

# ALA American Library Association

June 25, 2020

The Honorable Lamar Alexander  
Chairman  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions  
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions  
U.S. Senate

Re: “Preparing for the Next Pandemic” white paper

Dear Chairman Alexander and Ranking Member Murray:

The American Library Association (ALA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s white paper, “Preparing for the Next Pandemic.” America’s libraries have suffered painful losses due to COVID-19, and we appreciate the Committee’s attention to protecting the nation from future pandemics. We offer the following recommendations:

**1. Federal agencies should proactively deliver consumer health information, including through library partnerships, to prevent and mitigate future pandemics.**

An effective response to a public health crisis is impossible without an informed public. Federal public health and emergency management authorities have a responsibility to provide trustworthy, actionable information to at-risk populations. The federal public awareness strategy for an emerging pandemic must emphasize proactive and equitable outreach through all available communications channels, including through partnerships with libraries.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, America’s libraries have shown that information is an essential service. Libraries have kept their communities connected to health information and other vital resources by adapting their services, even as many library buildings closed to the public. For instance, in Washington, the King County Library System offered tools to help parents and kids cope with remote learning following school closures.<sup>1</sup> The librarian in Homer, Alaska, moved children’s storybook reading to the local AM radio station.<sup>2</sup> In Portland, Maine, the library established a phone line to connect residents with social services.<sup>3</sup> Florida libraries distributed unemployment forms in their drive-thrus.<sup>4</sup> In Alamance County, North Carolina, the library brought free Wi-Fi to neighborhoods with a mobile van.<sup>5</sup>

Recommendation 2.1 of the Committee’s white paper recognizes the need for public information regarding the effects of emerging infectious diseases. We recommend that the Committee additionally address the need to inform individuals about precautions through communications that are timely, accurate, understandable, and culturally-responsive. This should include communicating to at-risk populations through trusted messengers such as libraries.

We recommend that the National Library of Medicine, a component of the National Institutes of Health, be included as a key partner in informing the public about emerging infectious diseases,

including through its National Network of Libraries of Medicine.<sup>6</sup> In addition, we recommend that federal agencies collaborate with the Federal Depository Library Program, administered by the Government Publishing Office, to disseminate information through Federal Depository Libraries.<sup>7</sup> These communications strategies and collaboration mechanisms should be developed in consultation with the Institute of Museum and Library Services,<sup>8</sup> and should be established in advance of a crisis to enable prompt response in the critical early days of a pandemic. Congress should provide adequate funding to support these activities.

**2. Federal agencies should provide sector-specific information to private, state, local, and tribal partners to address distinct needs in responding to future pandemics.**

Employers and institutions, such as libraries, also need timely information about precautions to prevent infection. Information that is tailored to each affected industry's distinct needs will enable all sectors to take prompt action.

For instance, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) has responsibility to coordinate with other federal agencies on activities regarding libraries and museums.<sup>9</sup> In response to COVID-19, IMLS has taken a leadership role in addressing the distinct needs of libraries affected by the pandemic. IMLS has partnered with agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Small Business Administration, and the Federal Communications Commission, to provide timely information to the nation's libraries to assist them in preventing infection and promoting continuity of services.<sup>10</sup> IMLS has also joined with federal and private partners to commission research about the risks of transmission through typical library activities like book lending.<sup>11</sup> These activities promote the prompt and effective adoption of precautions by libraries, recognizing their distinct needs and circumstances.

In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Smithsonian Institution sponsor the Heritage Emergency National Task Force, which convenes federal and private partners to support disaster preparedness and response in cultural heritage institutions such as libraries and museums. The task force compiled a resource list in response to COVID-19,<sup>12</sup> and this model could be adapted to address future pandemics as well.

We recommend that federal public health and emergency management authorities collaborate with those agencies that have responsibilities related to industries and sectors where emerging infectious diseases could be transmitted. Such collaboration will ensure public health guidance is responsive to the needs of and effectively delivered to relevant state, local, tribal, and private partners. In the case of libraries, we recommend that health and emergency agencies collaborate with IMLS. These relationships and collaboration mechanisms should be established in advance of a crisis, and emergency response plans should be developed to address a range of potential future scenarios to enable prompt reaction in the early days of a pandemic. Congress should provide adequate funding to support these activities.

**3. Congress and federal agencies should prepare in advance for emergency economic measures as an essential part of the public health response to future pandemics.**

An effective response to future pandemics requires individuals, employers, and institutions to implement precautions. Yet people and organizations will hesitate to take precautions if they feel they cannot afford to do so. Such delay or non-adoption can permit widespread transmission to take hold, with dire consequences for the nation's health and economy.

COVID-19 has shown how economic anxiety can fan the flames of a pandemic. When deciding what precautions to take, individuals and employers are forced to consider the expense of purchasing new equipment or anticipated revenue losses from closures or lost work. If individuals and organizations lack confidence that government emergency measures will protect them economically, then they may decide to delay or forego protective actions and thereby exacerbate the pandemic. To safeguard the nation's health, the federal government must prepare in advance for emergency economic measures.

These concerns have affected the library sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 17, ALA recommended closing library buildings to the public to prevent the spread of the disease.<sup>13</sup> This was a difficult recommendation, not only because it would limit user access to certain services while closed, but also closing buildings could reduce library revenues and thus necessitate further service cuts. While we believe this action was necessary to protect the health of library workers and users, unfortunately the finances of libraries have not been protected. Library workers have suffered thousands of furloughs and layoffs as libraries have been forced to cut millions of dollars from their budgets due to COVID-19. To date, Congress has not provided fiscal relief to libraries affected by the pandemic, despite support from bipartisan Members of Congress and government, education, and business leaders.<sup>14</sup>

To promote timely adoption of precautions that slow the spread of disease, the federal government must instill confidence that it will protect the finances of workers and employers. We recommend that Congress and federal agencies develop economic response plans prior to a future pandemic. These plans must address the needs of all affected sectors, including public and non-profit employers such as libraries.

**4. Congress and federal agencies should accelerate research into future pandemics by ensuring scientists have access to all relevant data and publications.**

Research is essential to respond to emerging infectious diseases. Time is of the essence in a pandemic: scientists and clinicians need immediate access to the latest knowledge about the disease. We recommend that Congress and federal agencies accelerate research into future pandemics by ensuring scientists have access to all relevant data and publications.

On March 12, the Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and member of President Trump's Coronavirus Task Force, Dr. Kelvin Droegemeier, called for

all COVID-19-related research and data to immediately be made freely available to the public.<sup>15</sup> The statement noted that “timely access is critical, as it allows researchers to keep up with the rapidly growing body of literature and identify trends and relevant information in efforts to characterize this novel virus and address the associated global health crisis.”

We agree, and we believe such an approach should not wait until a crisis begins. We recommend that Congress and federal agencies require public access to all non-classified federally-funded research. As we wrote to OSTP on April 22, “This will not be the last pandemic. A zero-embargo open access policy will improve American and global security in the face of future public health crises.”<sup>16</sup> Congress has previously required research funded by the National Institutes of Health to be made publicly available.<sup>17</sup> We urge Congress to apply this policy to all federal agencies, include federally-funded research data in the policy, and eliminate the delay for public access.

## **Conclusion**

In less than a year since it was first identified, COVID-19 has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. When the next pandemic begins to emerge, our nation’s response must be swift, decisive, and coordinated. The federal government must ensure widespread access to information that allows individuals, employers, and scientists to combat the disease, and must make advance preparations to enable a timely response. We urge Congress to take action to protect America’s library workers and users from the next pandemic. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Kathi Kromer  
Associate Executive Director, Public Policy and Advocacy  
American Library Association

The American Library Association (“ALA”) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.

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- <sup>1</sup> “King County Libraries offering free events, classes to help pass the time at home,” KING 5, April 8, 2020, available at <https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/king-county-library-events-coronavirus/281-f5d96f43-ca44-46a0-aa54-19b7ac74b3c3>.
- <sup>2</sup> Rachel D’Oro, “Storybooks, radio connect kids isolated in far-flung Alaska,” Associated Press, April 28, 2020, available at <https://apnews.com/e78342333fde3756317359ab0254ad76>.
- <sup>3</sup> Michael Kelley, “Portland Public Library keeps in touch with patrons, works on re-opening,” *Portland Press Herald*, May 12, 2020, available at <https://www.pressherald.com/2020/05/12/portland-public-library-keeps-in-touch-with-patrons-works-on-re-opening/>.
- <sup>4</sup> C.T. Bowen, “Hillsborough County is handing out unemployment forms at libraries,” *Tampa Bay Times*, April 13, 2020, available at <https://www.tampabay.com/news/health/2020/04/13/hillsborough-county-is-handing-out-unemployment-forms-at-libraries/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Miranda Ferrante, “Local libraries offer free Internet access in Burlington,” Elon News Network, June 15, 2020, available at <https://www.elonnewsnetwork.com/article/2020/06/alamance-public-libraries-offers-free-internet-access>.
- <sup>6</sup> See 42 U.S. Code §§ 286-286d; see also letter from the Medical Library Association and Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries to the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, June 23, 2020 available at <https://www.mlanet.org/p/bl/et/blogaid=3036>.
- <sup>7</sup> See 44 U.S. Code §§ 1901-1916.
- <sup>8</sup> See 20 U.S. Code § 9103(f); see also 20 U.S. Code § 9121(9).
- <sup>9</sup> 20 U.S. Code § 9103(f).
- <sup>10</sup> See Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Updates,” available at <https://www.imls.gov/coronavirus-covid-19-updates>.
- <sup>11</sup> Institute of Museum and Library Services, “Research Shows Virus Undetectable on Five Highly Circulated Library Materials After Three Days,” June 22, 2020, available at <https://www.imls.gov/news/research-shows-virus-undetectable-five-highly-circulated-library-materials-after-three-days>.
- <sup>12</sup> Heritage Emergency National Task Force, “COVID-19 Resource Hub,” available at <https://culturalrescue.si.edu/hentf/major-disasters/current-disasters/>.
- <sup>13</sup> American Library Association, “ALA Executive Board recommends closing libraries to public,” March 17, 2020, available at <http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2020/03/ala-executive-board-recommends-closing-libraries-public>.
- <sup>14</sup> American Library Association, “Business, government, education leaders call for emergency funding for libraries impacted by COVID-19,” May 11, 2020, available at <http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2020/05/business-government-education-leaders-call-emergency-funding-libraries>.
- <sup>15</sup> Letter from chief science advisors to members of the scholarly publishing community, March 17, 2020, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID19-Open-Access-Letter-from-CSAs.Equivalents-Final.pdf>.
- <sup>16</sup> Comments by the American Library Association and Association of College and Research Libraries to the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, April 22, 2020, available at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/issues/scholcomm/ALA-ACRL%20Public%20Access%20RFI%20response%20FINAL.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> 42 U.S. Code § 282c.