COVID Tracer/Tracker
- Driver
- Disaster service worker
- Homeless shelter attendee/worker
- Immunization registration or assistance
- Information Center
- Interpreter
- PPE Creation (3D printing, mask sewing, etc.)
- PPE Distribution
- Water, Food or Meal distribution/delivery
- Other
- Comment

Q4

Which vulnerable or underserved populations did you serve during the pandemic?  
(Check all that apply)

- Homeless
- Incarcerated
- Individuals with HIV/AIDS
- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals with limited English proficiency
- Hospitalized
- LGBT Individuals
- Low income
- Mental health issues
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Refugees
- Rural populations
- Senior facility residents
- Shut-ins
- Substance-related disorders
- Unemployed
- Other
- Comments

Q5

How were your library building or other physical assets redeployed to assist patrons that were homeless, low income or otherwise impacted during the pandemic?

- Disaster Recovery Center
- Distribute clothing
- Donation collection site
- Donated existing PPE, disinfectants, hand sanitizers
- Homeless Shelter
- Food Pantry
- Immunization signup
- Immunization site
- Information Center
- Meal distribution site
- Pandemic Information Site
- Parking lot camping
- Public Restrooms
- Public Showers
- Vehicles
- Other
- Comments

Q6

How did you provide library service to your patrons?

- Bikemobile
- Bookmobile
- Books with meals
- Closed with no services
- Curbside service
- Delivery service
- Drive thru service
- Library vending machines
- Limited library hours - limited services
- Little Free Libraries
- Mail Service
- Open Library - full services
- Pop-Up Events
- Other
- Comments

Q7

What actions did you take to combat loneliness and social isolation of your patrons?

- Care packages
- Curbside service
- Delivery service
- Drive thru service
- E-mail
- Meal Delivery
- Mail service
- Letter writing
- Online chat
- Personalized notes
- Signage
- Social Media Posts
- Telephone Calls
- Virtual book readings/story times
- Wellness Checks
- Window chats
- Other
- Comments

Q8

Were new collaborative relationships formed with other agencies during the pandemic?  
Please explain in comments.

- City agencies
- County agencies
- Emergency Services
- Federal agencies
- Food Pantries
- Healthcare
- Local Businesses
- Other libraries
- Public Works
- State agencies
- Other
- Comments



Q9

How did your library assist with the digital divide?

- Created scheduled mobile WIFI hotspot stops
- Provided technical training and support
- Provided technology for patrons to attend substance addiction meetings
- Provided telemedicine spaces for virtual appointments
- Purchased and checked out additional laptops
- Purchased and checked out additional tablets
- Purchased and checked out additional wifi hotspots
- Repurposed library vehicles as mobile hotspots
- Strengthened and opened library WIFI beyond building
- Other
- Comments

Q10

What kind of innovations or processes were created to assist the older, underrepresented, or vulnerable populations while in social isolation?

Q11

Of new processes or innovations created, do any of them have potential to become standard practices after pandemic recovery?

Q12

Do you have any other insight or information you would like to share?

Q13

If you would be open to a follow up interview by email, phone, or virtual meeting, please leave your contact information.

Name

Phone

E-mail

End of Survey

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

The survey and results of this research may be published or shared but your identity will remain anonymous. This project was reviewed and approved by the Winona State University Institutional Review Board.

Feel free to contact me with any questions you may have at [smathews@winona.edu](mailto:smathews@winona.edu).