



## GOING DIGITAL: PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

**OVERVIEW:** Enhanced virtual programming and digital content during the pandemic shutdown increased community connections and helped with distance learning and combatting social isolation.

**CHALLENGE:** Library operations and services were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and shutdowns. The extent of shutdowns was not immediately known, and the effect of learning and working from home on our patrons was a concern. Due to the restrictions, community members had less opportunities to interact with others or attend events. When libraries closed, OCPL needed to find a way to create and promote valuable educational, informative, and entertaining activities. To reduce social isolation and continue providing services, OCPL quickly adapted to find new ways to continue meeting the needs of community members.

**SOLUTION:** Dedicated OCPL staff rose to the occasion by restructuring and creating committees to respond to the pandemic focusing on virtual programs and engagement. The first area to address was moving in-person programming to virtual. Virtual storytimes and crafting videos became the new normal, as staff learned how to record and edit storytimes and DIY craft projects from home. Library patrons have shared many endearing photos of families enjoying this new age of libraries. Aside from the need to focus on virtual programming, OCPL knew enhancing community engagement was equally important. On social media, the library began using Instagram and Facebook stories more regularly. To keep patrons engaged, staff created interactive activities such as trivia, search activities, polls, and daily questions to let people know the library was there. A popular social media post for many libraries is the “traveling library card”, which was rebranded as #OCPLsafeathome and encouraged library users to take photos of their library cards in their home or on daily ventures outside. The library’s monthly newsletter was altered to make weekly distributions of service updates, virtual programs, and more. To continue to engage patrons, a digital compilation of recipes shared by library users became the community cookbook. Individuals connected with their favorite library staff member via a weekly storytime or met their favorite author virtually. The first ever Spring Reading Challenge was also launched, which was a virtual reading program that was a combination of reading and at-home challenges. Once virtual programming and engagement were running like a well-oiled machine, the behind the scenes work that OCPL staff was

doing to keep libraries running was shared on social media platforms. Posts with overflowing bookdrops were a highlight for followers because it gave them a look at the nitty gritty parts of library operations that the public doesn't usually see. The library found that updates about getting ready for reopening were well-received by the public.

**INNOVATION:** It became apparent that internet access was not readily available to everyone. OCPL immediately began researching and posting ways to access free or low-cost internet to alleviate the access disparity. In an effort to advance equity, and inclusion, OCPL began circulating Wi-Fi hotspots and Chromebooks to bridge the gap in digital access. OCPL has learned that enhancing communication, increasing community connection, and developing new and creative ways for outreach is how the library will continue to thrive. With this in mind, OCPL launched a chat service for patrons and a mobile app that allows library users to navigate digital services and the collection at their fingertips. And continuing in its mission to bridge the digital divide, OCPL quickly planned and implemented two mobile library bookmobiles that take the library into Orange County neighborhoods.

**RESULTS:** Over 100,000 have participated in or engaged with the virtual programs and digital content available at OCPL. Having the virtual platform helps OCPL reach out to new users, meet users where they are and gives busy individuals the flexibility to log on from anywhere. The 125 Chromebooks and 160 Wi-Fi hotspots aid in bridging the digital divide and equip residents with the necessary resources to be able to learn and work from home taking into consideration patron health concerns, childcare needs, and mobility issues that are often barriers for some library users. In 2021, OCPL saw a 41% increase in storytime attendance with 20,726 attendees interacting. Also, in 2021, almost 19,000 patrons utilized the chat reference service, and OCPL saw the biggest growth in followings since the library began posting to social media over seven years ago. Library newsletter subscribers have also grown exponentially with nearly 6,000 subscribers.

**REPLICABILITY:** OCPL leveraged current programs and staff resources to create the virtual program. Similar programs could be created, not only by other public libraries but by other programs with the desire and need to connect people to resources virtually.

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** [OCPL Virtual Content - Google Drive](#)