

# Health Equity and Small and Rural Public Libraries During COVID-19

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## ABSTRACT

Rural communities in the United States struggle with many health inequities that predate the COVID-19 Pandemic. This poster analyzes how public libraries responded to COVID-19 from March 2020 through March 2021 by utilizing the social media platform Facebook to continue sharing content that supports community health and wellness. It situates these responses in the context of health inequities in rural America. Although libraries in different parts of the country responded to COVID-19 in unique ways, common practices include sharing timely information about the pandemic and social services; adapting services to continue serving communities safely; and providing enriching educational content that also addresses social determinants of health. The poster concludes with a call to better understand the work small and rural public librarians do to address health inequities.

## KEYWORDS

Health; public libraries; rural communities; COVID-19; community engagement.

## INTRODUCTION

Inequities in access to healthcare and to the social determinants of health abound whether one is in the midst of a pandemic or not. One institution that strives to address inequities where they exist is the public library. As COVID-19 began inserting itself into every segment of life in the United States, public libraries, especially rural and small libraries, responded to COVID-19 by striving to keep their communities connected to resources (Chase, 2021). This poster analyzes how public libraries utilized the social media platform Facebook to continue sharing content in support of community health. It situates these responses in the context of health inequities in rural America. Thus, this study has the potential to contribute to current literature by examining how public libraries have already, and may further respond to, both this evolving health crisis and the broader rural health divide.

## BACKGROUND

Rural areas in the United States rank poorly in national health rankings (Rural Health Information Hub, 2019) obesity, smoking, drinking, and poor exercise habits are factors (Henning-Smith et al., 2019), exacerbated by lack of access to healthcare and other health services (Rural Health Information Hub). In this context, small and rural public libraries have an opportunity to support health equity (National Libraries of Medicine, 2020). Small and rural public libraries, serving populations of 25,000 or less, comprise the majority of the estimated 17,000 U.S. public libraries (IMLS, 2021). Before the pandemic libraries worked to mitigate health disparities through health programs and services, often developed through community partnerships (Lenstra, 2017; Rubenstein, 2018; Whiteman et al., 2018), including community gardens; classes; checkouts of snowshoes and pedometers; and health screenings, among other services (Flaherty & Miller, 2016; Lenstra, 2018a, 2018b; Lenstra & D'Arpa, 2019).

When pandemic shutdowns began in March 2020, these libraries facilitated distribution of masks, provided patrons with links to reputable information sources, and called patrons who lived alone to check on them, all while coping with staff layoffs (Chase, 2021; Wang & Lund, 2020). These libraries were among the first to implement innovative strategies, such as virtual programming, virtual reference, extended WiFi access, and curbside services (Chase, 2021; Goddard, 2020; Public Library Association, 2020). The pandemic also exacerbated rural digital disparities, which libraries sought to address through the distribution of mobile WiFi hotspots, learning packets, one-on-one computer use, among other strategies to keep communities connected (Lai & Widmar, 2020; Robertson, 2020; Santos, 2020).

## **METHODS**

The researchers analyzed Facebook posts made by 13 libraries and three public library systems in Michigan, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Vermont from March, July, October, and December 2020, and March 2021. These libraries are the research sites for a larger IMLS-funded study (#LG-18-19-0015-19) focused on understanding health and wellness programs and services offered by small and rural libraries. The months selected are a convenience sample to allow analysis of a manageable number of library Facebook posts during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysis was conducted by individual researchers reading through the posts numerous times to derive themes and subthemes. Then researchers collaborated to create a shared thematic framework which was then reapplied to the data to achieve interrater reliability. The study limitations include: 1) Since only public posts were examined, it is not possible to analyze the motivations that led to posting practices, and 2) Using a sample of months loses continuity of behavior that could be more apparent if all posts for the 13 months were examined.

## **FINDINGS**

The thematic framework developed from Facebook posts included five types of content: library hours and services, COVID awareness, social and community services, programming, and wellness. In Oklahoma, one rural library system mostly posted library-created content designed to instill a sense of connection between library staff and their communities. Many of the videos they created were health-related such as cooking, gardening, and exercise. Another rural system, located in an economically depressed sector of the state, shared a wide variety of links related to jobs, unemployment, food and rent assistance, taxes, and access to healthcare. Both systems closed mid-March 2020, and both reopened, with some restrictions, by June 1. After March 2020, the pandemic did not overtly feature in posts. The libraries did continue to share a variety of health supporting content.

In North Carolina, as in Oklahoma, posts explicitly about the pandemic were infrequent after March 2020. Libraries took steps to share content related to wellness and social services. One shared information about where to go to get food. Another regularly shared content from the local health department. Library-created posts included content and programming on mental health, the importance of spending time outside, and how to cook at home and stay active during the pandemic. In March 2021, libraries shared information on starting spring gardens.

In Michigan, all libraries posted about closures in March 2020, and re-openings and access to virtual services thereafter. Limited COVID-specific content was shared after March 2020. Virtual programs began at one site in March 2020, and were common practice at all three sites alongside outdoor programs. Programs included StoryWalks, music and movement classes for kids, crafts, meditation, gardening, and cooking classes. Libraries also shared information about food access, an upcoming election, expanded 9-1-1 services, crisis help, and a community bike share initiative.

In Vermont, libraries started sharing virtual versions of scheduled in-person programming along with library closure information in March 2020. One library set up a program with its town to connect local residents with various social services including food sources, financial help, and crisis assistance, and posted regularly about this. In July, libraries announced brief walk-in visits of 30 minutes. They posted about pick-up kits for youth activities, virtual programs, gardening programs, museum and park passes, and StoryWalks, much of which continued thereafter. Shared content included posts about online forums on community needs such as free food. By December, library hours were limited again and only curbside was available, although borrowing of snowshoes began. In March 2021, libraries posted about COVID testing and vaccines, along with virtual programming (e.g., Qi Qong) and began offering outdoor programs with social distancing restrictions.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

By its nature, Facebook is a communication platform. Libraries used it to communicate with their communities throughout the pandemic. Engagement with Facebook, however, is predicated on patrons' having appropriate technology and tools. The lack of robust, affordable, and ubiquitous broadband in rural communities is a contributing factor to health inequity. It is a barrier that became more apparent during the pandemic as access to library services moved online. This work is a beginning to a better understanding of how rural libraries serving communities rife with digital inequities, innovated and adjusted to ensure access to and participation in this pandemic-fueled shift to online engagement. Libraries were able to leverage Facebook to continue to support community health and wellness during the disruption of the pandemic. The way libraries used Facebook varied considerably, with a broad mixture of virtual programs, timely information, advertisements for in-person services, Facebook Live events, and sharing social and community information. This poster demonstrates the ways small and rural libraries continued to support community health and wellness, even in the context of a global pandemic.

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