Communicating in Crisis, the COVID Challenge

In mid-February, Elissa Andre was just starting her new job as external communications manager for Johnson County Library, planning to use her marketing expertise to highlight and promote all the Library’s services.

Laura Hunt was a veteran branch manager but just starting a newly-established position as internal communications manager, planning ways to enhance Library staff interactions and cohesiveness.

Then the COVID-19 emergency shut down the branches on March 14. Suddenly, Andre and Hunt didn’t have the luxury of settling into their new roles. They were confronting an unprecedented crisis that made communications all the more urgent and important. Fortunately, they quickly forged a great working relationship. As Andre says, “We’re two halves of the same brain.”

It became imperative to communicate well with both the public and the staff, and Andre and Hunt collaborated on many of those tasks. Andre and her team quickly ramped up content about the closure and all the online resources, through the Library’s website, social media and email marketing. She worked with TV and other media to spread the word about MakerSpace innovations on masks and 3D printer face shields.

Frequent updates kept the public aware of the reopening process. “I am so thankful for how supportive the Library has been as a whole. My team has been really welcoming,” Andre says. “The administration has gone above and beyond. Working with the public is fun. It’s exciting to see the impact your work is having.”

In early May she received an email from a marketing professional complimenting the Library’s communication. “That came on a day that was very stressful,” she recalled. “It was one of those moments of grace.”

In those early days, staff knew things were happening in the world and there was this sense of fear and anxiety,” Hunt said. “None of us knew what to expect. Staff just wanted information, what decisions were being made.”

Meanwhile, race relations have also become a flashpoint, and the Library has a role there too. People searching the website have discovered the Race Project KC educational initiative, prompting an impressive uptick in grassroots donations. Andre is determined to make the most of this opportunity. “This is a moment.”

Despite all the challenges and intensity, for Andre this is her “dream job,” with talented co-workers and passionate patrons. Hunt is pleased that her Library knowledge compliments Andre’s marketing skills, giving them the foundation to build a strong communications department.

“Right now we’re still focusing on just getting things open and making sure everyone has the information they need to get open,” Hunt said. “But we’ve started digging into the procedural side of the department and thinking through the infrastructure we need to make things work more effectively.”
JOHNSON COUNTY LIBRARY  
VOLUME XVII  
3 

**BRANCHING OUT**

Blue Valley Branch – Getting Back in the Building

Blue Valley is known as one of Johnson County Library’s busiest branches, with thousands of materials circulating each month out of the facility at 9000 W. 151st Street in southern Overland Park. But the beehive of activity has been on a whole new order of magnitude during the past few months of COVID-19, even as the branch was closed to the public and then as it opened back up.

Responding to the pandemic has required flexibility and learning on the fly, and Branch Manager Stephanie Bailey is grateful for the entire system’s support. That was especially apparent when the book-drop and drive-thru service resumed in May at Blue Valley, Lenexa City Center and Monticello.

Blue Valley was particularly slammed, with massive piles of books returned and cars backed up around the building as patrons began picking up their holds. It was a dramatic illustration of the public’s pent-up craving for Library services. Top managers, including Library administrators Ben Sunds and Tricia Suellentrop, helped out, along with reinforcements from other branches.

“We have survived. That’s been a testament to how well we work as a Library organization,” said Bailey, who has been Blue Valley’s branch manager for about two and a half years. “We have had a lot of extra help since we’ve been socially distanced. New signage provides direction and guidance. Bailey praises Nancy Birmingham and the rest of the team tasked with planning the reopening process.

For Bailey, these past few months have been so intense that they are a kind of a blur, but she says staff has weathered the storm, with good communication and a positive attitude. An empty conference room was converted into a place to quarantine books for 72 hours. Meanwhile, Bailey and many others worked hard to manage the snaking line of cars through the drive-thru, pulling materials.

“Our whole system come together so we can help each other out has been a treat to see,” she said.

“Once we are back in the building cutting the wait time significantly. The process works well with one person at the window, another outside collecting library cards, and a third pulling materials.

On June 15, the branches began reopening, with reduced hours. Previously, Blue Valley and all the buildings underwent a deep cleaning and sanitizing, and ongoing cleaning will be emphasized. In normal times, Blue Valley is full of tables and chairs because it is heavily used for tutoring. But for now, patrons are not encouraged to linger, so much of that furniture has been removed to a storage facility. At some point, all of that will return. “It will be back, no worries,” Bailey promises.

Computers are available, but users are socially distanced. New signage provides direction and guidance. Bailey praises Nancy Birmingham and the rest of the team tasked with planning the reopening process.

Matt Hammes, a Blue Valley assistant branch manager, has also been integral to that effort. “So we have an expert branch manager, has also been integral to that effort. “So we have an expert

Katherine has twice been named a winner in the Friends’ annual contest (2018 and 2019), so she entered the 2020 contest with high hopes. She was naturally disappointed when the 2020 winners list did not include her name, but kept working at her art. “She first learned to love drawing from the bookmark contest,” said her mom. “She said she will try again next year.”

Katherine had also entered a contest sponsored by the local Rice Gallery of Fine Art, and was named a winner. The award, says her mother, was comforting and encouraged her to keep drawing. Katherine let her mother know she wanted to donate her prize money to the Friends of Johnson County Library. “As parents, we feel very proud for Kathy’s unexpected and lovely decision about her award,” says Judy Feng.

The Friends are pleased to welcome Katherine Feng as a Sponsor-level member. Her gift supports Friends activities and programs like the annual Bookmark Design Contest. Thank you, Katherine!

**TOP E-HOLDS**

- **JULY 2020**
  - White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism by Robin J. DiAngelo
  - The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz by Erik Larson
  - Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don’t Know by Malcolm Gladwell
  - Such a Fun Age by Kiley Reid
  - The Silent Patient by Alex Michaelides
  - Dear Edward by Ann Napolitano
  - Untamed by Glennon Doyle
  - American Dirt by Jeanine Cummins
  - The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes by Suzanne Collins
  - The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

- **Library clerk Thomas Parks serving library drive-thru users.**
Library clerk Jeremy Anderson, who has been a Cedar Roe Library clerk since April 2019, left the Roeland Park branch after his shift on March 13 (yes, Friday the 13th) thinking he would be back in the building the following week.

Instead, he got the news that Johnson County Library branches were shutting down indefinitely as of 5 p.m. March 14 because of the rapidly-spreading Coronavirus. Anderson and his colleagues worked from home for a few weeks, and fit in some online staff development courses. But then he learned he would be furloughed, indefinitely. Candidly, that was hard. “That was really kind of scary,” he admits. “When you don’t know how much time it’s going to be, it’s nerve-wracking.”

Many Johnson County Library employees continued working from home. But clerks work face-to-face with the public, helping patrons with library cards, fines, holds, book recommendations and questions about their accounts. They also help manage the collection. It’s a customer service job that Anderson loves, but he couldn’t do it from home. He became one of 213 Library staff members, including pages and other circulation employees, whom Johnson County reluctantly furloughed in early April.

Anderson is grateful to the County’s HR department for helping to sign up furloughed employees for unemployment benefits. So he quickly began receiving payments and never experienced the Kansas unemployment website hassles that many people did. “The Library also continued our benefits which was great,” he said. He didn’t need to avail himself of any health care services, but it was reassuring to know he could.

Anderson is grateful to his boss and co-workers for keeping in touch and supporting each other. “I think everyone had a similar experience,” he says. The attitude was: “This is really stressful and scary, but we’ll get through it.”

He did find ways to break the tension. Several friends introduced him to an activity he’d never been interested in before: online multiplayer video games. It was engrossing and fun. He also attended an online birthday party for a friend who was especially meaningful because it Zoomed in people from California and New York.

When the book drop resumed May 18 at Monticello, Blue Valley and Lenexa, Anderson leaped at the chance to help out. He had done stints at all three branches since he was first hired by Johnson County Library as a page in May 2018. He was assigned to Lenexa, where workers received thousands of books checked out months ago and prepared them to recirculate. Anderson also helped customers in the drive-thru, which did a brisk business. The service counted 217 patron interactions one day, far more than in normal times.

Patrons were thrilled, and their comments reinforced for Anderson how much the Libraries mean to people. Even better, all furloughed workers who wished to return were back by June 8, and the buildings reopened for limited service June 15.

Anderson looked forward to reconnecting with Cedar Roe regulars. It’s what makes the cherished neighborhood branch such a special place to work. “This branch has a lot of very loyal patrons. Patrons who care about the branch and about the role it plays in this community,” he said. “I like talking to our patrons and helping them find stuff. Everyone is very appreciative.”

Since 2016, the Johnson County Library Foundation’s biggest annual event and fundraiser has been “Library Lets Loose,” attracting about 500 people to Central for an evening of games, music, dancing, food and fun. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, it quickly became apparent that such an event couldn’t be held this year. The Foundation briefly considered cancelling, but decided to forge ahead with a virtual event that people can enjoy from home.

“We have found that people want to support the Library and this event is a perfect fit for them,” says Foundation Executive Director Stephanie Stollsteimer. “This year has been so weighted by uncertainty for everyone. If anyone has the capacity to give, we can help them with a way to do that. We want to join everyone to cultivate the community spirit of the Library.”

This year’s event is scheduled for Sept. 12, and planning is well underway. More details will soon be available on the Foundation website, https://www.jcolibraryfoundation.org/events-opportunities/library-lets-loose/

In the past, participants have bought a $75 ticket. This year’s event will be free, although donations are always welcome and encouraged. Attendees will view a brief presentation, then move to a variety of virtual rooms offering storytelling, trivia, games, musical performances and other entertainment. “We’re hosting interactive activities where people can participate from home,” Stollsteimer said. “Some of it will be live, some recorded.”

The event also relies on dedicated volunteers. This year the effort is led by honorary hosts Cindy Wallis-Lage and Kent Lage. Stollsteimer praised the hosts, both engineers, for their can-do spirit in the face of the pandemic. In a letter inviting event sponsors, the hosts urged continued financial support to help sustain Johnson County Library as a vital community resource.

“The current world emergency has highlighted the value of readily available learning resources for our community during a time with so much uncertainty,” they wrote. “As a valued partner in our community, the Library has remained available 24/7 with online resources for education, news, and entertainment.”

Kent Lage is an urban services manager with Johnson County Public Works. Cindy Wallis-Lage is a top executive with Black & Veatch, which is the lead corporate sponsor of Central’s MakerSpace. Both Black & Veatch and MakerSpace epitomize innovation, creativity and productivity – qualities needed now more than ever.

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TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Social Media Highlights

Yesterday Blue Valley, Monticello, and Lenexa City Center Library drive-thrus checked out 1,424 items to a total of 544 patrons!

Here’s a picture of the drive-thru line at Blue Valley, and a picture of the Holds list at Lenexa - definitely a record-setter!

Library clerk Subhra Mullick gathering books after 72-hour quarantine at Lenexa City Center.

Central Assistant Branch Manager Lisa Jordan being interviewed about Re-opening.

As you can see by these posts, the Johnson County library system continues to thrive even in these difficult times! Thank you for your support!