May 30, 2020

Continuity of Operations Plan – Covid-19

The state Department of Libraries recommends libraries have such a plan in place, however three of the four examples they have posted are largely obsolete less than a month after they were posted because of the level of detail. This reinforces the belief that the core of advance planning should be:

* listen to the best available experts (in the case of Covid-19, that’s been the CDC);
* follow the Executive Order and updates from Gov. Phil Scott in order to ensure the Library is obeying state mandates;
* continue to monitor all trusted sources, because the advice will change frequently.

However, it’s also clear we should be tracking what we find to be best practices and cautionary tales in case of a recurrence of Covid-19 or a similar outbreak. Here’s a few notes, plus I left in some Q&A at the bottom. Reminder that our primary goal in this planning is to keep the library a LOW-RISK environment as defined by VOSHA.

Randal’s ~~Four~~ ~~Five~~ Six Basic Rules

1. Err on the side of caution, both in terms of protecting the staff and not overreacting to initial panic.
2. Don’t fall in love with the plan. Even the best plan needs updates / changes / throwing out and starting over.
3. Maintain a stock of basic preventive supplies: Masks, gloves, sanitizer, wipes, soap! Have more than one supplier available, especially for items that might be chokepoints for reopening. Will we need to provide the public masks? Will we need to scan staff / patrons’ temperatures??
4. Provide clear, basic signage. Remove less-critical signs so the crucial ones about safety don’t get lost in the clutter.
5. Ensure the Board is well-informed ahead of any major changes / decisions (closing the library, do we pay / furlough the staff, etc.).
6. Communicate, communicate, communicate!

**Reduction in Hours and Services at the Physical Building**

This is a decision (along w/ reopening) that was largely taken out of our hands. We did decide to follow the schools on closing, which seems to have worked.

As far as staffing for reopening, etc., most of those questions are covered by the CBA. We need to be ready to consider underlying conditions, etc., on a case-by-case basis.

Were we perhaps a day slow closing down programs?? Probably.

1. *Will you alter your procedures around cleaning books? Toys? Other manipulatives?*

The key question that has emerged from this pandemic is how the virus spreads. At first we were concerned with transmission via surfaces. So was the state, as seen by the fact that this is their first question to consider. Later reflection turns out that we were overconcerned with transmission on surfaces and not concerned enough about aerosol transmission. See Rules 1 & 2, above.

*How will you handle cash?*

No reason not to. Same reasons as above. We are providing hand sanitizer at the till for staff.

1. *Does it make sense to extend due-dates and waive late fines?*

YES!We did so. Avoid giving the public an incentive to share potential viral loads.

**Closure of the Physical Building**

1. *How would you communicate with staff, volunteers, trustees, and the public about the library closing?* Could we do this better?? How??
2. *Would library staff still get paid if the library closed for days/weeks?* Board decision and needs to be periodically reviewed as the circumstances change. AVOID INDEFINITE GUARANTEES. This grew from a closure of weeks to potentially one of months with recurring closures.
3. *How will you ensure that paychecks continue to be cut if the person who does payroll gets sick?* Cross-train director … and one other person??
4. *Does the local school closing affect whether the library closes?* Yes … this is what we followed. It occurred to us that if schools are closing to keep children physically separated, the library choosing to stay open would be counterproductive.
5. *What services can the library still offer if the physical building closes? How will you publicize that?* Online / curbside. The library needs regular contacts with local media (Herald, PEG-TV, Mountain Times, radio stations) as well as active social media and its own website. The media landscape is too fragmented to say “we sent a blurb to the paper.”
6. *Who will be responsible for coming into the library to check the book drop, the facilities, etc., during an extended closure?* Admin
7. *How will the library’s bills continue to get paid during an extended closure?* Business office / admin
8. *How will the decision be made to reopen the library building?* Based on governor’s orders.

REOPENING

PHASE ONE – The virus is largely inactive in Vermont, but the library has been closed to the public for some weeks / months.

Step one -- Curbside.

* Use email, Facebook, Twitter, and / or the phone to take orders & tell patrons books are available. Drop-off only via the outside drop lets staff safely quarantine all items (in the case of Covid-19, that is a four-day cycle, one more than the viability of the vaccine on smooth surfaces like DVDs, mylar covers, etc.) Try for next day delivery at set times or by appointment.
* Curbside also allows staff to work through details of how to wash hands, sanitize, etc., in a very low-risk environment, until these practices become second nature.

Step two -- Opening with very limited services. The library is likely too large for any per square footage restrictions to be effective, so needs to be prepared to set its own limits on patron access. Key services might include access to computers, copy / scan / fax, newspapers, WiFi, and simply the ability to see what’s on the shelves. Not everybody can use the online catalog well enough to find the materials they are seeking.

Discourage browsing / reading / resting in the building. Bathrooms provided only in emergencies. No in-house programming. Only basic copier functions are self-serve. No volunteers / Friends / book sales. Minimal computer help with social distancing the prime consideration.

Step three – Gradual increases of maximum occupancy, still based on ability of staff to comfortably manage public demand, NOT the legal / fire marshal limits on carrying capacity of the building. Service restrictions above can be reconsidered on a case-by-case basis.

This reopening should be done in a gradual fashion. It will be announced first to local officials (from all of our supporting towns. Once best practices are in place and staff / admin feel comfortable with safety procedures at each stage, publicity for the reopening should follow the same basic outline as for closure.

PHASE TWO – The state is allowing most businesses to operate with loose limits (perhaps only restricting large public gatherings). The virus is largely contained and there is no local outbreak. The library has established appropriate safeguards and staff is comfortable with them.

Step one: The limit on occupancy can begin to be based on the building’s carrying capacity (in stages as needed).

Social distancing is observed, but the following occur:

* Chairs are provided for reading & computer stations are reopened.
* Browsing is resumed. Displays go up. Computer help is largely restored.

Step two (still with social distancing):

* Limited in-house programming resumes.
* Volunteers, Friends, welcome.
* Book sales resume.
* Meeting spaces reopen, starting with the Fox Room due to its size / ability to provide social distancing.

PHASE THREE – The virus is considered under control regionally / the state has largely removed restrictions on public gatherings. Business is largely back to normal.

Programming resumes. Browsing / reading / resting is encouraged. Group activities / social gathering spaces are fully restored. Social distancing is only a concern for special cases / at-risk populations, etc.

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