

## Forum 2: Building the Capacity of LAMs as Community Hubs During Public Health Crises

On March 3, 2022, OCLC hosted 27 participants for the second in a series of three online REALM Forums. Among the participants, 21 represented the library sector and 8 represented the museum sector.

This Forum was designed to facilitate discussion about the factors that might lead a library, archives, or museum (LAM) to be a place that community members turn to in times of crisis for information, resources, services, sanctuary and/or programming. The Forum also elicited perspectives about the challenges of such a role and how those challenges might be addressed, so that cultural heritage institutions and support organizations can envision a path forward together. The two-hour event covered the following agenda items:

- Welcome
- Breakout 1: Learning from each other's experience
  - Round-robin share out of local examples
  - Discussion questions
- Recap themes from Breakout 1 discussion
- Breakout 2: What – and who – makes a community hub?
  - Reflect on the community-centered approach
  - Discussion questions
- Large group discussion: If you had a magic wand...
  - Envision a future state of your institution as community hub
- Next steps and final reflections
  - One action step or takeaway
  - One word to describe current feeling

The overarching discussion question for the Forum was, “How do we build the capacity of libraries, archives, and museums to serve as community hubs during times of public health crisis?”

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## What makes a community hub?

In advance of the Forum, participants were invited to send three words that come to mind when they think of a community hub. The collected words and phrases submitted are shown here as a word cloud:



While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the basic elements of operating as a community-centered institution can be described as an ongoing cycle that includes the five stages shown in the following illustration. The resources needed and effort required for each stage may differ significantly across organizations; and times of crisis can create additional challenges. Forum participants were asked to reflect on their institution’s community response during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how those actions and insights might shape future directions.

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The following summary synthesizes notes from the two breakout discussions and the large group discussion.

### Identify Communities & Their Needs

Participants described the local impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as being multilayered and unevenly distributed across their communities, with some groups being somewhat buffered from its effects, and others being pushed (or pushed further) into situations of urgent need. The situation called for using more than one method or source for identifying people's needs. Examples shared include:

- Community members who contacted the institution directly to ask for help
- Institution outreach to legislators and community members to identify needs and offer services
- Local government agencies and service organizations approaching the institution with information about a need, e.g., rental assistance, emergency funding, unemployment, mental health support

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- Staff who had previous experience supporting community members' applications for federal assistance and other emergency services in times of crisis; with staff anticipating these support requests, the institution was prepared to respond
- Staff observations of local demographic changes, such as a recent influx of new residents and a correlating increase in local housing costs, housing insecurity, and homelessness
- Hosting community conversations with a diverse range of community representatives.

Among the needs that were described by Forum participants:

- **Social connection and wellbeing.** While isolation became a necessary safety measure, especially in the first phase of the pandemic, participants were keenly aware of community members who had depended on their institution for a place to feel connected to others and feel a sense of place. Having access to nature, entertainment options, arts and cultural activities, and people to turn to for information and help is essential for combating feelings of loneliness, depression, and desperation. The feelings were mutual: staff missed seeing and interacting with community members, too; and some participants described staff who struggled with not having their work world to center their life around. Of note, new residents couldn't get to know their local library or museums, and children couldn't visit after school or on field trips.
- **Reduce barriers to access.** The impact of the digital divide showed itself in the numbers of people who were unable to "pivot" online. This included those who had no internet and were also not eligible for free pandemic internet services programs. School children needed technology and connectivity for virtual school, and government agencies were ill-equipped to conduct all services online or in a hybrid format. Library WiFi was often inaccessible when buildings were closed. As more community members were feeling economic stress and uncertainty as byproducts of the pandemic, museums' price of admission and library fines were viewed with greater concern.
- **Space to host essential community services.** Local elected officials needed meeting spaces; court systems needed rooms equipped to host virtual court. Health, legal, and social service organizations sought space for popup clinics.
- **Access to health and human services.** In addition to the healthcare needs directly related to COVID-19—testing, vaccines, for example—many communities experienced increases in food insecurity, housing insecurity, financial insecurity, limited access to fresh drinking water (as parks, schools, and public buildings were closed), increased opioid misuse, and inaccessibility of healthcare.

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- **Community health education.** Explaining the nature of viruses and pandemics. Building vaccine confidence in hesitant populations. Supporting schools and school-age children on health and science topics. Addressing the growing interest in topics related to environmental sustainability and the impact of climate change.

### Build Capacity

Forum participants discussed where they were able to repurpose existing resources and where they needed to find new resources to have the capacity to adapt or expand operations, services, or programs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Staff skills and expertise.** Some institutions took advantage of the disruption in day-to-day work to revitalize skills through professional development and training. Some institutions had previously expanded their expertise by bringing social workers or community health workers on staff. But there were examples of additional training and expertise that were introduced during the pandemic to support community services, including new outreach and engagement coordinators, Narcan training, and peer navigators. With the new funding opportunities, grant writing and fundraising—along with adopting outcomes-based evaluation techniques—were mentioned as necessary additional skills. Supervisors also gained new knowledge and skills around managing staff in ways that incorporate the whole self and support mental and physical wellness.
- **Funding.** Many participants made use of federal grant funding, including IMLS CARES grants, IMLS Communities for Immunity grants, IMLS ARPA Outreach grants, and FCC Emergency Connectivity Fund grants. Participants were grateful for these timely financial supports and, for some, this was the first time they had applied for and received federal grants. Other projects were funded with state funds or through local philanthropic organizations.
- **Space and equipment.** Many institutions did more to use outdoor space, whether it was space they operated or other public space such as local parks or nature trails. Some institutions made improvements to their WiFi so that it could be accessed while the building was closed; and others expanded their inventory of mobile hot spots or laptops to loan to community members. Library parking lots became important real estate, e.g., for curbside pickup, mobile clinics, and WiFi services.
- **Partnerships.** Echoing themes from Forum 1, partnerships with local agencies and organizations were essential for extending and expanding services. Examples of partnerships included
  - *Government*, such as health, housing, wastewater departments; local law enforcement; city bus systems, legal system, and downtown ambassadors

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- *Nonprofits*, such as food banks and other food insecurity organizations, harm reduction organizations, legal aid organizations, low-income community centers, women’s centers, and advocacy organizations for African American and Tribal communities
- *Public and Educational Institutions*, such as other public libraries and museums, K-12 and post-secondary schools
- *Businesses*, such as senior centers and hospitals.

### Design & Deliver Services

Recognizing the disruption in their ability to conduct normal operations, participants’ institutions understood that the community still needed services, necessitating changes in their service design and delivery model to support those needs. Examples of these programs and services are listed here.

#### **Social connection and wellbeing.**

- Offer outdoor activities and play for kids and adults
- Teach outdoor learning programs, such as planting gardens, composting, beekeeping
- Co-design virtual reality experiences for teens
- Teach online art classes
- Host virtual art showcases, including artwork about the pandemic and featuring local artists
- Focus on social connection and wellbeing when planning events to support days of recognition, such as World Kindness Day, World Bee Day, Earth Day
- Respond to local tragedy with compassion kits, books and resources, memorial site
- Call people in the community who might be feeling isolated (elderly, living alone)
- More intentionally make time for conversations with people who came to the library
- Distribute mental health kits
- Host online journal for people to document their pandemic experiences

#### **Reduce barriers to access.**

- Offer mobile hot spots
- Install computers and internet in low-income housing community centers
- Offer Chrome books wired with WiFi
- Provide laptops to complete Census forms (outside, with WiFi)
- Boost WiFi access outside of building
- Add telephone-based services for people without internet
- Introduce free museum days or reduced admission for museum programs
- Eliminate library fines
- Increase language diversity of staff

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- Increase outreach to underserved communities
- Host telehealth stations in rural areas

**Space to host essential community services.**

- Mobile health van on site for low-cost checkups
- Legislators renting space for meetings
- Judicial system using space to host hybrid/virtual court calls

**Access to health and human services.**

- Food distribution and serving meals on site
- Distribute COVID-19 test kits
- Host vaccination clinics
- Increase distribution of drug disposal kits
- Work with harm reduction programs
- Distribute lists of community resources for people experiencing homelessness or other crises
- Distribute information resources on how to navigate SNAP and Medicare/Medicaid
- Install drinking water stations outside the building for free access

**Community education.**

- Educate people on green practices, composting, growing food
- Programs in response to increased local interest in nature, climate, and environmental sustainability topics
- Health and wellness information for rural residents
- Host vaccine confidence clinics for hesitant groups
- Display small library collections in low-income community centers, for people who could not or did not use e-collections or curbside pickup
- Distribute science kits with supplies for children in at-home school
- Exhibits on the history of pandemics and the field of virology
- Science exhibits and educational materials

**Reach & Welcome Community**

Participants described how public health and social justice inequities were made more visible through the pandemic and racial justice movement. For some, these events made it obvious that their institution needed to make changes to be inclusive of and responsive to all community members.

Many participants mentioned that their expanded services reached new people and put their institution on the radar of more stakeholders. Those that did food distribution found that the activity brought in people who hadn't been to the library or didn't know what it had to offer. Staff took the opportunity to inform them about other services as

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well, and these community members realized that access to “knowledge” is broader than they thought. As more people sought out reading material and entertainment during stay-at-home conditions, e-collections brought additional new users to libraries.

Museums’ new visitors included those bringing children who had grown to “museum age” during the pandemic. These families felt comfortable visiting spaces that had safety precautions in place.

Institutions that focused on improving the diversity of their staff and their outreach methods to be more welcoming to all reported reaching new community members as a result.

Some participants shared examples of adapting to user feedback as their institutions tried out new things. For example, a library that had been distributing activity kits for children attending virtual school removed the video components from the kit, in response to parents who wanted to reduce their children’s screen time.

Another participant shared about the experience of hosting an event that failed to be inclusive of the perspectives and lived experiences of Black community members; this spurred the institution to rethink completely how they design their exhibitions and programs.

Some institutions that had eliminated library fines or introduced a free or discounted admission program decided to make those changes permanent because they were successful in reducing barriers for community members—both those new to the institution and already familiar with it.

However, many participants also described how they lost or severely strained relationships with some community members, especially those who did not agree with institutions’ enforcement of safety protocols. Sensing that the experience had breached the two-way trust between staff and community members, some participants expressed concern about their ability to repair those relationships going forward. Additional details about this issue are described under Community in the next section.

## Challenges

Participants were asked to reflect on the challenges that their institution faced in the role of community hub. The responses centered around five areas: capacity, virtual life, community, staff, and decision making.

### Capacity

- No storage facilities for fresh food at the library, so they could only distribute shelf-stable food.
- When the grant funding ran out, the programming stopped—it wasn’t sustainable.

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- When COVID-19 variant surges hit the community, the library was the only one with testing supplies. The high demand for test kits took staff time away from other services.
- There wasn't time to put sustainable structures in place before reacting to the pandemic – just had to start “spinning plates.”
- Staff are now so stretched and so expanded that they are over-extended.
- As the duration of the pandemic has lengthened, it has been more difficult to maintain the support services.
- Evaluating impact is important, but staff have no capacity to do it.
- There's been less time to be more thoughtful and thorough; have settled for “good enough.”
- Outdoor space compromised by impact of wildfires the western regions; unable to use due to poor air quality from smoke.

### **Virtual life**

- Struggles to build and maintain partnerships when interactions were limited to virtual.
- Difficulty forming bonds with new staff and partners when only meeting over Zoom.
- The shift to online brought some new people but also excluded others.
- Virtual story times became less popular over time, as “Zoom fatigue” set in
- Harder to understand the needs of all community members if you can only interact online; need to get out there and talk to them in person.
- Building closures meant that some people lost access to services—they fell through the cracks.

### **Community**

- Political divisiveness and splintered attitudes around masks and other safety protocols; ways to bridge those gaps.
- Maintaining trust of community members.
- Changing demographics. People moved into the area with preconceived attitudes about institutions and without relationships with the local institutions. Some people moved to areas to avoid state or local government-issued mask mandates, and they did not appreciate institutions that had mask policies.
- Increase in housing costs and housing insecurity.
- Poorly designed efforts to document local racial justice activities. Forums that were not inclusive of Black voices.
- Reckoning with the awareness that there are communities that had been inadequately included, reflected, or represented by the institution, such as local history exhibits or programs.

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- Reluctance to survey community members during a combative and divisive time.
- With closed library and museum spaces, people miss out on having chance encounters with someone very different than they are.
- Children not being vaccinated reduced ability to be a hub for families with children. Need to rebuild with this population all over again.
- Staff of partner organizations feeling strained and stressed.
- Not having existing relationships with county organizations already in place.
- Dealing with aggressive, angry visitors.
- Changing from the tendency to talk only to people with similar worldviews.

### **Decision-making/Policy**

- Struggles with our inability to say no or to stop doing things, to make room for new and improved services.
- Negotiating COVID safety policies among different actors that were following different guidelines: government, independent organizations, universities, schools, etc.
- Not letting the few but very loud voices drown out majority views when making policy and protocol decisions.

### **Staff**

- Maintaining staff trust throughout decision-making.
- Some staff saw the additional or expanded services as contributing meaningfully to the community. For others, it was a mindset challenge to adapt to doing the expanded or new community services.
- Filling staff workdays when they can't do their job in the usual way due to closed buildings. Training was a solution for the first phase, but what to do after that was exhausted?
- Figuring out how to work effectively with partner organizations that have different ways of going about their work.
- Staff members who are new in the community; much harder to establish relationships with limited means for interaction.
- New hires during the pandemic who don't know what normal volume of business looks like; how will they cope if numbers return to their previous levels?

## **Reflections and Insights**

The breakout discussions elicited some thoughtful comments about what participants have observed from their experience as a community hub during these past two years.

### **Community connection**

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Many spoke of looking for opportunities to maintain the connection with community members on different sides of the political divide. Participants saw outdoor activities as particularly helpful because masks weren't required outside, reducing the tension between those who had different views about masks as a safety measure.

Some reflected that it was important that they were able to share information resources about COVID-19 so that people could see the science- and fact-based information that was at the root of their institution's safety protocols. In some cases, this helped to diffuse tension or backlash against institution staff who had to enforce the protocols.

Some participants reported that their institution was motivated to better reflect the stories of more of the community, which includes expanding their understanding and awareness of all the communities that exist in their locale. This awareness was coupled with intensified efforts to listen to community members' experiences to gain insights about disparities, their past experiences with federal funding, and which services are and aren't working for them. Some participants expressed concern about whether their institutions would incorporate these improvements into standard practice or let them fall by the wayside.

Participants in communities that are experiencing significant population shifts mused about how their institutions can identify and respond to the rapidly changing community needs.

Relationships between organizations and between an organization and its community are key. Those that had such relationships in place could build on them to respond quickly (for example, one institution added content kits to meals already being distributed by other organizations). Those that lacked such relationships found them challenging to build amid crisis (for example, one museum's difficulty in documenting the Rally for Black Lives without already having strong connections to that community).

Participants stressed the importance of letting the community guide the priorities around which services and programs to offer, and to work with community members to co-create solutions.

Several participants reflected on the changing demographics, attitudes, economies, and cultures in their communities. They hoped that their institutions could remain inviting "third places" for anyone and everyone to visit.

### **Public perceptions**

Many participants found that local constituents broadened their views of their institution during the pandemic. Among the library representatives at the Forum, many reported that more local agencies now recognize the library as a valuable partner and community members have a new appreciation for the library, realizing they needed the library, especially when buildings first closed and services were most limited. Legislators, as well,

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have developed a greater awareness of the value of the library as a vital community resource.

There was additional reflection on how the shift in community members' attitude was an unexpected outcome of the pandemic. "Crisis can show what our organizations are capable of. What we offer and what we do can be considered part of leisure time, but when we help respond to crisis, it illustrates how necessary we are."

The perception of key stakeholders, especially local officials such as mayors and city managers, was seen as an opportunity area. Participants wanted these officials to be aware of the ways the institution was supporting community goals and helping individuals, but felt they needed support for how to communicate this so that it would resonate. They also recognized the importance of measuring outcomes that provide evidence of impact, but struggle to find the resources for this work.

Some noted the increased awareness of the digital divide that challenges the assumption that "everything can be done online." This led to a perception shift from "Why is the library here?" to "We need the library here!"—especially in discussions about digital inequities and broadband.

The perception of "open" shifted for both staff and community members. For libraries, the expansion of curbside, online, and other services allowed more people to see the library as "open" even when the building was not. For museums, many reported seeing themselves beyond the "four walls" and leaned more into virtual and outdoor programming. However, as buildings reopened, participants noted that many community members were excited to be back in those community spaces. And, while the newly revamped online services brought in new audiences and new opportunities for these institutions, some participants reported that they lost connections with older people as a result.

Participants from public libraries emphasized the value of the library as a public and democratic space—one of the few places where people from very different backgrounds and experiences still mingle together. With the growing divisiveness in communities, libraries are still a place where we can see one another as fellow human beings.

Libraries and museums help to build social connections within our communities. In this way, the physical spaces matter more than ever, even if the institution's presence is extended into virtual space.

Some participants expressed concerns about their institution's higher profile in the community, whether expectations had been raised to a level that would be difficult to maintain without additional operational capacity that extends beyond the crisis. One library participant explained, "We noticed a lot of holes in our capacities and tried to fill those. We have developed all these systems that people love—curbside and at the desk,

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online and virtual—while we are in the middle of the ‘Great Resignation.’ How do we keep doing more after the temporary funding runs out?”

### **Proactive partnerships**

In addition to the importance of the services that are provided under normal circumstances, libraries and museums can also step in during crises and provide for needs usually served by others; for example, a library system providing meals for students during school closures to help alleviate food insecurity. Participants connected this with the practice of regularly documenting their institution’s strengths and assets and proactively reaching out to current and potential partners to be sure they’re aware of those strengths before a crisis hits.

Some saw partnerships as a way to avoid falling into the “do more with less” trap. “It’s important to build partnership and collaboration so we’re not all trying to do it ourselves—that’s hard for our staff and a challenge to manage organizationally. Rather than building skills and competencies for staff to take on all these different roles, the best way is to develop strong partners.”

### **Shifting internal attitudes**

Some reflected on how they had learned to let go of some practices—such as library fines or focusing on the return of “library property—that no longer felt important in light of the needs of community members.

Others observed staff members’ increased willingness to be involved in community activities and outreach and stronger feelings of connection to the community: “We are all in this together.” Some participants said they felt their institution was inclined to do more health-related projects going forward.

Some participants expressed the hope that their institution’s staff and stakeholders now see the importance of thinking beyond the building when designing programs and services, so that if physical space is unavailable for a period of time, the institution is not in danger of being forgotten altogether. “We need to be thinking about buy-in from our stakeholders—board members, and other people who have been engaged with us for a long time—to get them to come with us in this new direction.” Others viewed their experience with adaptation during the pandemic as proof that they had been limited in its thinking about the institution’s potential by fusing it’s brand and identity with the physical space. Extending that identity into its activities in schools, community centers, outdoor settings, and virtual space opened up a new world of possibilities for what being “hub” looks like.

Some reported an even more “seismic shift” in their institution’s understanding of its role in the community as a result of COVID-19 and the social justice movement. They

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described staff and leadership who were completely rethinking programs, partnerships, outreach, and operations to build on its strengths as a community hub.

Some reported that the pandemic-related service reduction gave them more time to pursue grants and projects that they would not have had time to do otherwise. They would like to figure out how to make time for these activities during standard operation circumstances, if the requirements for requesting and executing a grant are not too onerous.

Others discovered ways to work and serve their community in virtual formats that they never would have considered before. They are now envisioning what virtual jobs would look like in the longer term.

Staff mental health and wellbeing was foremost in many participants' minds even when talking about community-centered approach. People managers had learned that healthy staff are required for building healthy communities. New or improved practices mentioned included frequent staff check-ins, mindfulness exercises, encouragement to take time off for mental health and wellness, providing time for training and professional development, and encouraging staff to find other things than work to keep them grounded and fulfilled.

Staff safety took on new dimensions as well. Managers found that staff were less anxious when they did not feel forced to comply with a mandate but, instead, had some element of choice. For example, in communities that had eliminated a mask mandate, staff wanted to feel assured that they could wear a mask if they wished.

Participating in the Forum discussion itself led some to an in-the-moment realization of the value of such conversations. They expressed appreciation for opportunities to meet colleagues working in other states, hear what they've been through, and compare notes. They observed that such sessions also provide space to step back, reflect, and take a break from daily operations.

## Waving Our Magic Wand

When asked to envision a positive future for their institution's role as community hub by "waving a magic wand" to eliminate barriers to the outcome, responses reflected changes in attitudes, actions, and results.

**Think outside the building, involve the community in all that we do.** Envision the library as a 24/7 community project not restricted to anyone or any space. Challenge the ways we have always done something. Don't lose the expanded vision we gained throughout this experience. We are community-based, we are community educators—embrace that role whole-heartedly. We are seen as the experienced community leaders that we are.

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**Be a place where everyone feels their experiences are reflected and shared, and where they feel they can come and share their experiences with others.** Our hope is that when people are in our space, they can understand their community better.

**Remove the divisiveness that has made these times so much more challenging.** Divisiveness is pervasive, but we saw the local community unite when a tragedy occurred, so we know it is possible.

**Saying no to say yes.** As a profession, we are not good at letting go. Give ourselves the grace and permission to let go of some programs so we can strengthen and continue the new things. Don't be stretched in too many different directions; we need sustainable operations.

**Remove barriers to funding and partnerships.** Align partnerships so that we can partner more easily, do more, and do it more sustainably. Understand, measure, and value outcomes and impact rather than outputs. Simplify the grant awarding and administration process to decrease the burden on under-resourced institutions. Take risks and have bold conversations with funders—convince them to invest in organizations rather than projects or programs.

## Next Steps

The REALM project team is using the input from these discussions to document recommendations for future projects or initiatives that can help build the capacity of LAMs to serve as community hubs in times of crisis. That documentation will be part of the final set of outputs for the project.

The summary of the Forum will be discussed with the REALM Executive Project Steering Committee and Joint Working Group in April 2022. The final version of this summary will be circulated to those stakeholders, Forum participants, and posted to the REALM website.

## Forum Discussion Prompts

### Breakout 1: Learning from each other's experience

- Share a brief example of something your institution or organization did in response to a need surfaced during COVID-19.
- Did the experience shift internal or external perceptions of your institution's role in the community? In what way and by whom?
- Did you or your institution learn something new about your community during this experience?

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**Breakout 2: What – and who – makes a community hub?**

- What led you/your institution to take on or expand your role as community hub during this crisis?
- What beliefs, attitudes, values are embedded in that decision?
- Which parts of the 5-cycle approach are the most critical to address or have offered the most significant barrier?
- To be successful in the role of community hub, what do your stakeholders need? How do these needs complement or compete?

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