

COVID-19 Emergency Response – Update

Date:	January 25, 2021
To:	Toronto Public Library Board
From:	City Librarian

SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to update the Library Board on Toronto Public Library's (TPL's) implementation of the reopening and resurgence plans as a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency, and to provide information on staffing.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact beyond what has already been approved in the current year's budget.

The Director, Finance & Treasurer has reviewed this financial impact statement and agrees with it.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PLAN

Reopening branches and reinstating services as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic directly addresses TPL's strategic plan priorities, particularly opening up the Library's public space and addressing digital literacy and inclusion. With new lockdown restrictions on branch services, online services and other new services continue to be developed and offered.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Reinstating services and developing new services responds to population growth, poverty, changing patterns of work, study, education and leisure in Toronto, and drives strategic outcomes such as greater digital inclusion opportunities through increased access to the internet, Wi-Fi and computers, and reduced barriers to access for equity-

seeking groups, seniors and youth. New services such as Internet Connectivity Kits and seniors' wellness checks are offered in response to community need.

DECISION HISTORY

At a Special Meeting on August 21, 2020, the Library Board approved a plan to support Toronto school boards' use of library facilities:

<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2020/aug21/06-potential-use-of-tpl-facilities-by-tsb-combined.pdf>

At its meeting on June 22, 2020, the Library Board received an update on the TPL's reopening plans and staffing:

<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2020/jun22/16-covid-19-emergency-response-update.pdf>

At its meeting on May 25, 2020, 2020, the Library Board approved TPL's reopening framework and phased reopening plan, and authorized the City Librarian to execute the phased reopening plan, adjusting it as needed based on the changing conditions and circumstances in the city and elsewhere:

<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2020/may25/11-covid-19-emergency-response-plans-for-reopening-revised-combined.pdf>

At its meeting on April 27, 2020, the Library Board received a report on TPL's operations, services and responses to the COVID-19 public health emergency, its integration with City of Toronto's Incident Management System, and details of TPL's pandemic plan: <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2020/apr27/14-covid-19-emergency-response-combined.pdf>

At its meeting on September 21, 2020, the Library Board received a report on the implementation of TPL's reopening plans a result of the COVID-19 public health emergency, an outline of TPL's resurgence plans in the event of a significant increase in COVID-19 cases, and information on staffing:

<https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2020/sep21/21-covid-19-emergency-response-update-combined.pdf>

ISSUE BACKGROUND

Based on recommendations from Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, the City of Toronto cancelled most programming and closed a number of facilities, including recreation and community centres, City-run daycares, museums and art galleries in response to the evolving COVID-19 situation. This came into effect at the end of the day on March 13, 2020 and as a result, all TPL branches were closed at the same time.

The Premier proclaimed a state of emergency effective March 17, 2020. TPL has been at various stages of reopening since the Premier announced stage one reopening of services effective May 19, 2020.

More recently, with the onset of a COVID-19 resurgence, Toronto entered a Grey Lockdown period effective November 23, 2020 resulting in the scaling back of high contact services.

Further restrictions were imposed when the Premier announced Ontario would go into a full lockdown effective December 26, 2020. For public libraries, the provincial regulations for the current lockdown state that: *Public libraries are closed to the public except for the purpose of curbside pickup, or for the return of circulating library materials, or for the delivery of circulating library materials.*

The Premier proclaimed a second state of emergency effective January 12, 2021 and a stay-at-home order effective January 14, 2021. The new regulations under the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act Stay-at-Home Order* do not additionally impact the current services and operational requirements of public libraries. Generally, the workplace is covered in the regulations stating that: *Every individual shall remain in their place of residence at all times unless leaving their place of residence necessary for one or more of the following purposes: Working or volunteering where the nature of the work or volunteering requires the individual to leave their residence, including when the individual's employer has determined that the nature of the individual's work requires attendance at the workplace.*

COMMENTS

Implementation of TPL's Resurgence Plan

When Toronto went into the Grey Lockdown period on November 23, 2020, TPL was in the midst of implementing the reopening plan. At that point, 82 of TPL's 100 branches were open with regular Monday to Saturday open hours (no Sunday service). The focus up until that point was on reopening with most services resuming in Q1 of 2021. Plans

were in place to reopen most branches by year end and implement a full suite of Sunday service hours at most locations in February 2021.

The lockdown measures which came into effect on November 23 and December 26, 2020 have changed the 2021 service plans, and impacted TPL's 2021 operating budget request to the City.

In moving from the reopening to the resurgence plan, the following strategies were engaged within the context of provincial regulations.

- Keep branches open as long as possible with a particular focus on keeping them open in areas with the highest needs.
- In scaling back, reduce high contact service first.
- Respond to surges in demand, pivoting between digital and in-person services as needed.
- Rapidly deploy additional digital services and built digital capabilities while maintaining phone services to promote equity.
- Add community-based services as needed.

TPL's services in response to the November 23 restrictions included:

- Access to 82 of 100 branches with regular open hours
- Contactless pickup of holds
- Open drop boxes
- Access to computers (by appointment and drop-in)
- Access to photocopiers, printers, scanners
- Access to washrooms
- Library card registration
- Bookmobile and Home Library Service with contactless service
- Answerline email and phone services.

TPL services that were suspended with the November 23 restrictions included:

- No access to collections for browsing (can only access collections through holds)
- No access to study space
- No youth hubs (TPL has 23).

With the announcement of the December 26, 2020 lockdown, TPL's branch services were reduced to the following:

82 branches providing:

- Contactless pickup of holds
- Open drop boxes.

Online programming, initiated as a new service in April 2020, continues to provide free, high-quality and engaging experiences to customers. Since launch, TPL has offered over 900 online programs with more than 67,000 attendees/views. Online programs have been offered for all audiences on topics such as employment, science and technology, personal finance, author talks and storytimes. These programs have been well-received by customers, as seen through our customer feedback survey with over 1,000 respondents. 120 staff from across the system have contributed in varied ways with delivery, coordination and planning.

In addition, Bookmobile service operates for contactless pickup of holds and returns of circulating materials.

The January 12, 2021 announcement about the second state of emergency and stay-at-home order do not additionally impact the current services and operational requirements of public libraries.

Community Based Services

Responding to community needs in new and innovative ways is always important but has been a particularly critical feature of TPL's service development during the pandemic.

Internet Connectivity Kits

TPL developed Internet Connectivity Kits to provide to Torontonians experiencing the greatest need for home internet access during the pandemic. Kits are comprised of a laptop and a Wi-Fi hotspot with two-years of unlimited data access. All kits have been supported solely by donations via the TPL Foundation, grants via the City of Toronto emergency relief funds, or from TPL partners donating equipment. TPL has worked with the City's Community Coordination Plan, an initiative led by the City and United Way that works with local community organizations to identify urgent issues, to identify and distribute the kits to the Torontonians in most urgent need. To date, the initiative has received or been pledged almost \$1M in support which is funding to support over 660 households with internet access and a laptop.

Seniors' Wellness Checks

The Seniors' Wellness program was launched in 2020 to connect with isolated customers during the pandemic. The program involves public service staff phoning customers between the ages of 80 to 100 to provide a friendly check-in, to share information about available library services, answer questions, and make referrals. To date, over 10,000 customers have been contacted and the response from recipients and others has been very positive. There has been extensive media attention with six

reports in the past few weeks. The next phase of the program is underway with staff contacting approximately 13,000 customers between the ages of 70 to 80 years.

Food Banks

TPL continues to support North York Harvest Food Bank (NYH) in providing weekly service at two TPL branches: Albion and Jane/Sheppard. Starting in January 2021, NYH will pilot a new innovative service model using shipping containers parked adjacent to these two TPL branches. This model expects to afford the flexibility to nimbly move service where required in the community and not rely on commercial space. Closure or insufficient space for physical distancing in commercial spaces has been a key reason over 1/3 of Toronto's food banks closed during the pandemic. The shipping container model will have one container for storage and another designed for retail use as the volunteer work and service area. TPL and NYH have agreed to pilot the model for up to a year at each location.

Staffing

Staff have continued to adjust and support the changing service and operational requirements as TPL works through the provincial restrictions imposed as a result of the resurgence in COVID-19 cases.

Over 1,500 staff (70 percent) continue to work on site with approximately 315 (20 percent) working remotely. There are approximately 255 vacant positions in branch operations either because staff have been approved for family or medical accommodation, the position is vacant because of the voluntary separation program, or the incumbent has left the position for other reasons and recruitment of a replacement is underway.

CONCLUSION

TPL has launched resurgence plan strategies in response to provincial restrictions introduced on November 23 and December 26, 2020. Service plans for this year have been adjusted in anticipation of ongoing service and operational restrictions in 2021 with the ongoing resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

CONTACT

Vickery Bowles; City Librarian; Tel: 416-393-7032; Email: vbowles@tpl.ca

SIGNATURE

Vickery Bowles
City Librarian