San Mateo County Libraries

Agenda Item V.

To:	JPA Governing Board
From:	Anne-Marie Despain, Director of Library Services
	Carine Risley, Deputy Director of Library Services
Date:	September 15, 2020
Meeting:	September 21, 2020
Re:	Current Operating Status and Phased Reopening Update

Background

On March 13, the Library JPA Operations Committee and Governing Board held emergency meetings to discuss our level of emergency response to COVID-19. The difficult decision was made to close our libraries starting on Monday, March 16 to help mitigate the spread of the coronavirus in our community. Subsequently, the County Health Officer issued a Shelter in Place Order requiring a suspension of all in-person services, including information services, programming, events, outreach to our communities, technical instruction, literacy support, public internet access inside our buildings, check-outs and pick-ups of physical library materials, returns of library materials, and access to our in-library computers.

Staff were able to quickly adapt their technological skills, creativity, and service ethic to the new environment and mobilized to provide dynamic, high quality, enhanced virtual services to our communities.

We prototyped, printed, and delivered hundreds of PPE to essential workers, including face-shields and ear savers to County Health, and to address the digital divide we procured an additional 500 hotspots and 3 high capacity hotspots and extended exterior Wi-Fi range at all locations. By the beginning of May, library programs streaming on our YouTube channel enjoyed nearly 4,700 views in just 28 days. We increased access to staff with a dedicated phone line and live texting support to make reading recommendations, answer questions, connect people to resources, and help patrons navigate our vast digital resources. Behind the scenes, we revamped our website and worked to continuously curate, collect, and significantly expand our digital collections.

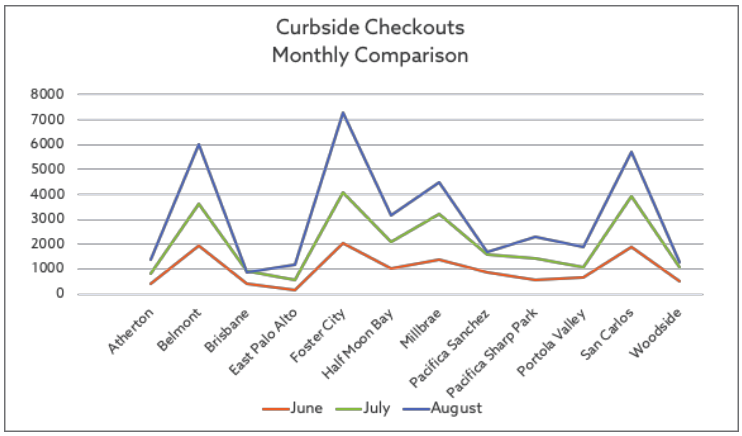
On May 18, 2020, the Library's COVID-19 Phased Reopening Plan was presented to the JPA Governing Board. The plan has four phases: Phase 1: On-site Planning and Preparation, Phase 2: Customized Curbside Services, Phase 3: Limited Public Access to Facilities, and Phase 4: New Normal. The board approved the Plan and provided authority to the Library Director (after consultation with public officials and JPA members) to transition library operations as needed and, on a case-by-case basis, to the appropriate phased level of service. San Mateo County Libraries transitioned into Phase 2: Customized Curbside Services on June 6.

Discussion

Current Operations

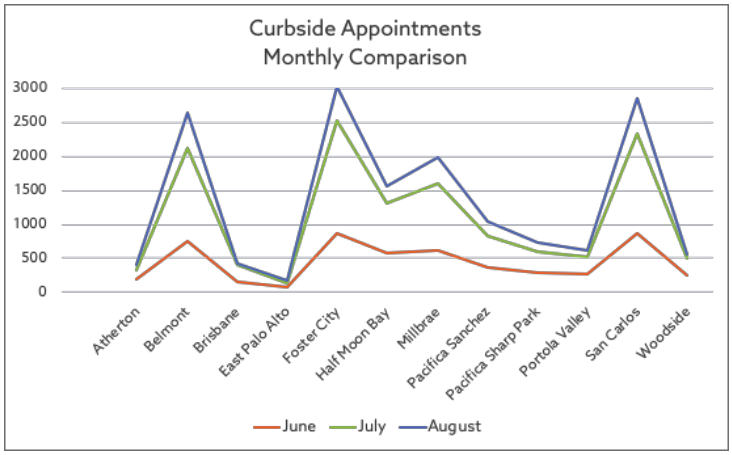
Staff began phased public services outside library buildings three days a week at all twelve locations. Curbside Services were expanded on July 14 to offer five-day service. Through curbside pickup, library materials and other services are packaged and provided at the curb, using contactless procedures. We also began accepting returns and have implemented library industry best practices of quarantining items for four days.

In the last three months, a total of 34,408 curbside appointments have been booked and a total of 73,604 items have been checked out.



Checkouts of physical library materials have steadily grown as people have learned about our Curbside Service, dramatically increasing once we switched to five-day weekly operations.

Many factors affect people booking appointments. Constraining factors include the County returning to the state watch list and people choosing to stay home more as well as wildfires and poor air quality. In June, our daily average for curbside pickup appointments was 474. By August, that number had grown to a daily average of 765 pick-up appointments.



Our curbside service has catered to all age groups and has made a significant impact when it comes to helping people expand their world due to this new constricting environment. Through positive testimonials, thank you notes tucked in our book drops, and flowers left for our librarians, we feel confident that we are fulfilling a vital community need. As one customer said, "I am writing to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the process you have established allowing us to pick up books from the Library. I used the service earlier this week and was positively delighted with the ease and safety of the entire process, from making the appointment to the actual pickup. Thank you all so very much!!"

From June through August, we have provided responsive remote services to our community members 12,891 times through the launch of our new text messaging service, consolidated phone line, and email. Our staff have successfully helped individuals connect to our resources, provided recommendations, answered questions, and offered a caring human connection by phone, text, and email. In August, staff typically provided virtual personalized support to anywhere from 100 to 250 individuals per day.

Virtual programs, including English Language Conversation Clubs, which filled up within hours of open registration; formerly in-person book clubs that transitioned online; new book clubs established to build community and combat isolation; popular one-on-one technology assistance appointments to help navigate an almost entirely online world; and youth and family programs like Kayla Marie's Musical Jamboree, Shao Mei's Mandarin Storytime, Adrienne's Baby Storytime and Create with Kelly, have developed a faithful following. Since June, our virtual experiences have been viewed 15,290 times.

We began Summer Learning book distribution on June 23 and by summer's close, had given more than 70,000 free books to youth and families through Curbside Service. Families were so excited to pick up the books that many returned to pick up another round for their children to enjoy and learn throughout the summer. Traditional summer programs were retooled as staff connected families to high-quality virtual programs including a summer-long STEAM Camp and a weekly Summer Learning Showcase series. Our STEAM camp featured 108 staff-led activities for youth hosted on YouTube that have been viewed over 3,600 times.

To support families and teachers now thrown into unprecedented digital learning at home, we created a dedicated Teacher and Student Resource page with relevant blogs and our online resources, like live tutoring for students and book guides for teachers.

During the past six months, our highest priority has been the health and safety of our staff and community. We have implemented socially distanced work on-site in stable staff cohorts and, where possible, telework. All staff wear face coverings, observe social distancing guidelines, and participate in health screenings. In addition, we've provided face shields, gloves, and staff cleaning supplies, along with extra time to regularly sanitize work areas and wash hands. We are offering flexibility to staff who need it and are providing wellness workshops and sessions to support staff with anxiety and promote self-care, mindfulness, meditation, and coping strategies in this challenging environment.

San Mateo County Libraries staff are continually evaluating the success of our Curbside and Virtual Services to consider improvements and additional services. Fall 2020 will include an expansion of curbside to include: adjustments to allow for friendly services in inclement weather and additional walk-up capacity; printing on demand; remote 3-D printing; subject requests and staff-curated selections of materials; reinstated check-out of ukuleles, bicycles, and sewing machines; and increased access to technology.

Next Steps

During this unprecedented time, we utilized a patron survey to collect data that would help guide us in moving forward with reopening plans. Results showed that 80% of our patrons express some level of concern regarding coronavirus, 40% of patrons say they will wait until the virus is contained or there is a vaccine to resume modified visits to libraries, and only a third will visit as soon as modified service resumes.

Staff have conducted a thorough review of what our modified services could look like following current restrictions; under the State's industry guidance, libraries are mandated to follow retail guidelines and are encouraged to maximize curbside or outdoor services. While the new orders do allow libraries to open with modifications and up to 25% capacity, the retail guidelines prohibit many beloved features of our library buildings and require elimination or removal of public seating and materials that can be handled by multiple users. They also do not permit the provision of amenities that make our spaces enjoyable and discourage the sharing behaviors inherent to our services that make libraries distinct from the larger retail category.

Library materials are shared and reused, and the act of browsing physical books indoors can be a high-touch practice that may not be in the interest of protecting the health and safety of those we serve or library staff. According to the latest research regarding the persistence of the COVID-19 virus on various library materials, libraries have broadly adopted the practice of quarantining returned library items for a minimum of four days. Unlike retail stores, libraries have thousands of items going out and being returned daily, which increases space needs as well as safety precautions and processes.

Even if other services or buildings are re-opening, the specific nature of library services may make them unsuited to re-open until the situation has improved further. Libraries serve a variety of high-risk populations (which include older adults and the unhoused population) and behavior modeling in some cases has suggested that book-browsing may be a higher risk activity in indoor group settings.

Based on patron feedback we are confident that our current and future planned services will be able to provide our communities with the support it needs, while introducing safe, innovative, and fun measures to reframe and enhance community connections that are vital in today's world. Currently, 87% of patrons feel we are doing a great job responding to the Covid-19 Pandemic and 62% of patrons say that curbside pickup is extremely important to them.

Recommendation

For the health and safety of all, staff recommend continuing Phase 2 Operations and Curbside Service through the end of 2020. Our goal is to protect the safety of our community members while providing a high level of service. To help mitigate the spread of

COVID-19 in our community, we will continue to offer access to all library experiences except gathering inside our facilities and will use the remainder of the year to prepare our facilities to open to the public as early as January 2021.

We continue to find wisdom in moving slowly and making prudent choices as an organization. For the remainder of 2020, staff recommend further refining of current operations, introducing new services to enhance the quality of life for residents, substantially increasing support of schools and student academic success, addressing the digital divide with expanded access to technology, and delivering targeted support to vulnerable populations.

Fiscal Impact

There is no fiscal impact in accepting this report. If the board approves advancing to Phase 3 as early as January 2021, staff will begin working to modify spaces to facilitate public social distancing and increase safety precautions. Funds are included in the current budget to support this work.

Recommendation

Recommend JPA Governing Board accept the Current Operating Status and Phased Reopening Update and provide input and direction to staff on next steps. Operations Committee members present at the September 15, 2020 meeting concurred with this recommendation.