



Returning to Service: Libraries and COVID-19

Although many libraries have re-opened (or re-closed) their physical buildings, some directors and managers continue to adjust and adapt to the latest challenges related to the public health crisis. They continue to grapple with these two central questions:

“As we start to re-open our buildings, or start to return to ‘normal’ operations, how can we do this safely?”

“What’s the potential for material (returned by patrons, or transported by the statewide courier) to be ‘infected’ with COVID-19?”

Both questions were addressed in late March during an IMLS-sponsored webinar “Mitigating COVID-19 When Managing Paper-Based, Circulating, and Other Types of Collections.” Then, in late spring through the summer, OCLC and other partners announced the REALM project, designed “to produce science-based information about how materials can be handled to mitigate COVID-19 exposure to staff and visitors of archives, libraries, and museums.”

Protect Your Employees and Volunteers

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) has released guidance on preparing workplaces for COVID-19. It’s reasonable to classify library workers ***who interact with the public*** as being at Medium Exposure Risk. OSHA recommends that such employees may need to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) “some combination of gloves, a gown, a face mask, and/or a face shield or goggles.” In addition (at service desks, for instance), employers should “install physical barriers, such as clear plastic sneeze guards, where feasible.” <https://www.osha.gov/Publications/OSHA3990.pdf>

Key takeaways:

- Staff members and volunteers are your library’s single-most valuable assets. Services don’t run without them, *so take protection guidelines seriously.*
- Consider easing/staging into full-service mode. Perhaps provide “takeout” or curbside service, or schedule protected access hours to your building for vulnerable individuals, including elderly and those with underlying health concerns (much the way some retailers do).
- Consider reduced public hours, allowing for shelving activity when patrons are not actively moving throughout the library.
- Weigh the risk of rushing to re-open all public spaces, meeting rooms, small study rooms, and lounge areas, which encourages gatherings of people. What would be worse, delaying a full return to service (to keep your people and your community safe) - **or** - a news headline: “Library Becomes Viral Hot Zone for COVID-19 Infections.”

- Ensure staff members and volunteers interacting with the public and handling library materials have protective gear: gloves and masks. If your library can't yet procure those supplies, then it may be a sign that it is still too soon to re-open.
- Every library operates under local control, so use situational, thoughtful decision making *based on facts*.

Deep Clean Your Library

BEFORE opening your library building, FULLY READ the CDC's guidance on "Cleaning and Disinfection for Community Facilities." <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/cleaning-disinfection.html> Seriously. Take time and read this slowly.

Key takeaways:

- Frequently clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces.
- Coronaviruses are quite susceptible to many household and commercial disinfectants, including Clorox wipes. *Use them*. Not every cleaning product is certified effective against viruses.
- The EPA's "List N: Disinfectants for Use Against SARS-CoV-2" is a good resource. <https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2>

Handle Materials Safely

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in March reported, "Generally coronaviruses survive for shorter periods at higher temperatures and higher humidity than in cooler or dryer environments. However, we don't have direct data for this virus, nor do we have direct data for a temperature-based cutoff for inactivation at this point. The necessary temperature would also be based on the materials of the surface, the environment, etc." **And then, drumroll...** The REALM project offers answers to many of these unknowns. Lab test results show how long the virus lives on a variety of surfaces, under different conditions (stacked or unstacked). <https://www.oclc.org/realm/research/lab-testing.html>

Key takeaways:

- Consider a staged, "quarantine zone" where materials can be disinfected (when reasonable) or left for a minimum of 24 hours before returning to circulation.
- If disinfecting mountains of material is impractical, or back-office space is a concern, consider utilizing a public meeting room, or even renting one or more Portable Storage Containers (think: PODS) where these items can be staged and secured for many days. Viruses are not known to live for very long outside of a "host," so even a 24-hour quarantine of material *significantly reduces the likelihood of viability for transmission*.
- Ensure staff members handling library materials have protective gear: gloves and masks. If your library still can't procure those supplies, then that may be a sign it's too soon to open.
- Read this good two-page summary, provided by the REALM project literature review. <https://www.oclc.org/content/dam/realm/documents/lit-review-visual.pdf>

Variables Out of Your Control

Even when your library building may be ready to re-open, remember there are other libraries or other partner organizations that may still be in suspended-service mode, including: vendors, suppliers, schools, small businesses, and courier services. Consider how your library operations may be impacted.

Share and Discuss Your Plans

Have some creative ideas for how your library plans to stay safe? Need to bounce ideas off someone? Utilize your trusted colleagues at other libraries or CLiC. Our “Colleague on Call” service is available to talk through these things with you. <https://www.clicweb.org/>

References used in the production of this guide

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