

# TEXAS LIBRARY JOURNAL

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## LIBRARIES RESPOND TO COVID-19

Innovation Leads to  
Virtual Success

Assisting First  
Responders

Summer Reading  
Programs



# Innovation, Patience Lead to Virtual Success

**WHEN HISTORY ASKS HOW TEXAS LIBRARIANS** responded to the COVID-19 pandemic the answer will be, with innovation, courage and grace.

In the spring of 2020, in the span of a few weeks, the whole world changed as the COVID-19 virus spread. Broadway shut down and sports events were cancelled; theme parks closed and so did schools. Colleges and universities, and local officials and administrators directed libraries to close, or limit services.

Nearly overnight, children across Texas saw their beloved librarians for storytime, but through computer screens instead of in person; book club members learned how to use Zoom, and librarians worked harder than ever as thousands of readers across the state signed up for virtual subscriptions and learned how to check out books and other materials with Libby, Overdrive, Hoopla and other apps. Here are a few ways our courageous Texas librarians made the best of a difficult situation.

## **VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING AND SUCCESSES**

At the **Fort Worth Public Library**, more than 300 residents signed up for virtual Spanish classes, and more than 200 people signed up for a “Stay at Home” Facebook book club. The book club is currently engaged in a robust discussion of *The 7 ½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* by Stuart Turton.

“We have always valued the creativity and innovation our library staff brings to their jobs, but closing all our library locations in a day presented us with challenges we had never faced before,” said Fort Worth Library Director Many Shorr. “Our staff continues to deliver services that our community is

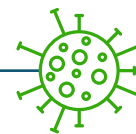
yearning for, while we are all working to keep each other safe and healthy during the crisis.”

The digital collection was already an important component of the library’s offerings, but suddenly it became the only way for patrons to access materials. Around 3,000 titles for all ages, in English and Spanish, have been added to the collection since the closure, with more added almost every day. Digital usage has also increased. From the day the library buildings closed to the public, March 14, to April 5, digital checkouts were up 23 percent to 56,913 items.

One project at the Fort Worth Library is providing a personal touch at a time when isolation has created a new normal for many. Staff members are calling library cardholders age 65 and older to check on them. In the first nine days of the project, full-time staffers made about 289 calls a day. By April 27, they had called nearly 2,600 patrons, connecting with 1,054 of them and leaving messages for the rest. Calls last an average of 18 minutes each, and staff members take note of what was discussed. Overwhelmingly, the call recipients are appreciative.

“Our library staff love people, and they love to help them in whatever way they can,” Shorr said. “The calling project has been an incredible product of their desire to serve the public, even during a difficult time.”

In Plano, a wide array of virtual programming was quickly made available to patrons, said Kristin Linscott, Development Coordinator, **Plano Public Library**. Library programs are being offered via Facebook streaming video each day, with storytimes at 11 AM, adult programs at 1 PM, and family learning programs at 3 PM. The Plano Public Library now offers book clubs, reader’s advisory and Small Talk, a conversation



program for speakers of English as a second language, all virtually. Librarians are also developing collaborative programs with the Plano Parks and Recreation department for nature-themed activities.

“Our community has been overwhelmingly grateful for the continued service of library staff through this challenging time. Parents tell us they appreciate the ability to adapt their storytime routine to our online programs with familiar faces. Adults are thankful to have so many options for online learning and for the opportunity to connect virtually with library staff and each other,” said Cecily Ponce de Leon, Programs Manager, Plano Public Library. “Whether they need a distraction from a stressful environment or are building skills for career development, Plano Public Library offers resources to support our community and to help them feel less isolated. Our staff is enjoying the opportunity to use their creativity and skills in new ways as we embrace virtual services.”

In Pottsboro (in North Texas near Lake Texoma and the Oklahoma border), the Pottsboro Area Library has been hosting drive-in esports events, using the side of a large white trailer as a screen. Ordinarily, the **Pottsboro Area Library** is home to a local esports team made up of high school students, coached by local college students. A drive-in Mario Kart tournament was a big hit, with players in separate cars in the parking lot.

Many people in the Pottsboro area lack Internet access; librarians have been helping residents one-on-one with library computers. Patrons make appointments to come in and four people are allowed in at a time. Computers are widely spaced in the library and staff disinfect after each user, said Pottsboro Library Director Dianne Connery. Many veterans and senior citizens have come in to use the computers to refill prescriptions and update wills, and staff members have helped many people file for unemployment.

In addition, in conjunction with the local Information Technology Disaster Resource Center, the Pottsboro library staff set up a trailer in the nearby Tanglewood Resort and Conference Center parking lot to offer 24/7 WiFi. The Pottsboro Library also offers 24/7 WiFi from its parking lot, which is frequently utilized by local residents.

At the **Houston Public Library**, librarians worked with the local Alley Theatre to get a limited number of e-tickets for a taped performance of the play *1984*, based on George Orwell’s novel. With a library card, you could register to stream the exclusive content. Tickets were available to Houston Public Library MY Link card holders; the performance was a special treat for many patrons.

At the **Denton Public Library**, Facebook Live virtual storytimes have been a great success with local families. Kerol Harrod, children’s librarian at Emily Fowler Central Library in Denton, began the virtual events with a book about compassion.

“Our first book was *Be Kind* by Pat Zietlow Miller. I chose this book because I knew my own children were having a hard time adapting to being at home and in close quarters, and that while we were all staying home to keep from sharing germs, kindness

was something we should share,” Harrod wrote, in [a blog post](#) for *Programming Librarian*. More than 2,000 people have watched the storytime since it first aired, he said.

Harrod has found his online interaction with families very rewarding. “I love creating live virtual programs for families. I believe the live aspect is particularly important since it allows for real-time interaction,” he told TLJ. “In one of our Facebook Live story times, for example, viewers were able to vote throughout the program for their favorite foods; at the end of the story time, the food with the most votes (which happened to be spaghetti) was woven into a song,” Harrod explained. “That’s an opportunity to interact and feel more connected, not just with one’s own family, but with other families who participate. Story times are meant to be interactive, and preserving some of those important dialogic qualities gives children a sense of something that’s familiar and meaningful. It shows them that the library has not gone away, and that they can still show up and be included. Facilitating that kind of connection when we so desperately need it is rewarding for everyone involved.”

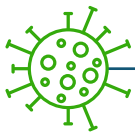
For school librarians, one of the main challenges has been how to support students who don’t have good access to the Internet at home.

“With many of our students living in rural areas of our county, access to technology quickly became a major issue,” wrote Deah Hester, **East View High School** Librarian in **Georgetown ISD**, in [a blog post](#) for the American Association of School Librarians. “Our students and teachers were ready to continue with their lessons, but how could we ensure that all our students would have the same access? Fortunately, Georgetown ISD quickly surveyed families as to their needs. During breakfast and lunch pick-ups, our school librarians and technology specialists distributed Chromebooks and WiFi hotspots to each family that signed up for one. We also distributed learning packets, and at Frost Elementary, librarian Denise Mozingo gave away over 75 paperback books to her students to keep at home.”

We asked Hester what the most rewarding part is about



Kerol Harrod,  
Emily Fowler Central Library



## LIBRARIES RESPOND TO COVID-19



working with students and teachers during the COVID-19 crisis.

Hester responded, “We discussed that very question at our weekly secondary librarian meeting. And one of the things we mentioned was getting the time and the wide variety of platforms to work with people we don’t normally see very often. The six secondary librarians have been meeting for a video conference every week, and sharing ideas and resources, as well as collaborating on multiple Google docs, Google sites, and new applications like Flipgrid or Peardeck and Sora. I’ve also been able to work with and help some teachers in my building who don’t normally swing by the library, but in this case, I can sit in on team meetings via video, and offer my help, or send an email full of links, and maybe one of them catches their attention. So I’ve been able to build a few new relationships that way.”

Hester talked about how nice it’s been hearing from students, whether the communication happens on Twitter, Google Classroom, through email, the school’s website or through her virtual book club.

“Before the COVID-19 crisis, I only saw students if their teachers brought them as a group to the library, or if the

students came in before school or during lunch,” she said. “I don’t think it occurred to students to just send a quick email to ask me a question. But now, students are learning that their school emails and the school websites can really hold a wealth of information at their fingertips. They can reach a teacher and get an answer much faster now than they could when we were in school, when they might have to wait for the next A day/B day to ask a question.”

This interaction gives her hope that even after school resumes in person, some of these innovations, developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, will continue.

“I think the administration, the teachers, the students, and the parents have done the very best job they could throughout all of this. And we’ve learned some really valuable lessons. I foresee the use of more of a hybrid model going forward; even while in a traditional setting, we can still take advantage of some really great programs to flip the classroom and allow students to learn at their own pace, finish their assignments online, while getting instruction time with teachers and more assistance from staff all over the school.”