Engaging our Digitally Divided Communities

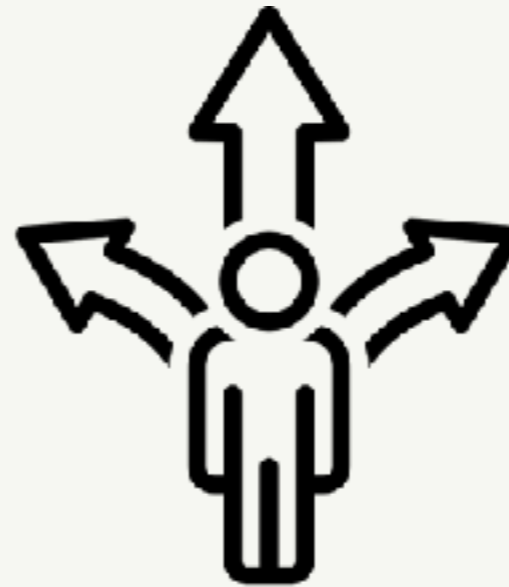**Jessamyn West - November 2020**

Hello from America!

U.S. Libraries

[background photograph of a bunch of small islands with caption "US Libraries"] Just a quick note before I begin, libraries in the US are very very decentralized. Each state has its own state library and different states handle library funding differently. Some have consortia, some have funding from the state (I live in one state that doesn't) and some have a ton of tiny little libraries.

Vermont's Libraries

[photograph of one island close-up with caption Vermont's Libraries] (note: picture not actually Vermont) In Vermont where I live, one of the smaller states both in size and population, we have the most libraries per capita of any US state but also EACH ONE is funded by the town that it is in which means there can be huge variability from one library to the next, and one librarian's job to the next. This has meant that COVID response has been really all over the place, so I will be talking local (a little) and then some ideas at a national level that seemed useful.

[caption: we had to make changes, but what? with icon of person standing with arrows going many directions] As COVID initially swept through libraries in the US we were all forced (to varying degrees, depending on what our states were doing) to make some changes. Vermont went into lockdown March 17 and was in that state through late April for some businesses and late May for others.

[caption: complicating factors: Vocational awe; Community's emotional responses; Leadership vacuums (in some places); Digital divide issues] There were problems, the largest of which was that if you didn't have digital skills (as a person, or as a library or library staffer) now was going to be a tough time to acquire them. There was also the very important "vocational awe" issue which is that it's hard to feel both that you're essential to people's lives but also that for public health reasons you have to limit your services. Some libraries did this better than others. Worst case situations were when management had vocational awe and staff felt more like they should respect public health guidelines (separate from the conversation about budgets and "proving our worth" in that way). This can be enhanced when there are vocal community members who feel strongly one way or the other. I know many states suffered from lack of leadership—library or otherwise—mine was not among them. And then, lastly, the digital divide. Which is true and, if I am being honest, should have been worked on more aggressively before we were in a pandemic crisis, or before Hurricane Irene happened, or before…. (aside about family that needed a trench)

Mitigating factors

- **$$$ for changes (IMLS)**
- **Some infrastructure in place already**
- **Hyperlocal is our specialty!**

[caption: mitigating factors: $$$ for changes (IMLS); Some infrastructure in place already; Hyperlocal is our specialty!] But there have been some silver linings as well. There has been some "bailout" money for doing things like increasing connectivity and finding ways to provide contactless services. IMLS (a federally funded national organization) had a few rounds of grants that helped libraries build digital capacity. Many libraries were already offering wifi outside the buildings but now they were teaming up with local organizations to have wifi with/near parking with/near outlets (in better weather)
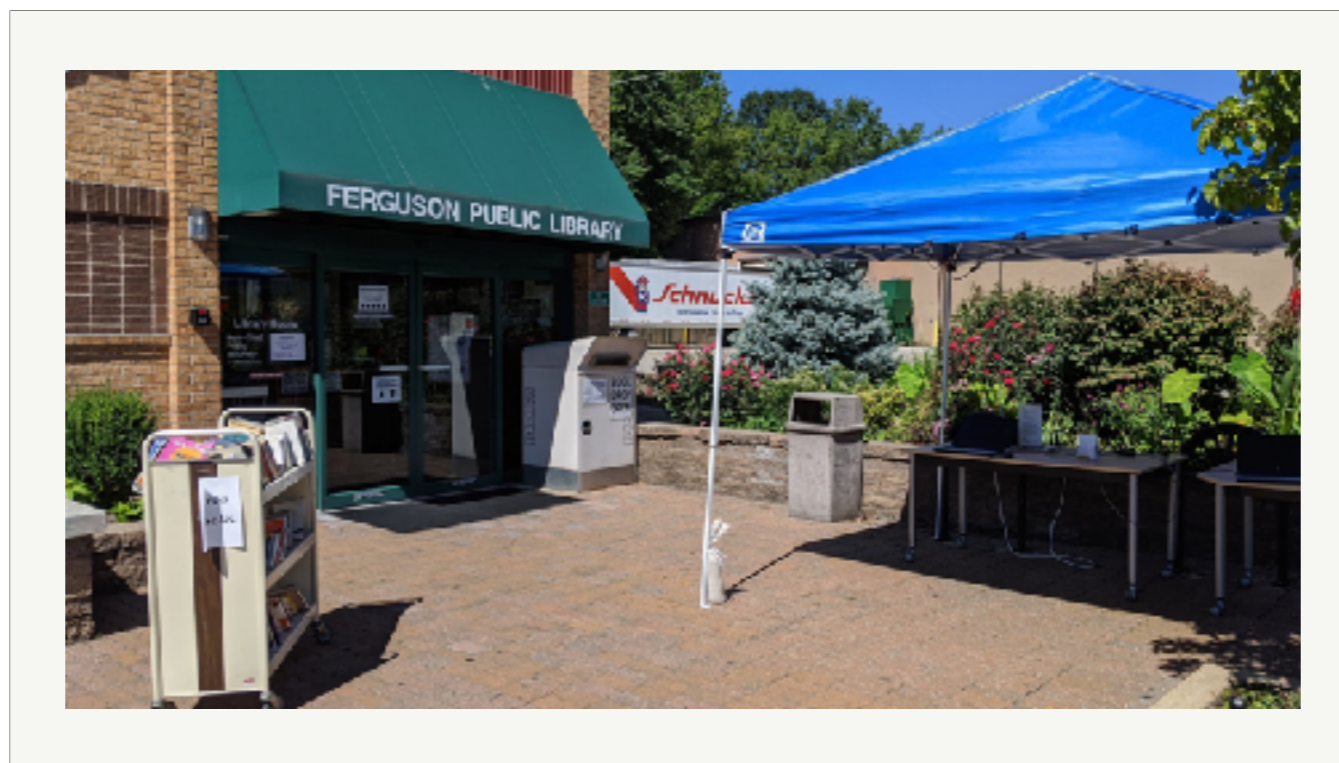
[caption: Libraries that had better results weren't necessarily the ones which were the most tech-savvy, but rather the ones that could listen to what their patrons wanted… and not just what they didn't want. with icon of two people talking with one another] It's good to be there to listen. But you can't always let people's dissatisfactions drive your COVID era policies. People want a lot of things they can't have, we all do. Listening to people to see what will help them solve their problems and feel more connected
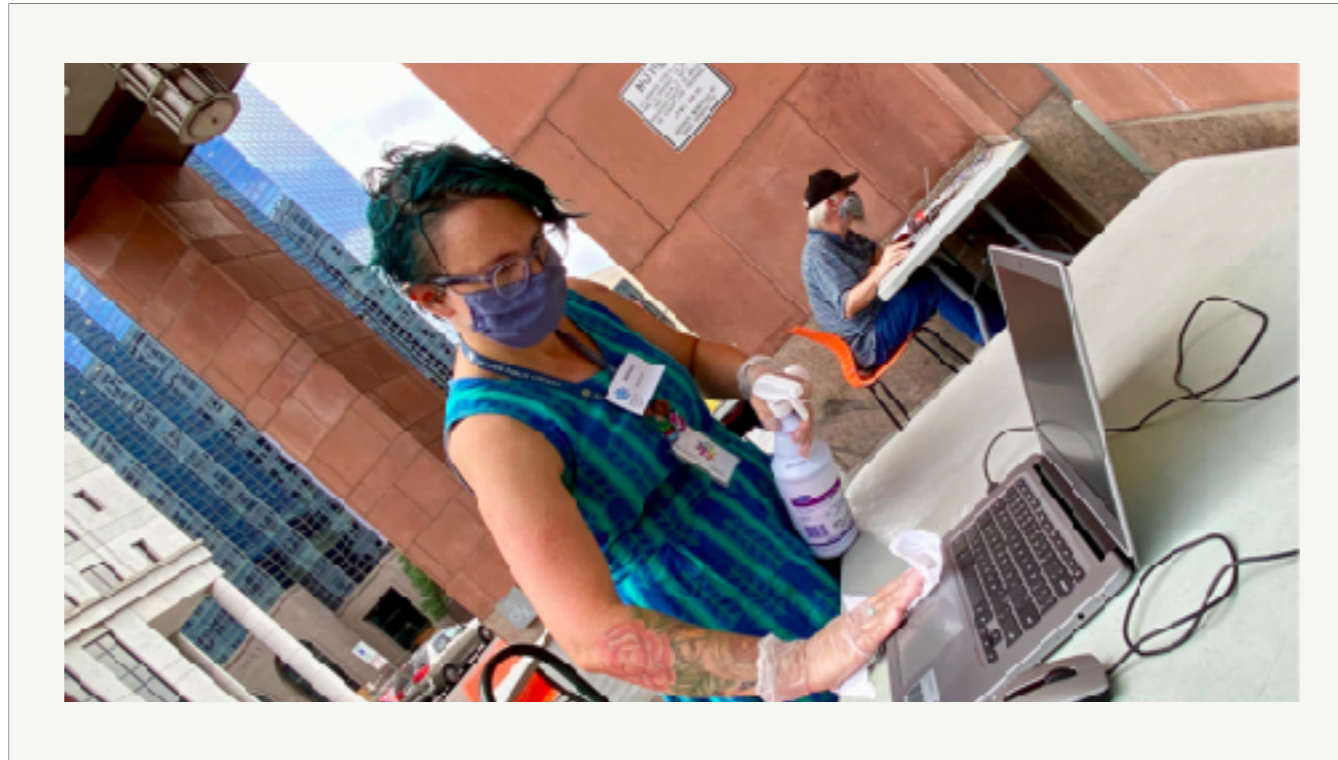
Old and New Connections

[caption: old and new connections with icon of old-style telephone and new style smart phone both with speech bubbles] There is some debate in privacy circles about whether it's okay to call people from the library just because you have their phone number, but the libraries we know that did this (with either older patrons, or patrons who were "frequent fliers" no matter their age) seemed to truly appreciate it. It also highlighted the library's ability to serve as a general resource clearinghouse for people without a lot of digital skills "Oh did you know that the Veggie Van will be in town on Thursday?"

[photograph of Ferguson Public Library with their copiers and some laptops moved outside along with book cart offering free books] Ferguson Public Library in Missouri was famous for offering a safe haven during rioting and police crackdowns. They moved as much of their services as they could—tech, free books, even the copy machine—to safer outdoor spaces.
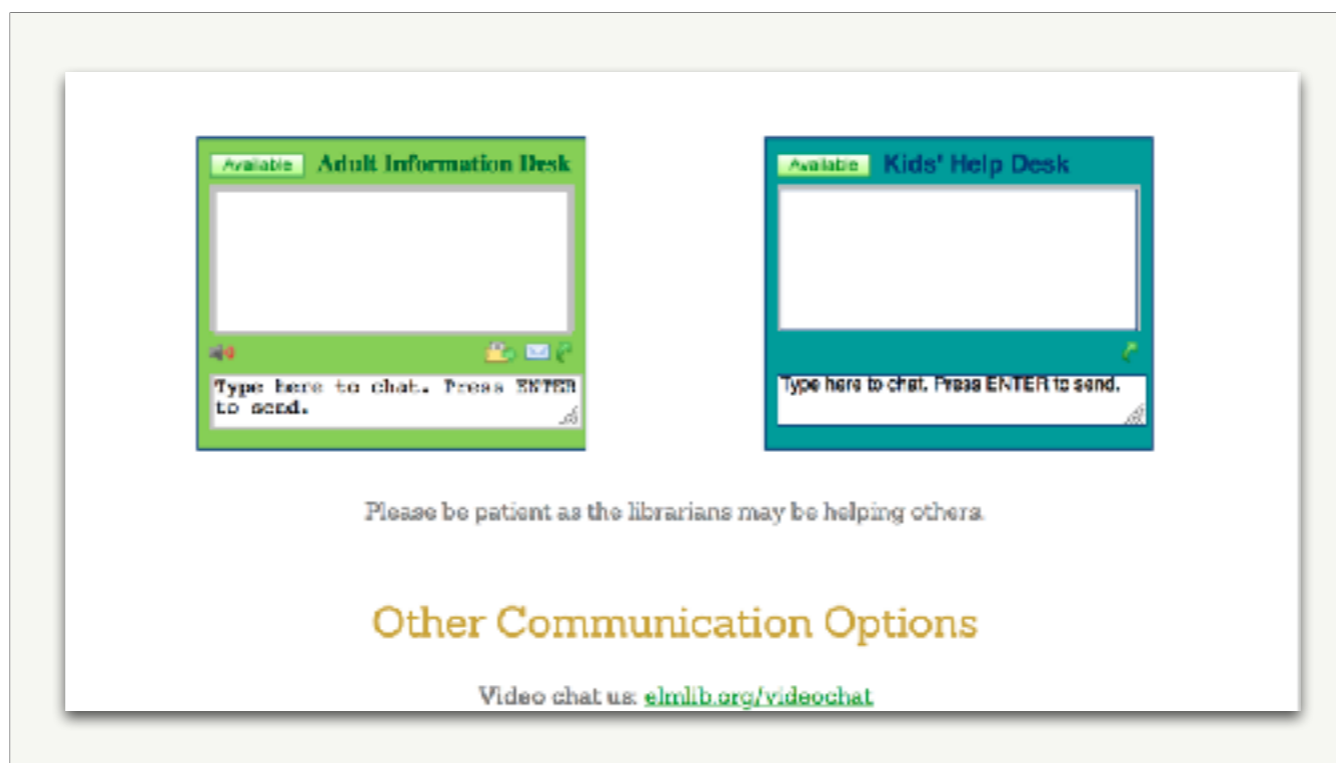
[photograph of Denver public librarian masked and gloved wiping down a public laptop in an outdoor atrium area] Denver Public Library moved their entire computer lab outside so people without access to devices (because often people need more than just wifi) could have that.

New things to share

economies of scale have *always* been our jam

- **Zoom rooms**

- **Content beyond our geographical borders**

- **Storytimes** (with permission)

- **Maybe more stuff to just give away?**

[caption: New Things to Share: - Zoom rooms - Content beyond our geographical borders - Storytimes (with permission) - Maybe more stuff to just give away?] We've always shared books and other information resources but how have we been able to expand on that?
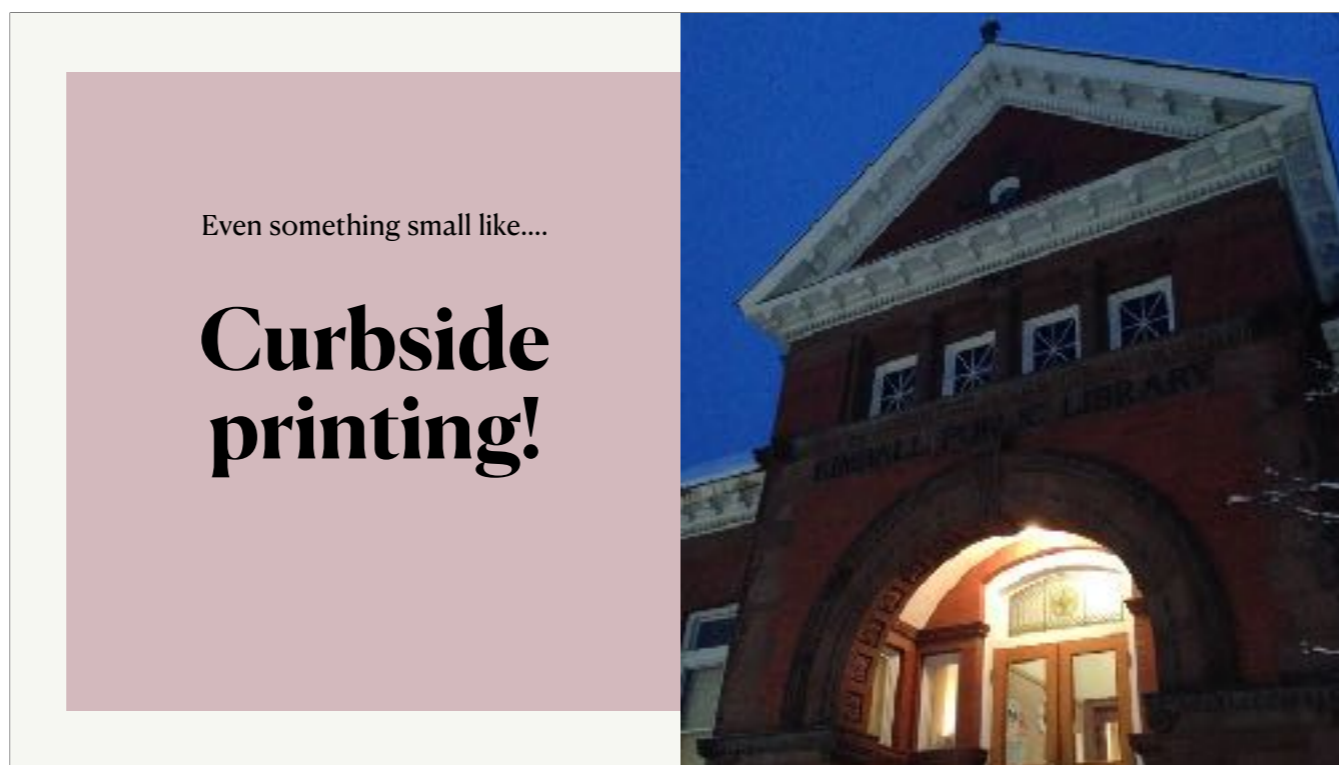
[screenshot of Elmhurst Public Library chat windows and also link to where you can sign up to use their Zoom room] Elmhurst Public Library (IL) paid once for zoom, allowed it to be scheduled and shared with the community (in fact they may have paid for two because they use one for chat reference)

Write to the Dogs

Your Library therapy dog friends miss seeing you! Send an email to any of these furry friends and tell them what you've been up to, ask them questions, share what you've been reading, or write about some fun facts. They will send you an email response with their picture!

[screenshot of another Elmhurst page where you can write to dogs, featuring four photos of their dogs with their names and a description of the program] They also have one of my favorite quarantine programs: Write to the Dogs.

Even something small like....

Curbside printing!

[photograph of my small library in an old brick building with the caption "Even something small like Curbside printing!"] Even my own library, a tiny library in a community of 4500 people, decided to offer curbside printing (you always had to come in to the library to make your prints before) and it was wildly popular. The knitting group met on Zoom when it was too cold to meet on the lawn

[caption: "Digitally ready" didn't just mean having plug-and-play tech, it meant being ready to apply technology to social problems (when appropriate) and having the confidence that you could make it work for you. Icon of a pair of hands holding a heart with a gear in it] It's good to be there to listen. But you can't always let people's dissatisfactions drive your COVID era policies. People want a lot of things they can't have, we all do. Listening to people to see what will help them solve their problems and feel more connected

Stay safe, stay in touch.

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image of me in my mask holding "I voted" election stickers with my contact information on it.