

Adapting to the "New Normal"- Response to COVID-19: Village Libraries' Services

Introduction

The project Agrolib Ja (Agricultural Libraries in Jagodina) is the initiative by the "Radislav Nikčević" Public Library. It is the internationally recognized project that included the renovation and adaptation of four rural libraries to the needs of the members of the local communities, predominantly farmers. The COVID-19 outbreak brought a lot of unexpected changes for them since these libraries were cultural, information, communication and meeting hubs.

Results/Findings

The findings are presented as a percentage based on the number of respondents to each question. The open-end questions are analysed in a qualitative manner and the data are extracted from the open-text responses.

The village librarians survey: Their primary mode of operation during COVID-19 when libraries were either closed or partially open was from home with occasional visits to the libraries in order to deliver books, newspapers, agricultural journals door-to-door (1 librarian) and work from home with occasional visits to the libraries to prepare pick-up points in front of the library buildings for patrons to collect library materials, (4 librarians). Three of them communicated with their patrons through the form "Ask a librarian" on the Library official website and all of them communicated with patrons by phone. Two of them recommended government's initiatives and gave advice on reliable websites regarding the pandemic. One of the librarians had an extra service- she provided the older patrons with groceries and medicines by using her bicycle as a means of transportation. Three of them promoted among the patrons the digital library within the official Library website that contained e-magazines, newspapers and books. The open-end responses show that they have certain concern over leaving out some community members who may need library services. Also, there is a concern over decline in library usage or permanent closure of libraries. All librarians are satisfied with the services they managed to provide for their patrons and just one of them was partially satisfied with the patrons' responses. Three of them said that they started introducing the digital library service to the patrons after the reopening of the libraries and one of them said that she started introducing critical information literacy to the patrons.

The patrons survey: More than half of the respondents visited the libraries every weekday prior to pandemic. Almost all of the respondents said that they were fully satisfied with the services provided during the pandemic. The great majority of the respondents said that they did not access the digital library. Almost half of them asked the librarians for the COVID-19 updates. Great majority of the respondents used the pickup service opposed to those who used door-to-door services. Great majority of them borrowed agricultural magazines and daily newspapers, followed by those who borrowed books. Almost all of them said that they continued visiting the libraries after COVID-19 like they used to do prior to it.

The survey findings clearly demonstrate that the four libraries provide places that are highly valued by the members of their local communities.

Purpose and goals

The aim of this poster is to outline the impact of COVID-19 on the services that the village libraries provided their patrons with and to demonstrate the adaptability of village librarians to drastic changes during the COVID-19 pandemic from how they provided services, restricted use of library premises to closure and re-opening. It was important for the „Radislav Nikčević“ Public Library to gain a better understanding of new roles of the librarians and a completely new experience the patrons had; a shift from in-person services to online, door-to door and pickup services that the village librarians provided since these libraries were important to the patrons as physical spaces.



Methodology

In March 2022, the librarians in four village libraries in the Jagodina Municipality were invited to participate in a survey via e-mail about their adaptability to changing circumstances in providing their patrons with library services during the pandemic. Also, the village libraries' patrons were invited to participate in a separate survey regarding their experience with the library services during that time. They were contacted by phone.

Both surveys were developed and distributed by the librarians who worked in the "Radislav Nikčević" Public Library in Jagodina. The surveys were short because the library team did not want to occupy too much of their time and they wanted the surveys to be easy to complete and concise and to get short and prompt feedback.

The survey for the librarians was a mixture of open and closed questions. They answered multiple choice questions regarding their services provision and communication with their patrons during the pandemic and open questions regarding their attitudes and perceptions of the challenges they faced.

The survey for patrons contained only closed questions.

A total of 4 village librarians and 162 patrons participated in the survey.

Practical implications or value

The survey demonstrates the example of librarians' good practice during COVID-19 and showcases how village libraries, even though serving small communities, demonstrate their value and ability to adapt to new circumstances and provide the users in their local communities with new, transformed services. Even though some of the librarians introduced the digital library as a new service, patrons showed little interest in it. The respondents-patrons value not only the librarians' professionalism, but also their friendly attitude and engagement. The village libraries have a pivotal role in their rural communities and as such are responsible for their patrons in terms of offering different services or programs to them and meeting their needs in "normal" and "new normal" circumstances. The village librarians shall continue attending professional training programs and develop their skills and competencies in order to perform their tasks successfully and efficiently and stay ahead.

Statistics

- 58.02% of the respondents visited the libraries every weekday prior to COVID-19
- 94.4% of the respondents are fully satisfied with the services during COVID-19
- 75.31% communicated with the librarians by phone
- Just 21.60% of the respondents used door-to door services
- 71.60% used pickup services
- 48.15% asked librarians for COVID-19 updates
- Just 17.28% of the respondents accessed the digital library during the pandemic
- 85.80% borrowed daily newspapers and agricultural magazines
- 61.11% borrowed books
- 91.36% visit the libraries after COVID-19 as they did prior to it