



Ministry of Education
Supporting Restoration of
Public Library Services During COVID-19 in BC
Guidance Framework for Public Library Systems

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are playing an important role in helping families and people stay connected, informed and entertained during the COVID-19 pandemic. B.C.'s 71 public library systems with 249 branches also play a crucial role in providing access to public computing, community and legal information and literacy-based activities.

While remote services and online collections have supported entertainment, recreation and life-long learning, it is not ideal as a sole model for supporting families, seniors and vulnerable people. Restoring some in-person access and service is a crucial part of a plan for supporting the social system. This work includes developing plans and using alternative service delivery methods to provide access to library collections, programs, spaces and public computing. These plans are being developed under the guidance of public health officials to ensure delivery of services that keep library patrons and staff safe. Consistent application of preventative measures must remain top of mind.

Libraries are already considering flexible and innovative ways to address local community needs. It is important to acknowledge that local circumstances require different approaches and that that "learning involves patience and time" ([First Peoples Principles of Learning](#)). Examples of adapted services include, boosting outside WIFI signals, offering books on demand or grab bags, virtual story-times/craft activities, developing guides for online learning, and/or enhancing phone information and technology support services.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this framework is to support B.C.'s public library systems in developing plans to deliver remote access to collections/programs while working toward restoring in-person services and re-opening closed library spaces.

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This document is also intended to assist public library systems to maintain safe and healthy work environments for staff and library patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been prepared based on questions received from public libraries and existing guidelines from comparable services in B.C.

Given the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the provincial response, the Ministry of Education (Libraries Branch) will continue to update this document with new information, resources and promising practices as they become available.

The strategies and actions needed to support the restoration of public access to library services during this pandemic are guided by the following principles:

- Informed by research, practices and guidance from other sectors (e.g. K-12, recreation centres) and jurisdictions in planning to reopen library spaces;
- Flexible to expand and contract to align with the health emergency measures as directed by the PHO;
- Encourage libraries to work with local government, health and other community partners when making access, space and service decisions;
- Involve voluntary levels of service based on community needs and capacity;
- Applied provincially, by system and/or on a local library branch basis depending on the status of COVID 19 outbreak.

CURRENT STATE

The Provincial Health Officer (PHO) has ordered some types of businesses to close. Any business or service that has not been ordered to close and is also not identified on the [essential services list](#) may open if they can adapt their services and workplace to the orders and recommendations of the PHO. WorkSafe BC has provided [guidance](#) on how to adapt services and workplaces in light of new health and safety requirements.

In the week of March 16, all 71 public libraries made local decisions to close library spaces. Since that time, libraries have adapted services, providing primarily remote/virtual delivery of library collections, services and programs.

Public libraries have not been ordered to close, nor are they listed as essential services, meaning that the question of closing and re-opening is a local decision. B.C. released information on its [Restart BC](#) plan on May 6th 2020. Libraries were identified in Phase 2 (May

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19th) in the restoration of services. Worksafe BC released new protocols for libraries on May 15th.

When making plans to open in-person services, libraries, like all other operations are expected to follow new health and safety recommendations and guidance from the PHO, BC Centre for Disease Control (BC CDC) and WorkSafe BC.

Public Libraries should continue to explore online/remote service delivery options, while planning for the return of some in-person services based on broad public guidance provided by the PHO, BC CDC and WorkSafe BC. These services may include:

- Contactless curbside pickup by request
- Boosted WIFI for outside use
- Home delivery services for homebound patrons
- Public computing with cleaning protocols, plastic covers
- Limited public access hours, protected hours for vulnerable visitors

It may take a while for public libraries to completely re-open and return to normal service levels. Libraries should consider a phased approach to the restoration of in-person services, public computing, collection browsing and events/programs. Where possible libraries should work locally to determine the areas of highest need (e.g. public computing) and plan accordingly.

GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL RELATIONSHIPS

The Library Act defines each library board as an independent corporation. The board is the employer of the public library and has fiduciary and accountability responsibilities.

The *Library Act* provides direction on the relationship between library boards and local governments. Local governments are the primary funder of public libraries. Establishing a collaborative and a strong working relationship between the library board, staff, and local government officials is an essential part of successful library governance. These relationships are even more important during an emergency. In some communities, library directors or other library staff take part in local [Emergency Operation Centres](#). This has enabled libraries to participate alongside other key public agencies in delivering and supporting community needs.

Reviewing and updating internal governance processes is another important step in the initial planning phases. Proactive measures involving the Library Board and senior

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management can help preserve community trust in vital leadership roles and model shifts in practice for the rest of the organization.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

1. Public Libraries have flexibility in how they deliver library services in a manner that meets the unique needs and circumstances of their users and communities.
2. When making plans to open, libraries are expected to adapt services in light of the new health and safety recommendations and guidance from the BC Centre for Disease Control (CDC), Provincial Health Office and Worksafe BC.
3. It is up to library systems, through their local planning processes, to determine the optimal balance between virtual (remote) and in-person opportunities for services.
4. Public library leadership teams are encouraged to work with and liaise regularly with their local medical health officer in the health authority to ensure that protocols respect the guidelines provided by the PHO.
5. [BC CDC](#) provides guidance in a number of areas such as cleaning protocols, distancing and signage. You will find guidance documents, posters and information to support your planning and policy development.
6. The [guidance provided to K-12 Schools](#) is a useful companion document for planning for the restoration of in-person services, including current thinking on:
 - Maintaining cleaning and disinfecting policies,
 - Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)/masks,
 - COVID-19 viability on services/high touch surfaces,
 - Use and application of cleaning materials,
 - Cleaning of toys, electronics etc.
7. WorkSafeBC has issued resources for [COVID-19 and returning to safe operation](#), all of which must be considered by libraries as employers. There are specific [protocols identified for libraries](#).



8. All employers are required to develop a COVID-19 Safety Plan that outlines the policies, guidelines, and procedures they have put in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.
9. Library Boards as employers are responsible for taking appropriate [preventive measures](#) in the workplace. For examples, ensuring employees who show any symptoms are supported to stay home and self-isolate for at least 10 days from onset of symptoms. Employees have the right to [refuse unsafe work](#).
10. Research is underway. Guidance may change as new information becomes available.

OPENING SPACES AND RESTORING IN-PERSON SERVICE

The PHO's [order](#) prohibiting gatherings of over 50 people is intended to prevent large groups of people from gathering in close quarters with one another, and does not necessarily apply to buildings where physical distancing is possible. There could be more than 50 patrons and staff in a large library building at any given time if they are not all in one area at the same time and are actively engaged in physical distancing.

To facilitate physical distancing in the library building, staff may consider measures like staggering visitors, changing furniture layout, providing visual indicators (e.g. tape on the floor) of appropriate spacing in line-up areas, and posting revised occupancy limits on small spaces such as elevators and meeting rooms. Expanded protocols and information are available from Worksafe BC. At the moment there is limited information on occupancy rates as they relate to libraries.

The following elements are expected be in place when libraries move to in-person service delivery:

- Measures to support physical distancing between library patrons and between library patrons and staff,
- Considerations of limited services hours or protected hours for vulnerable, community members,
- Enhanced cleaning protocols,
- Signage.



MATERIALS HANDLING

Managing inventory (e.g. returned items) and handling materials is a daily function of public libraries. [Research](#) is still emerging on the length of time COVID-19 lives on surfaces. Libraries are looking for guidance in mitigating risk to employees in handling collections and restoring in-person services. At this time there is no definitive evidence-based research on how long the virus may live on books and other types of library materials. Libraries may wish to consider isolating materials returned from library patrons for a minimum of 72 hours as a conservative estimate. Other cleaning protocols should also be used to protect staff and mitigate transmission.

SIGNAGE

If you decide to open a physical location to the public, post signage encouraging visitors to take the appropriate preventive measures. It will also help your library patrons understand how your services have changed and what they can do to support prevention and reduce risk.

The BC CDC and Public Health Canada have prepared a variety of posters, factsheets, and infographics about COVID-19 that can be displayed in public areas. ([CDC: Resources at a Glance](#)) ([Public Health Canada: Awareness Resources](#))

CLEANING AND DISINFECTING IN A PUBLIC SETTING

BC CDC provides detailed guidance for [cleaning and disinfecting in a public setting](#). These are the measures that organizations can take to prevent infection and transmission:

- **Cleaning:** Consider increasing routine cleaning practices – if you are cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces once a day, move to twice a day using the products you already use.
- **Space:** Consider the density of your business and provide additional space for customers and employees to interact; for example, consider how line ups or seating could be expanded so that people are able to put some distance – 1 to 2 metres – between one another.
- **Hand hygiene:** Ensure your washrooms remain stocked with soap and consider offering hand sanitizer at entrances.
- **Communication:** Show your customers, clients, members, and employees what you are doing to support the efforts to slow transmission of this virus by communicating online and at your place of business.

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- **Employees who feel unwell:** Support your employees to stay home if they are sick.
- **Public gatherings:** Events that bring more than 50 people closely together – indoors or outdoors – are ordered to be cancelled for now. This does not apply to buildings where the environment allows for distance between people.

The Public Health Agency of Canada has also posted guidance on [cleaning and disinfecting public spaces](#), including recommendations regarding cleaning procedures and protocols. There is also general guidance from the BC CDC for [cleaning in the home](#) which provides options for cleaning items such as toys and electronics.

PROVINCIAL INTERLIBRARY LOAN, BC ONECARD AND REGIONAL DELIVERY SYSTEMS (INTERLINK)

The Ministry of Education, in consultation with ABCPLD (Association of BC Public Library Directors), closed the provincial interlibrary loan and BC OneCard programs on March 16.

The ministry recognizes the restoration of interlibrary loan (ILL) and BC OneCard service will depend on each library's ability to manage locally. ILL and BC OneCard services will be restored when over 80% of libraries are providing some level of in-person services and have the capacity to process returns and requests safely. InterLINK may return to regional delivery in consultation with the Libraries Branch.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND COMMUNITY SUPPORTS

Libraries should consult with their local Medical Health Officer regarding significant decisions related to COVID-19. To find your local Medical Health Officer:

- Fraser Health: 1-866-990-9941 or CDPHNs@fraserhealth.ca
- Interior Health: <https://www.interiorhealth.ca/AboutUs/Leadership/MHO/Pages/default.aspx>
- Island Health: <https://www.islandhealth.ca/about-us/medical-health-officers>
- Northern Health: <https://www.northernhealth.ca/about-us/leadership/medical-health-officers>
- Vancouver Coastal Health: <http://www.vch.ca/about-us/contact-us/medical-health-officers>



The Public Health Agency of Canada has released [community-based measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19](#), including hygiene and respiratory etiquette, environmental cleaning, and mitigation measures that promote social distancing and decrease density.

HELPING BC PREVENT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19

Each of us has a role to play in reducing the spread of this virus and protecting the people we love. The most important things people can do to limit the spread of the virus are:

- Stay home as much as possible and limit contact with other people.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid touching your face.

Libraries play an important role in helping people find information and access government services. Library staff are key information navigators and provide access to fact-based health, legal and government information. This is particularly important to people who do not have ready access to computers. Please continue to help us get the work out and help people find the information they need:

- B.C. has launched a non-medical information line for British Columbians who have questions about COVID-19: 1-888-COVID19. Phone lines are open 7 days a week from 7:30 AM to 8 PM, and information is available in more than 110 languages.
- B.C.'s COVID-19 website has many resources available at www.gov.bc.ca/covid19.
- The BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) website also has many resources for British Columbians who want more information about COVID-19, at <http://covid-19.bccdc.ca/>.
- If you think you have symptoms the Ministry of Health has developed an online self-assessment tool at <https://bc.thrive.health/>.
- If you have symptoms associated with COVID-19, self-isolate and call 8-1-1 to pre-arrange health testing.
- For more information and latest updates on COVID-19, follow the BC Centre for Disease Control on Twitter @CDCofBC or visit its website: <http://www.bccdc.ca/>.
- Worksafe BC, provides information for employers and workers: <https://www.worksafebc.com/en/about-us/covid-19-updates>.