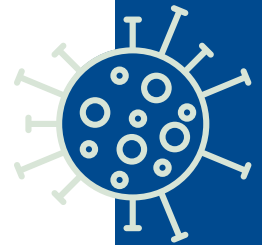


MANAGING IN TIMES OF COVID-19

By Michele Gorman



In 2019 the Fort Worth Public Library launched a robust and innovative strategic plan, extended hours at all locations, and eliminated fines. In February 2020, we unveiled a comprehensive new facility master plan to guide the library's development over the next ten years. A month later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and in a matter of days, everything changed.

When the mayor of Fort Worth issued a stay at home order in late March, we shut down the library and sent everyone home. My new youth services manager had started three days before, and I sent him home to build a new department from the ground up without having met his team or learned much about the library's culture or plans for the future. Library administration was still coming in to work, but there were a million questions and very few answers. The most pressing problem was how to continue serving the public when so much of what we offer our customers happens face-to-face. The next was how to keep hundreds of staff safe and employed amidst a raging global pandemic.

Within weeks we formulated a plan to get everyone back to work safely. We immediately launched virtual programming with an understanding that we were not going to try to recreate the in-person experience; we were going to come up with

something truly innovative to meet our community's needs during quarantine and beyond. While staff worked on special projects from home, library administration and a core group of frontline staff were making plans, purchasing PPE, drafting new protocols, and modifying our spaces for a brave new socially distanced world.

We successfully rolled out curbside delivery at five locations in May. By the end of June, we had implemented curbside at all of our libraries and began offering limited in-person services, including in-person check-out, browsing, and computer access, at more than half of our locations.

So how did the Fort Worth Public Library pivot so quickly? We aligned our decision making with our fundamental leadership values:

- Utilize reputable information, expert opinions, and the library's core values;
- Communicate with radical transparency; and
- Empower staff to lead.

BASE DECISIONS ON REPUTABLE INFORMATION, EXPERT OPINIONS, AND THE LIBRARY'S CORE VALUES

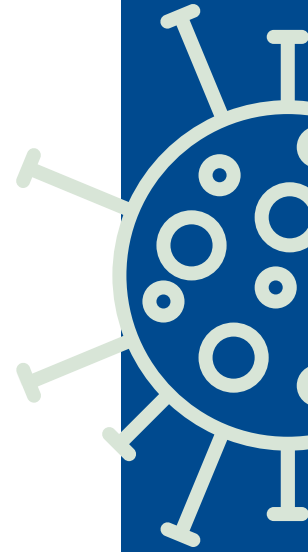
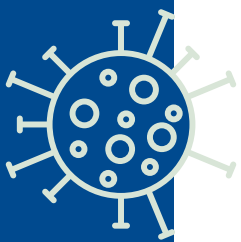
Like so many libraries around the country, when COVID-19 hit in March, we faced hundreds of questions and had very few definitive answers. We were making decisions using emergency plans intended for a fire or flood, not a pandemic. What modifications were necessary to meet demand safely? What services could we alter, and what did we need to shelve for the sake of safety? What facility modifications were optional, and which ones were mandatory? What did the staff need to return to work, and could we provide it safely and promptly?

One of the first things we did was ensure we knew and understood the legal and procedural entities that governed the options available. We mainly needed to understand how FMLA, ADA, and the Families First COVID Response Act impacted our staff and any limitations to public service decreed by our city, county, or state. Second, we utilized current scientific research to inform our decisions regarding quarantining materials, screening procedures, and facility modifications. Third, we recognized the value of staff experience, knowledge, and perspective, particularly for decisions regarding staffing and local community needs.

Finally, equipped with relevant and reliable information from sources of authority, we grounded all decisions in the core values of the library: customer-focused, community-driven, curious and creative, inclusive and accessible, and trustworthy and accountable. This crisis did not change our values, but it did change some of the ways we approach them. Being customer-focused and community-driven is as much about safety as it is about services in a pandemic. We reviewed every procedure through this new safety lens, and we've approached many of our core services differently as a result. Programming is the most remarkable example of staff learning how to tap into their curiosity and creativity in a new way – modifying existing programs such as language classes, craft programs, book clubs, and business workshops, and launching brand new programs including a children's variety show, music concerts, interactive STEM learning experiences, and more. Inclusivity and accessibility were drivers in our decision to open libraries with computer and internet access rather than offer access to books and virtual programming. Ultimately, we used our organizational values as a litmus test for decision-making. Does a particular decision or policy reflect our priorities and advance our mission? Does it create or remove barriers to our success? By making meaningful decisions using the best information available, we developed policies and procedures that were fair, consistent, and in our stakeholders' best interest, including staff.

COMMUNICATE WITH RADICAL TRANSPARENCY

In any situation, communication is important. In a pandemic, it's essential. We recognized quickly that the best plan for pandemic communication was early and often, and we aimed to be intentional and radically transparent in our messaging.



We increased our regular meetings with managers from monthly to weekly and quickly made the change from in-person to virtual, with a continued focus on sharing information, gathering feedback, and answering questions. Management participation helped us keep multiple perspectives in mind as we continually shifted plans and evolved services. Additionally, we sought individual staff feedback through formal surveys and followed up with one-on-one meetings as needed. We knew it was important to keep the flow of communication multi-directional and remain accessible to our staff.

Throughout this ordeal, our leadership team members have worked hard to communicate candidly, striving for honesty with optimism at all times. Knowing that staff tended to fill in communication gaps with their knowledge, beliefs, and anxieties, we made sure to practice radical transparency. The leadership team acknowledged what we did not know, and we deliberately chose to show our vulnerability and concerns as caregivers and spouses—as human beings in a pandemic. We then modeled a healthy focus on what we did know and could control. We also clarified core messages with managers beforehand and conveyed these messages to all staff in three ways. We aimed to minimize communication gaps and information overload.

EMPOWER STAFF TO LEAD

Over the past few years, we have worked hard to build a culture where staff felt included, seen, and heard. We have invested in relationship building with our management team, and we have worked hard to build a people-first organization where managers are trusted advisors and local decision-makers. Before the pandemic, we invested in team building and leadership development, and we focused on teaching our leaders how to manage through significant organizational change. When the pandemic struck, this pre-crisis work served as our foundation for incorporating system leaders into the decision-making process. And our staff stepped up, impressing us each step of the way with their flexibility, resourcefulness, and positivity.

NEVER WASTE A CRISIS

It has been nine months since the mayor issued the stay at home order for Fort Worth, and I sent my new youth services manager home to rebuild his department. During this time, his team's work has been truly indicative of the adage "necessity is the mother of invention." They didn't attempt to recreate what we were doing in our libraries before the mayor's order. They took the opportunity to think about the library's role, community need, and the best ways to provide meaningful and engaging experiences for our young customers and their parents and caregivers.

Similarly, our management team has taken this opportunity to review what we do well and assess what we can do better. The popularity of curbside delivery means it's likely here to stay. We now know from experience that there is a place for virtual programming, and for some programs and classes, it's a preferable format. Our **Stay at Home Book Club** is flourishing with almost 500 members, and our new and exceptionally creative children's variety program, the "**Learn. Dream. Do. Show**", is reaching a new generation of library users.

Like any grand disruptor, COVID-19 has changed just about every facet of how we do our jobs, from getting books in people's hands to engaging young learners. What this virus has not changed is that we are a people-oriented profession. We serve the community, and COVID-19 has shown us we can do this in many ways beyond the traditional in-person service model. These are challenging times, but we have embraced the positive outcomes. This year has proven a powerful opportunity for self-reflection and growth. The unanticipated circumstances of 2020 enabled us to improve upon our already robust plan from 2019 in ways we could never have imagined. Our staff are stronger, more flexible, and surer of themselves than ever before, and they are the ones who have made it possible for the Fort Worth Public Library to not only survive but to thrive in these times of COVID-19.

Michele Gorman is the Assistant Director, Public Services at Fort Worth Public Library.

