



COVID 19 RESOURCES

FOR MUSEUM PEOPLE

Considerations for Reopening Illinois Museums

Date: 4/29/20

Presented by David Oberg

Vice President, Illinois Association of Museums
Executive Director, Elmhurst History Museum

While museums in Illinois are temporarily shuttered as part of the Governor's shelter in place mandate, museum staff and volunteers are looking to the future and trying to prepare for reopening later this year. Presently, there are no industry-wide guidelines for the museum community, and local conditions will certainly play a role in individual museum decision making. However, if we look to those nations where museums are beginning to reopen, there are a number of practices emerging that warrant consideration and discussion.

An examination of museums which have reopened primarily in China is instructive as we consider what opening museums in Illinois might look like. In addition, there are emerging examples of museums opening in Germany and the Czech Republic which may help inform our decisions. Recent discussions have indicated a number of trends:

QR Codes and Health Status: In China, residents use several government recommended apps to receive a health rating, which determines if they can travel and visit sites, including museums. To receive a rating, users must download an app embedded in a government approved platform. The apps work differently by city and province, but they typically require users to register with basic information—name, national identity card number, phone number, and home address. Subsequent questions are more invasive, quizzing users on health status and travel history, and asking them to identify any close contacts diagnosed with COVID-19.

Based on this input, the app's algorithms dictate the user's freedom of movement through colors green, yellow and red. Green is required for entry to shops, museums, public parks, residential compounds, and commercial buildings. In some places, green codes are needed to ride the subway, buy a train ticket, or take a taxi. Users present QR codes when they visit public sites, ride public transportation, etc., so that their travel is captured in real time. If an outbreak of COVID-19 is detected, users' QR codes help to determine if they were potentially exposed and if travel restrictions are necessary. Singapore has a similar system. While this may sound draconian, other countries are using slightly less invasive techniques to aid with contact tracing. (See below).

Contract Tracing: Australia has created an app, which people can voluntarily download to help with contact tracing. Nearly 2.5 million people downloaded it within the first 48 hours after it went live. In other affected countries that are reopening, patrons, at a minimum, are required to sign in when visiting cultural sites and restaurants, sharing their name, contact information, recent travel and indicating if they have come in contact with anyone diagnosed with COVID-19, anyone showing symptoms, or if they or someone they have been in contact with is running a fever. This information may be used to track down and potentially quarantine individuals if an outbreak is detected at a specific site.



Admission: In China, a QR scan is a must, and in many countries, the aforementioned contact tracing questionnaire is required for admission. In China, multiple temperature readings with an infrared thermometer are also required for admission. Anyone running a fever or manifesting symptoms consistent with COVID-19, is denied admission and detained in an area set aside for quarantine. Health officials are then contacted for testing. Staff and volunteers are required to submit to temperature scans as well. Credit cards rather than cash are stressed, to limit interaction, and plexiglass shields separating staff and patrons are common. Some museums are setting aside special hours for the most vulnerable. This is often done at the beginning of the day, after cleaning protocols have been observed and the institution is at its most pristine. Other institutions have set aside special entrances for the most vulnerable to minimize exposure to crowds.

Face Masks: Face masks are required for admission, and museum staff and volunteers are required to wear face masks as well. A simple cloth mask will suffice. N95 respirator masks should be reserved for medical personnel and first responders only. In Illinois, as of May 1, all patrons, staff and volunteers must wear masks in public buildings where social distancing cannot be easily practiced. Masked staff and volunteers can look intimidating to patrons. To offset this, some museums are equipping front line staff and volunteers with lanyards that include their name and a picture of their smiling face. There are YouTube videos to coach people on how to smile with their eyes. Playful, colorful masks are also a consideration to soften the image of front line staff and volunteers.

Capacity: In China, capacity varies by region, with most galleries mandating an attendance ceiling of 50% capacity, although some have a ceiling as low as 30% capacity. Digital and audio tours are available in some museums, with strict cleaning protocols, but group tours are not permitted. The most severe example is Brandenburg, Germany, where capacity is limited to 1 person for per 160 square feet. The Governor of Texas just announced that museums may choose to open on May 1, with a ceiling of 25% occupancy and with the caveat that all hands-on exhibits be closed. Looking to restaurants in China, which might speak to our facilities with on-site dining, tables are placed 1.5 meters apart and large groups are separated into tables of four. In South Korea, diners are not allowed to sit side by side. There are no stools in bar areas, and patrons order from the bar and then move away from it once they have been served. In the U.S., Alaska is beginning to reopen restaurants, but at 25% capacity.

Enhanced Cleaning Protocols: Museum staff and volunteers regularly clean touch points, and most museums are deliberately obvious in announcing cleaning times. Patrons should be able to see cleaning done on a regular basis. With Clorox wipes in short supply, it should be noted that bleach and water, as well as soap and water, will get the job done. Signs regarding cleaning protocols, as well as signs stressing hand washing and hygiene, are placed prominently in public areas. Hand sanitizer stations are everywhere. Larger museums may reduce public hours to provide more time for enhanced cleaning.

Attendance: While some museums have reopened, not everyone is flocking to visit just yet. Outdoor attractions, where it is easier to maintain some social distancing, are performing fairly well. Indoor sites have seen 10-30% of normal attendance in these early days. Periodic studies of Americans to gauge intent to visit have shown stable interest in returning to museum galleries, though hands-on children's museums and science centers, with multiple interactives serving as touch points, have not performed as well. Theaters and performing arts venues, where there is potential for many patrons in a confined space have likewise not performed as well. The discussants involved in the American Alliance of Museums' webinar on April 23 noted that in China, people were still skittish about large crowds, and there was anticipation that this could continue for at least six months.



Planning for Illinois Museums: As we consider these models for Illinois museums, it is important to consider federal and state guidelines, as they will inform any decisions we make about our own institutions. Please note that local conditions may vary, and your county health department and local guidelines will ultimately determine your individual response. In addition, institutions vary in size and scope and ultimately, you will need to determine what is best for your patrons, volunteers and staff.

Federal Guidelines: The federal government currently proposes a three phase approach to gradually reopening the economy, once local pre-conditions are met. Prior to entering Phase I, communities must:

- See a significant, sustained, 14-day downward trajectory of documented COVID-19 cases, influenza-like illnesses, and COVID-like cases, OR a significant, sustained downward trajectory of positive tests as a percentage of total tests
- See regional hospitals have capacity to be able to treat all patients without crisis care
- Have a robust testing program in place for at-risk healthcare workers, including emerging antibody testing
- Have the ability to quickly set up safe and efficient screening and testing sites for symptomatic individuals and trace contacts for those testing positive for COVID-19
- Be able to quickly and independently supply sufficient PPE and critical medical equipment to handle a surge in cases

Once these guidelines have been met, communities may begin to gradually reopen local economies as follows:

Phase I: At this point, vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place and employers should continue to encourage telework when possible and feasible. Non-essential travel should be minimized. Employees should return to work in phases, avoid congregating in social areas where social distancing protocols cannot be enforced, and minimize non-essential travel. When in public or when socializing, groups of more than 10 should be avoided. At this stage, schools and organized youth activities should remain closed, as should day care facilities and camps. Restaurants, theaters, sporting venues, and houses of worship can operate under strict physical distancing protocols, as can gyms, with enhanced sanitation protocols.

Phase II: Vulnerable individuals should continue to shelter in place, telework should still be considered when feasible, and those returning to work should be mindful and take precautions when returning to homes with vulnerable residents. Special accommodations should be made for employees who are members of a vulnerable population. People should still take care to maximize physical distance in public spaces. Social gatherings for more than 50 people should be avoided, unless precautionary measures are observed. At this point, schools, day care facilities and camps can reopen. Larger venues, such as restaurants, theaters, sporting venues and places of worship can operate with moderate physical distancing protocols. Non-essential travel can resume and bars can reopen with diminished standing-room occupancy.



Phase III: Vulnerable individuals may resume public interactions, but should practice physical distancing and minimize exposure to social settings where distancing may not be practical, unless precautionary measure are observed. Unrestricted staffing can resume. Large venues, such as restaurants, theaters, sporting venues and places of worship can operate under limited physical distancing protocols. Bars may operate with increased standing room occupancy. Visits to senior care facilities and hospitals can resume, with diligent hygiene.

Definitions: Vulnerable individuals are classified as the elderly, or those with serious underlying health conditions, including: high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, or those with compromised immune systems.

What Might Reopening Look Like? Based on models from the international museum community and federal guidelines on a phased reopening, the following is a speculative exercise in what reopening an Illinois museum might look like. Please note that this is not an attempt at a “one size fits all” solution. Local conditions, scope of operations and overall business model for your institution will ultimately determine the best approach for your facility. Phase I of reopening your institution may not line up neatly with Phase I under federal guidelines. Ultimately, state and local guidelines, and your local health department should inform your decisions.

Reopening the Museum Phase I: Following China’s model, the first phase would be a soft reopening of the museum’s galleries with a strict ceiling on the number of patrons allowed in each gallery. This could be 30-50% of total capacity. CDC and Department of Health guidelines should ultimately inform this number. If possible, timed tickets purchased online, or timed admissions, should be used to help reinforce strict controls on admissions. Online ticket registration will minimize contact during the early phase of reopening. Credit card sales are preferred to cash, to minimize interaction. Consideration should be given for a special admission time for vulnerable populations or a special entrance which shields them from larger crowds.

At this point, only paid staff or volunteers who are not classified as vulnerable, should man the museum. Care should be given to separate work and volunteer stations in keeping with physical distancing requirements. Consideration should be given to staggering shifts to aid in physical distancing as well. All staff and volunteers should be required to take their temperatures prior to reporting for duty and again half way through the day for added safety.

Taking patron temperatures with an external, infrared thermometer prior to entrance may be a consideration. Capturing contact information and inquiring about potential contact with anyone exposed to COVID-19 may be a consideration, to aid in contact tracing.

Per state of Illinois mandate, staff and patrons will be required to wear cloth face masks for added security, and museums should take measures to install plexiglass barriers between front desk staff and the public. To give a friendlier appearance, staff should wear lanyards with photos of them smiling. Your institution may wish to consider museum branded masks or transparent interpreter masks if they are available. The latter show the mouth, and are friendlier to the public. Consider providing inexpensive cloth masks for patrons who do not bring their own. Sewing or making cloth masks could be a good project for volunteers unable to return to the museum, but looking for a way to stay engaged.



Hand sanitizer stations should be placed near the entrance and outside galleries. Enhanced cleaning protocols should be in place and should be publicly announced and highly visible. Publicly posted messages on proper hand washing and guidance on reducing exposure to COVID-19 should be on display in public areas.

At this early stage, on-site programming for groups should be avoided. Online programming, activity sheets and self-guided walking and biking tours might be a consideration. Hands-on learning stations should be closed and museum staff should consider alternative learning solutions for exhibits, rather than traditional hands-on stations for the next 12-18 months. QR codes linked to video feed, video on a continuous loop, backdrops for photos, and disposable scavenger hunts in lieu of traditional interactive components might be worth exploring. If hands-on learning stations are employed at all during this time frame, they should stand up to rigorous cleaning and must be patrolled and cleaned very frequently.

Reopening the Museum Phase II: At this point, museums can consider raising the ceiling on the number of walk-ins, but should still keep galleries below maximum occupancy. Museums should continue to push online ticket sales and/or timed admissions. Face masks for staff, volunteers and visitors should continue to be required. Hand sanitizer stations would continue to be the norm, as would enhanced cleaning protocols. Special hours for vulnerable populations or special entrances should still be considered. Temperature scans and contact tracing for patrons may still be a possibility. Staff and volunteers should continue to take temperatures prior to coming to work and again half way through their shift. Physical distancing should still be a consideration when determining work stations and staggered shifts may help with this.

At this stage, staff or volunteers categorized as vulnerable could choose to return, but only if extra precautions are taken. Museums may wish to consider limited, on-site programming for groups of 50 or less, with an emphasis on outdoor programming that encourages social distancing. Any indoor programming would require physical distancing measures, and museums with a large contingent of senior patrons may still want to avoid indoor programming at this stage. Summer camps might be a possibility, but only with enhanced hygiene protocols. Supplies should be bundled into individual kits to avoid any cross contamination. Online camps and lectures may be worth exploring.

Reopening the Museum Phase III: At this point, galleries could return to full occupancy rates, so long as masks and hand sanitizing stations continue to be used. Walk-in traffic could resume, replacing online ticket sales and timed admissions. All other safety and cleaning protocols would need to be strictly observed. The ceiling on outdoor programs could be raised to 250 people, and indoor programs for groups of up to 50 people, including vulnerable populations, could resume at this stage, so long as enhanced safety measures, including masks, are strictly observed.

Collections: With people sheltering in place for an extended period of time, many have had extensive time to tidy and reorganize. More than a few will likely be coming with images, artifacts and ephemera for your collections. In keeping with best practices, these items should be isolated from collections, should be handled with gloves, and as an added protection, you should wash your hands thoroughly after handling. COVID-19 can live for as long as five days on paper, ceramic, glass and metal, and items stored in basements, attics, crawl spaces and garages may harbor pests, mold or mildew.



A Final Note: Local conditions will change and revised guidelines are likely to emerge. Keep abreast of the latest developments by following literature in the museum community and look to your local health department, and the CDC for updated information. Over time, mandates on crowd size may relax further, especially if therapeutic drugs are developed. However, we are going to be living with this for a long time, and the chances of additional resurgences are likely. Just as we will move forward from one phase to another, there is a strong likelihood that we will need to fall back as well. Stay informed, and stay safe!



For more information and to become or renew your membership visit:

IllinoisMuseums.org

About IAM

Mission: It is the mission of Illinois Association of Museums to provide advocacy, promote best practices, and foster the exchange of ideas for the Illinois museum community.

Vision: IAM will be the recognized voice of, and a valued resource for, the state's diverse museum community.

Affiliations: IAM is an independent museum network. IAM supports the work of the American Alliance of Museums, the American Association of State and Local History, the Association of Midwest Museums, and various other local and regional museum networks across Illinois. IAM seeks to collaborate with all museum professional groups to promote best practices around the state.

Illinois Association of Museums
P.O Box 1174
La Salle, IL 61301
Phone:815-343-4814
illinoismuseums@gmail.com