The public library has always been a trusted source of information with the oldest library on American soil beginning with a 400-book donation in the 1630s to a new university by John Harvard, which honored him by adopting his name.

The expansion of academic libraries in the 1950s was linked to the increase of enrollments in higher education. In those days, the librarian was revered as the “search engine.”

Fast-forward to 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on these institutions.

At the historic Union Library Company of Hatborough, Montgomery County, Director Michael Celec said, libraries had to close in March and during that time increased online resources. “We’ve offered streaming movies, audiobooks, e-books, magazines, and so on, and in the early pandemic when everyone was at home, we added several online content services that our patrons could access,” Celec said.

He added that in the spring there was no way for patrons to get physical books, but the library staff were available remotely to provide technical support on the new online resources.

“We started offering online library card sign-up,” Celec said, “which you normally have to do in person. We found ways to be flexible and to reach people.”

Later in the summer as most of the state went to the “yellow phase,” the Union Library added contactless pickup. Residents could request books, then staff would take them to their cars in the parking lot.

“We’re still offering this, and I expect we will be for a long time. It’s the lowest risk way to get physical books,” Celec continued.

As more restrictions were lifted, he said the library offered book browsing and computer use inside the building with advance appointments and time limits.

“We increased our hours gradually so that we were open six days a week. All the services we added during the pandemic are still available. While we can’t host groups or gatherings, we’re here for the public and have found ways to deliver practically everything else.”

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Even before COVID-19, a September 2020 report from the Center for Rural Government, *The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Providing Access to Online Government Services*, reported that traditional library functions, which emphasized assisting patrons with finding materials, along with assistance with digital library services, including e-books, reflected the growing influence technology has on library services, in general.

In the study, the library staff were asked about assisting patrons with online tasks. Over half said they were often called upon to assist with completing job applications, preparing tax forms, and completing PA Department of Transportation (PennDOT) forms. Staff from rural libraries had more of their time devoted to PennDOT forms and applications for public assistance compared to libraries in urban counties. Librarian respondents at urban libraries, on the other hand, reported helping with voter registration more often than their rural counterparts.

**COVID Sharing**

Not surprisingly, librarians are good at sharing information with each other, as well as the community. In Montgomery County, Celec said, there was increased communication among the library directors.

While a lot of the adjustments to the pandemic were similar for all of the libraries, some changes were not because of the size of the library building or the types of residents who used the facility.

“We shared ideas and closely tracked what our neighbors were doing, everyone had to make a custom plan that fit their residents and their situation,” he added.

Chrisi Buker, executive director of the PA Library Association (PLA) said it held twice weekly calls for library directors and staff to share best practices, questions, and what the practical applications of various directives looked like. She said it was especially helpful for rural libraries that have more limited resources to tap into.

**Funding**

Library funding, critical to expanding programming and services, has often faced challenges at the state level. Finding dollars either locally or at the state level may be especially difficult in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Bonnie Goble, library director at the Cleve J. Fredricksen Library in Camp Hill Borough, Cumberland County, said direct development (fundraising planned and run by a staff member) has the best way to supplement resources in the face of dwindling government support.

For example, her library’s development efforts account for about 27% of its revenue. Interestingly, in the time of lockdowns and ongoing service adjustments, library development found donors generous and serious about supporting libraries.

The *Role of Rural Public Libraries* report included a data analyses that revealed that when adjusted for inflation, PA library revenue had fallen by 8% over the last 10 years.

Still, when compared with other states, PA ranked in the top 15 for state library funding; however, it ranked as the second lowest in terms of local government funding.

When comparing rural and urban libraries, the research indicated differences in funding. Per capita operating revenues for rural libraries were substantially lower than urban ones with rural libraries relying more on funding from the state government.

Overall PA’s public libraries have 10% less purchasing power per resident than they did a decade ago. At the same time, these libraries continue to be trusted resources in their communities.
Not Just About the Books

Public libraries have increasingly taken roles in their communities beyond those traditionally associated with book repositories.

Public libraries are safe, accessible spaces where people expect to find a wide range of resources and assistance. In some cases, librarians have become something like social workers, helping citizens with accessing government, employment, and mental health services.

“Local governments can be better stewards for public libraries by taking the time to understand what libraries are and how they benefit the community,” said Nichole Henline, director of the Monroeville Public Library, Allegheny County. “We are no longer just repositories of books; we are hubs that create connection and vibrancy in the community.”

Buker of PLA said that rural libraries are critical supporters for their communities, and provide a variety of services, from copying, printing, faxing, computers, internet access, and support and referrals to access to government services such as unemployment, job searches, resume writing, and more.

“These services are beyond the normal reading, physical materials, social connections, and information provided. So, when buildings had to be closed in the spring, it created real hardships for people and especially some of our most vulnerable populations,” she added. “But librarians are amazing, creative individuals who work to stretch every penny to support their communities.”

She said that libraries found support and grant funds to extend internet access to parking lots and areas outside their buildings, and to set up computers and printers in lobbies to allow access and maintain safety protocols.

But she acknowledged that rural libraries have serious financial limitations – small staffs of primarily part-time workers with...
no benefits, cancelled fundraisers, and loss of donations and revenues. In fact, 63% of libraries operate with zero to two full-time positions.

Local support for public library services is usually the biggest area of funding, and during the pandemic there have been a lot of concerns about cuts to funding.

She added that some libraries had to lay off staff and, when re-opening, had to reduce hours of operations and limit some services.

“While the passing of the state budget is a big help, we are also concerned that local funding for libraries remains strong,” she said.

Buker said that a large part of what PLA does is advocate for stable and strong financial support for libraries.

“Libraries are not funded 100% through tax dollars,” she said. “Instead, they rely on a combination of state aid, local municipal support, donations, and for most, fundraisers to support their operational budgets.”

In fact, Buker said, public libraries received the first significant funding increase in more than a decade, and it was hoped to be part of a multi-year restoration of funding after cuts of 30% in 2009.

“Government leaders,” Henline said, “can also be better stewards for public libraries by pushing for sustainable funding. Talking up the library on a regular basis, as they do for the parks and the police departments, would also go a long way to creating the sustainability and understanding that libraries are more than just a place for books.”

Monroeville library officials aren’t waiting for others to explain what is needed.

They use the “turning outward” method to focus on what the community needs by changing processes and thinking in order to make conversations more community-focused; being proactive in the area of community issues; and putting community aspirations first.

“COVID-19 has highlighted just how important it is for everyone to have access to the internet, something libraries have focused on for years, but we’ve taken it further now. Thanks to the highlighting of this issue during the pandemic, some of our financial supporters have helped to procure more hotspots to bring the internet to more community members,” Henline said.

Many libraries have not only ramped up their online presence and scaled up their social media, but have also provided timely and factual information to the people and neighborhoods they serve during COVID-19.

About the author: Patti Boccassini-Hill is a project manager and media solutions adviser for Triscari Video | Web | Marketing in Camp Hill, PA. Previously, she was the publisher and editor-in-chief of Harrisburg Magazine for nearly 19 years.

Contributing writer Heidi Hormel contributed to this article.

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