I spent 4.5 years as the Director of Library Services at Bezhigoogahbow Library on the Leech Lake Tribal College Campus in Leech Lake Nation in the town of Cass Lake. Cass Lake is rural, and by “rural,” I mean it’s over 100 miles from the nearest Red Lobster restaurant. I current work as a State Library Program Specialist with State Library Services. State Library Services is a division of the MN Department of Education responsible for administering federal and state aid to support all types of libraries.
This data is from the 2018 annual public library reports. The decrease in in-person visits we’re seeing in Minnesota is a national trend.
Minnesota has a higher proportion of residents with library cards than most states.
Along with providing access to computer and the internet, libraries also answer a very wide range of patron questions about using technology.
State Library Services and State Demographic Center began working together in November 2019.

1. Provided in-person Census workshops to 250+ librarians and Adult Basic Education instructors

2. Shipped 49,200 bookmarks

3. Registered libraries as Questionnaire Assistance Centers
   • Designated locations where people can complete their census and receive assistance as needed
   • Basic training and resource guide provided to all
Great River Regional Libraries consists of 32 libraries located in 6 counties in Central Minnesota. The system is headquartered in Saint Cloud. The ability to communicate with a large audience is a strength public libraries bring to Census operations.
Anoka County Library consists of 9 branches. Professionalism is another strength of libraries in this work. Librarians have training in providing customer service and in helping people find the information they need. All libraries registered as QACs received Census training.
Grand Marais Public Library is the only public library in Cook County. Public libraries are trusted community organizations. People may be wary of completing the Census due to federal government distrust. Trust on a very local level – between a community member and a library worker – is more likely, and this trust can help encourage a person to complete their Census form.
Tracy Public Library is located in a town of about 2,000 people. By participating as a QAC, they can demonstrate the value of the library in connecting their rural community to a larger, nationwide cause.
This data was current as of March 11. So, so proud of all our libraries!
On March 15, in response to the exponential spread of confirmed COVID-19 cases, Governor Walz issued an executive order closing K12 schools. To protect library workers and community members, over 340 of Minnesota’s 355 public library locations temporarily closed. Closure – especially long-term, indefinite closure – is a very difficult decision for libraries to make. When I worked at Bezhigoogahbow Library, we always tried to ground our work in the 7 Anishinaabe values: humility, wisdom, courage, trust, honesty, respect, and love. I see these values reflected in the decision public libraries are making to close. Despite my use of a comic on this slide, the COVID-19 pandemic is incredibly serious. Closing public libraries reduces the availability of public gathering spaces, which in turn reduces the likelihood of COVID-19 being transmitted. Librarians are demonstrating courage and wisdom and humility and love as they help protect their communities by temporarily closing libraries.
Already, libraries are responding to closure with resilience. Many are promoting their digital resources like ebooks and are seeing a sharp increase in circulation of digital materials. Some libraries are offering curbside delivery, so patrons can receive physical library materials without entering the library itself. Public libraries are keeping their wifi on 24/7 so that people can bring their own devices and use this connection from outside of the building. Phone and email assistance are still available at many libraries.
Libraries are developing creative solutions to engage with their communities. Saint Paul Public Library is hosting story times on Facebook. Cannon Falls Public Library is recording their weekly balance and chair cardio classes for seniors. Martin County Library is holding a virtual Lego challenge, encouraging patrons to share pictures of their Lego creations. Not long after announcing their temporary closure, Fergus Falls Public Library continued promoting Census completion via their Facebook page.
These comments are based off only four days’ worth of observation. In this evolving situation, everything is subject to change:

Safety is the top priority right now. Libraries cannot fully reopen until they can guarantee a safe space for staff and for patrons, i.e. a space where COVID-19 is unlikely to be spread between individuals. Once libraries can re-establish and maintain safe spaces for staff, they can begin offering basic services -- like curbside delivery, hotspot lending, and access to digital materials – that don’t require patrons to enter the library building. Once libraries can re-establish and maintain safe spaces for both staff and patrons, then they can reopen buildings to the public.

COVID-19 changes the mechanisms through which libraries will support Census completion. It does not change the values that libraries uphold. The solutions libraries devise will be grounded in these values.
Thank you!

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