

Libraries are **Critical to Recovery** for Florida.

By Laura I. Spears, PhD

Florida House Speaker Chris Sprowls (R, Pinellas) recently addressed the 2021 Florida legislature, citing the Latin phrase “semper paratus” or “always ready” as a principle that should guide Florida’s response to emergency management. This is guiding principle for the day to day actions in all of Florida’s libraries and underscores the value that libraries deliver daily. However, in this time of COVID-19, Florida libraries have continued to meet the needs of their communities in a variety of ways and are critical elements of communities as they recover the impact of this pandemic.

Specifically, libraries have continued to be reliable providers of internet access, According to the [PEW Research](#) organization, over half of Americans (87%) surveyed said that internet access has been essential or important as communities faced lock downs, parents worked from home and children began virtual homeschool. But as businesses closed and people were laid off, the ability to pay for internet access or other needed technologies worried almost 30% of American, and disproportionately impacted people of color and lower income communities. As parents worried about job losses and lack of childcare, they also had to ensure that their access to the internet and digital technologies were available for their children, now completing schoolwork from home.

Florida’s libraries were not excluded from the impact of COVID-19 and many were closed; others operated with limited access. But you can’t keep a good library down for long. Library workers discovered ways to continue access to internet and digital technologies and all types of library services and materials.

Many libraries innovated by negotiating with library vendors to increase access to electronic resources including e-books, audio recordings and streaming videos as digital lending in libraries by vendors like Overdrive resulted in a 33% increase over 2019. As [Publishers Weekly](#) reported, 2020 was a record year for Overdrive, with readers worldwide borrowing “430 million e-books, audiobooks and digital magazines.”

In Orange County, while the libraries have remained open, the library system delivers free to all cardholders’ homes in the district, alleviating the anxiety and mitigating the risk of library users reluctant to visit a public space to use library services. For many libraries whose communities opted to close the buildings, library workers provide drive-up or curbside services so that children and adults could continue to read, providing access to most library materials.

The need for literacy experts became even more important and librarians took their book discussion groups and children’s programs online; regularly scheduled programs were recorded and as copyright allowed, recordings have been made available on demand. Home schooling motivated demand for live, online tutoring programs like Brainfuse™ in Broward County and Tumble Book Library for early learners and their parents at the Dunedin Public Library in Pinellas County.

Academic libraries increased their hours for the online Ask-A-Librarian program and digitized course materials to meet students’ needs as Fall 2020 courses were primarily held online. At the University of Florida, aggressive efforts to meet needs included expanded access to licensed materials and innovative digital lending to support an abrupt move to wholly online learning.

Libraries became such a lifeline in some communities that in Lake County, a library initiated a food bank and supported 39 families in December. For them, "Open libraries = Hope for many." The Palm Beach County Public Library System's staff worked directly with Community Services to assist with the processing Care Act Food, rental and energy assistance applications.

In July, after months of COVID closures, Florida libraries submitted requests for over \$5 million to the federal CARES Act funding, competing for the \$1.9 million allocated by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Most applications sought funding to extend their virtual services with more hotspots, and expanded WiFi services that increase wireless connectivity to patrons using it in the library parking lots. Some sought personal protective equipment to keep their staffs safe while they get their libraries open so that library patrons could access internet and computer services to find work and apply for unemployment insurance. Libraries continue to provide training and support for job seekers, those seeking government services and support for small businesses. Many libraries continue to collaborate with Career Source Florida, a key community resource for job recovery.

With these programs and services, libraries support literacy, technology needs, and employment efforts, serving as incubators for new ideas and opportunities in Florida's communities. And with adequate funding in the 2021 state budget, libraries can continue to be crucial elements of our state's recovery from COVID-19.