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# Ontario Public Library Response to COVID-19

Report prepared June 2020

## Executive Summary

On March 17, 2020, public libraries across Ontario were ordered to close to help reduce the spread of COVID-19. As of June 2020, libraries across the province are starting to open up in some limited capacity. While physical library branches have been closed to members of the community, however, they have continued to operate virtually, providing access to a wide array of services and resources for people of all ages, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Starting March 13, the Ontario Library Association (OLA) invited public libraries to share information about how they are adapting during this period of closure through a short survey. The survey tool evolved with the pandemic, adding new questions to capture current and relevant information. Libraries were invited to respond multiple times to provide updates over time.

The [full responses](#) were made available to respondents immediately in order to provide real-time information on how other public libraries were responding and to help support public libraries in their own response to a completely new and ever-evolving situation. This report summarizes key trends noted in survey responses. It focuses on responses received between April 1 and April 30.

### **Here's what we found:**

Public libraries remained very active during this period of physical distancing, continuing to offer relevant programming and services to their communities. Libraries are:

- Offering digital resources to their communities, expanding digital collections where budgets allow, and increasing promotions of these e-resources and tutorials on how to access them.
- Developing virtual programming for children and adults, including story-times, book clubs, technology training, and more.
- Acting as a trusted source of information regarding COVID-19, amplifying public health messaging and sharing current, local information regarding the pandemic.
- Placing care calls to seniors and vulnerable populations.
- Providing virtual reference services.
- Supporting COVID-19 community response by creating PPE.
- Facilitating card-renewals and temporary/virtual card registration.

At the same time, the closure has had a significant impact on the way that libraries work.

- Libraries saw a significant change in how their libraries have been staffed, with 70% of libraries in April reporting that they had a combination of some staff continuing to work, while other staff had stopped working.
- 50% of libraries had laid off or furloughed some staff members.
- For those staff still working, many transitioned to working from home. In April, 66% of libraries reported that all staff were working from home. An additional 26% reported that staff were both working at home and at the library.
- With this shift, libraries supported staff working from home, lending laptops or other devices and facilitating remote access to library systems.

As public libraries move forward with phased reopening, we anticipate continued shifts in how libraries operate and serve their communities. The public library response to date demonstrates the incredible ingenuity of our sector.



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## Survey methodology

The first iteration of this survey was launched on March 13, after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization and before public libraries were ordered to close by the Ontario provincial government. The original survey consisted of 9 questions, and focused on whether libraries were going to voluntarily close their doors. After the announcement by the Ontario provincial government on March 17 mandating the closure of public libraries, new survey questions were added focusing on the impact of physical closures on library programming, community response and staffing.

The majority of survey questions were originally constructed as open-ended. Responses were coded according to major themes that emerged across responses. This report summarizes key trends noted in survey responses. In May, most questions were revised to be multiple choice, using the themes that had emerged in early responses.

This report focuses on responses received between April 1 and April 30. Where available, comparative data collected in the month of March is included. While this survey remained open through the end of June, only 9 responses were received between May 1st and June 30th. These responses have been excluded from this report, they can be viewed [here](#).

### Library Response Rate by Size of Population Served

Libraries serving a population of under 5,000, were under-represented among respondents, with only 18% of these libraries responding in April (compared to 35% of all libraries responding). A lower response rate among smaller libraries is not uncommon. Often, smaller libraries have limited staff resources and may not have the time to dedicate to completing these types of optional surveys.

Population served	All Ontario Libraries	March Responses		April Responses	
		#	%	#	%
under 5,000	146	16	11%	27	18%
from 5,000 to 15,000	62	25	40%	30	48%
from 15,000 to 50,000	50	25	50%	25	50%
from 50,000 - 100,000	23	15	65%	11	48%

over 100,000	29	16	55%	14	48%
<b>All sizes</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>35%</b>

### Library Response by Geographical Location

Similarly, there was a relative under-representation of libraries from Northern Ontario.

Geographical location	All Ontario Libraries	March Responses		April Responses	
		#	%	#	%
Eastern Ontario	79	26	33%	25	32%
Central Ontario	62	37	60%	27	44%
GTA	1	1	100%	1	100%
South Western Ontario	42	13	31%	19	45%
Northern Ontario	126	20	16%	35	28%
<b>All regions</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>35%</b>

## Survey Results

### Library Programming and Services

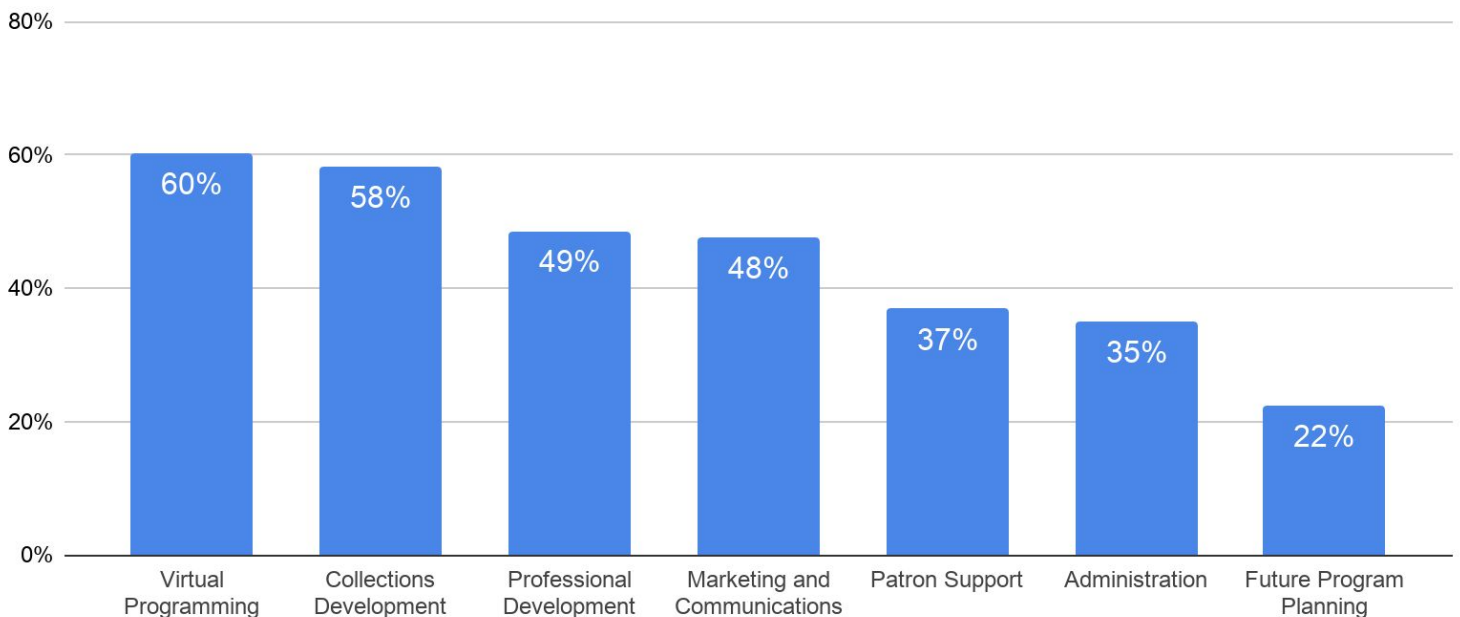
#### What are staff working on?

While physical library locations have been closed, library staff have remained hard at work to respond to community needs, adapting programming and services to reflect a distanced and virtual service model.

When asked what library staff were working on during this time, the most common activities cited by respondents were:

- Developing virtual programming (60%)
- Expanding or promoting e-collections (58%)
- Working on Professional Development (49%)

% of libraries who mentioned each activity (n=103)



## Care calls

Many libraries also reported some new services put in place to continue serving patrons at a distance through Direct Patron Support (37%). This included care calls to seniors and vulnerable populations (8%), virtual reference (8%) and membership renewals (15%)

**Care calls** consist of proactive outreach by library staff to vulnerable members of their communities, including seniors, homebound members, and other vulnerable patrons. Staff members connect directly to help break social isolation and connect to other social services in the community as needed.

## Popular Virtual Programming

Library respondents mentioned a wide variety of virtual programming options being delivered in their communities. Some of the most common examples included:

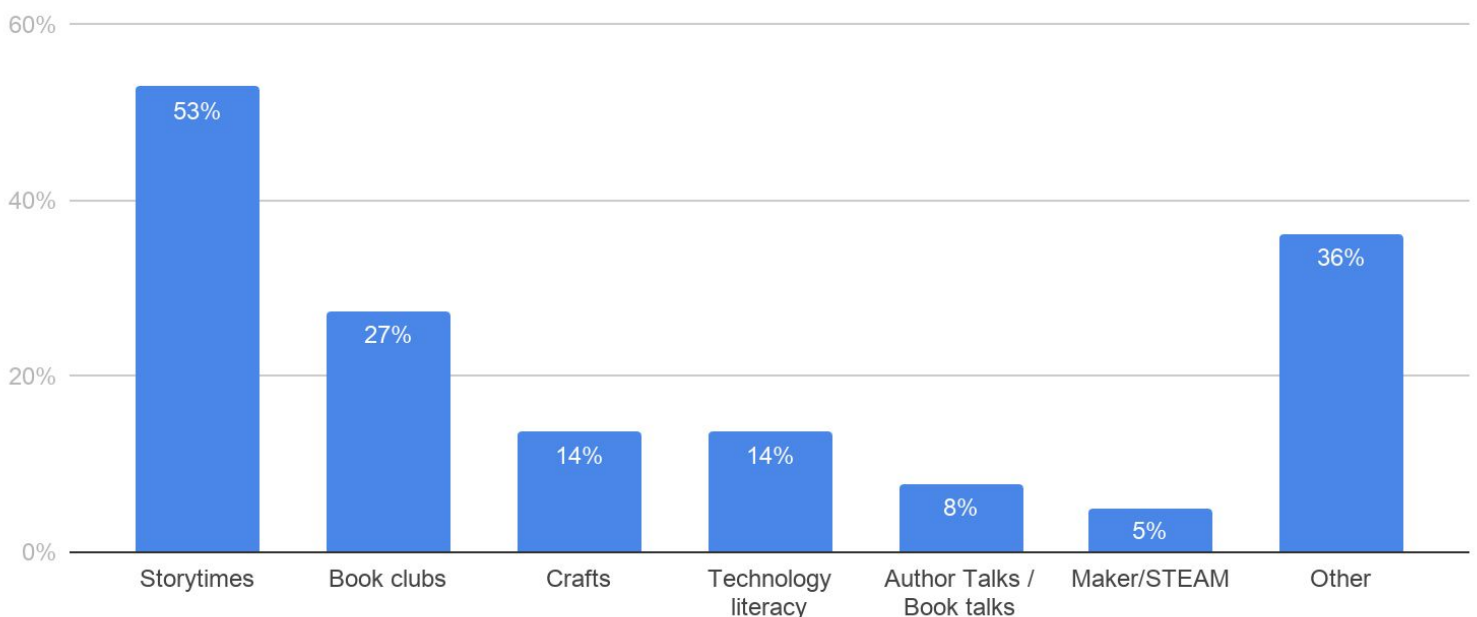
Virtual storytimes (53%)

Book clubs (27%) and Author talks (8%)

Crafts (14%) and Maker/STEAM activities (5%)

Technology Literacy Programming and Supports (14%)

### % of libraries who mentioned each activity (n=102)





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## Other Virtual Programming

36% of libraries described other programming offered remotely. This represented a wide range of activities. An incomplete list of activities mentioned by Ontario libraries:

### For kids

- Easter Egg Hunt
- Educational videos
- Virtual gardening program for kids
- Zoom babytime
- Literacy dog
- Weekly Boredom Buster program

### For adults

- Help navigating government sites
- Volunteer Income Tax program
- Community check in service / Virtual visits

### For everyone

- Providing Internet access via wifi
- Escape rooms
- Fitness classes
- Cooking videos, sharing recipes and meal-planning programming
- COVID-19 social history project
- Podcasts
- Instructional videos
- Reading challenges
- Creative writing club or challenges
- Scavenger Hunts
- Trivia nights for adults and for teens
- Contests
- Word of the weekend
- Viewing parties and film clubs
- Virtual discussion groups
- Music classes and Ukulele Jammers group
- Virtual workshops/lectures artists doing remote sessions
- Knitting clubs
- Seed deliveries
- Games

- Hacker events
- Interviews with local leaders and personalities
- 'Ask a Genealogist' service
- Mindfulness programming
- Online portrait exhibition

### Libraries supporting COVID-19 community

Public libraries are also contributing directly to their local communities COVID-19 pandemic response.

#### Producing PPE

Notably, **1 in 5 respondents noted that they are helping to produce personal protective equipment (PPE) at their libraries.** Many are doing this using 3D printers to produce face shields. Some are also coordinating sewing circles to produce cloth masks.

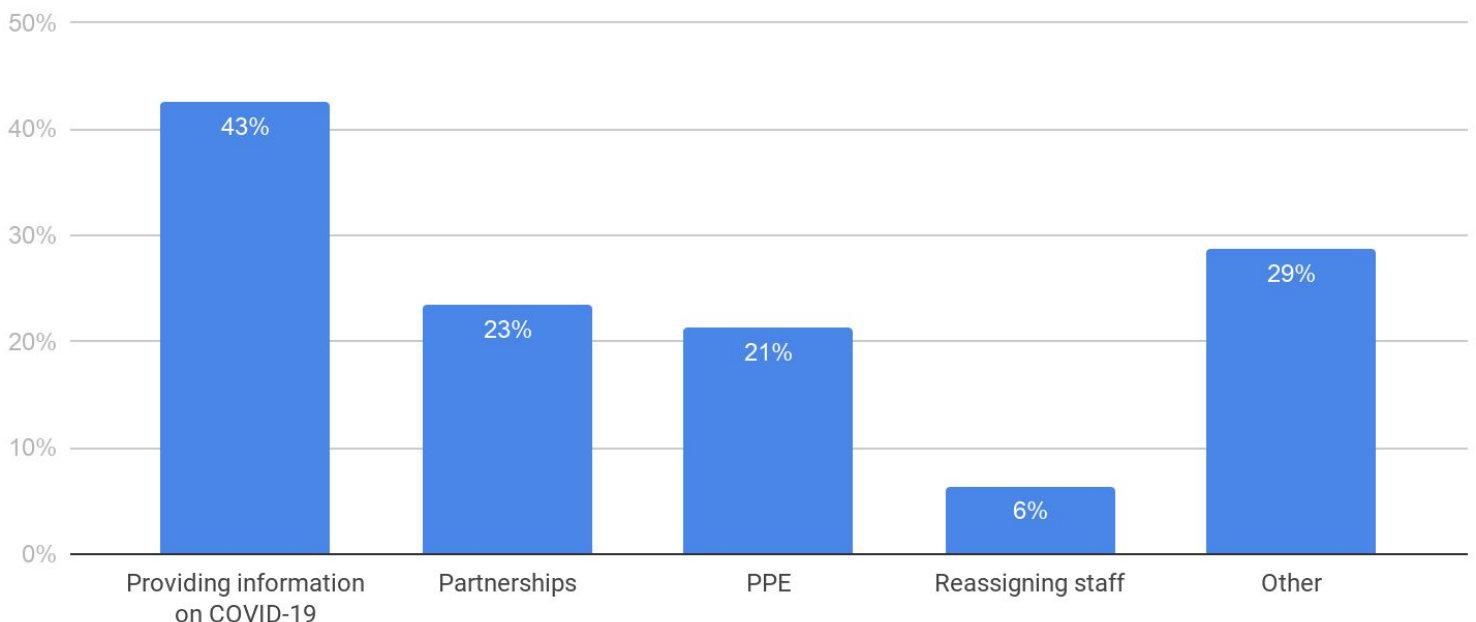
#### Sharing Information

Public libraries are doing what they do best: **sharing reliable information with members of their communities.** At a time when information is key to public health, libraries are helping to provide up to date, reliable information on COVID-19 to members of their communities. Libraries are leveraging their social media platforms, websites and physical library spaces to amplify local public health information, community resources and updates.

#### Community Partnerships

Public libraries are also partnering with their municipalities and local organizations for a coordinated response to the pandemic.

% of libraries who mentioned each activity (n=92)





### Expansion of Digital Resources

With physical branches closed, public libraries across the province saw an increased demand for their e-collections.

95% of libraries surveyed noted changes made in their approach to the delivery of their e-collections.

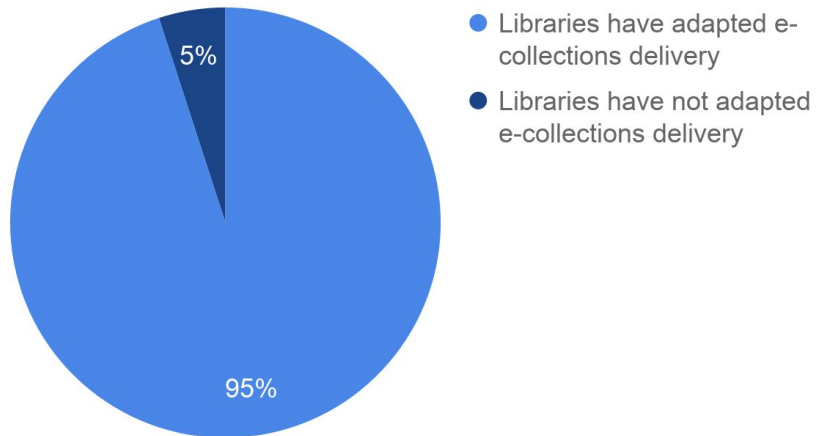
These changes have focused on:

Expanding collections  
(39%)

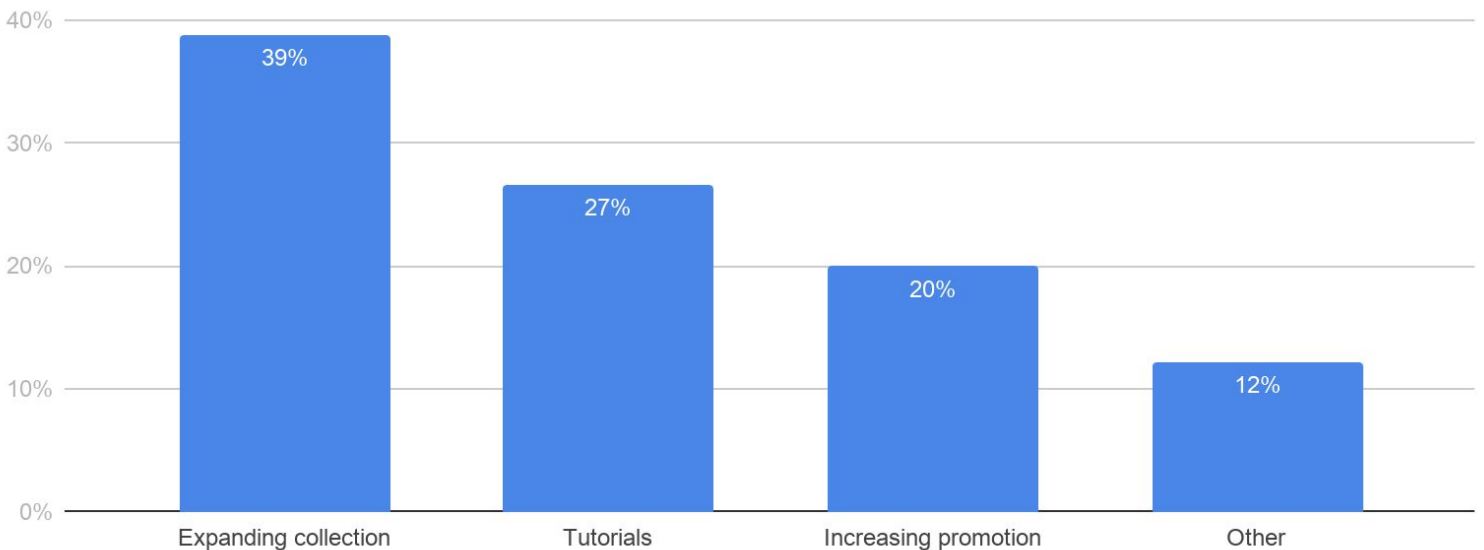
Providing tutorials on how to access e-collections (27%)

Increasing promotion of e-collections (20%)

% of libraries who noted changes to e-services



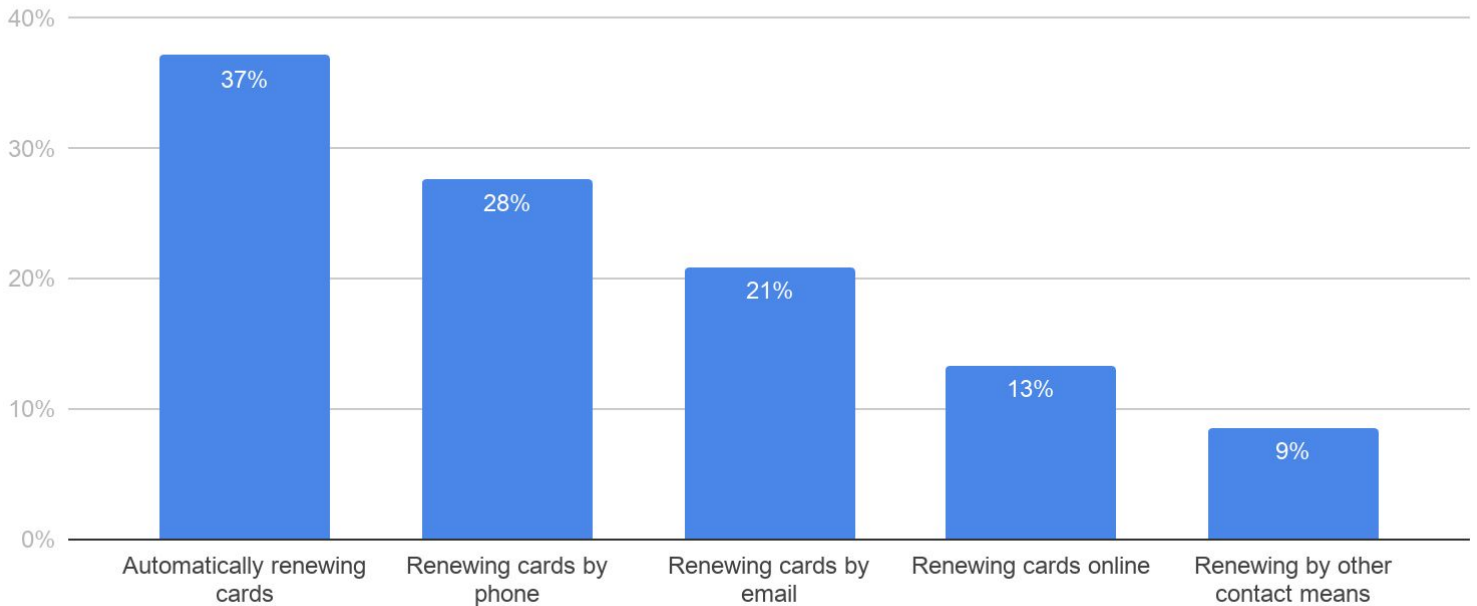
% of libraries who mentioned each activity (n=90)



## Card renewals

Libraries across the province also worked to put in place options for automatic or remote card renewal for community members whose cards would expire during the time of library closure. 96% of libraries indicated that they had put in place at least one mechanism for card renewal during this time.

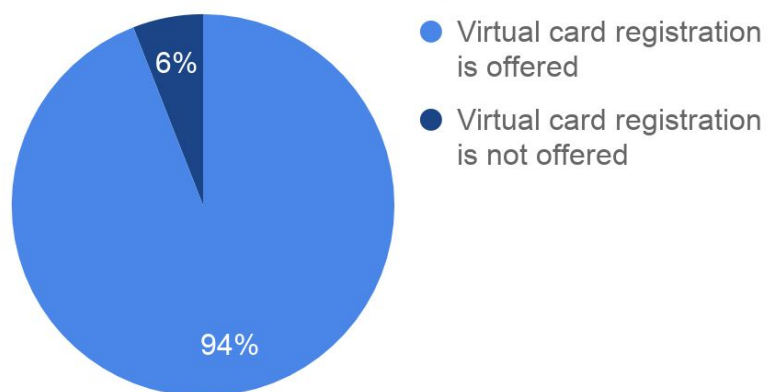
% of libraries who mentioned each activity (n=105)



## Card registration

To help community members who did not have library cards prior to the building closure, 94% of libraries implemented some form of virtual card registration. These strategies help to reduce barriers to community members accessing the resources that they need while the library building is closed.

Virtual card registration (n=101)



A wide range of options were noted for library card registration, including online form or contact by phone, email, or fax.



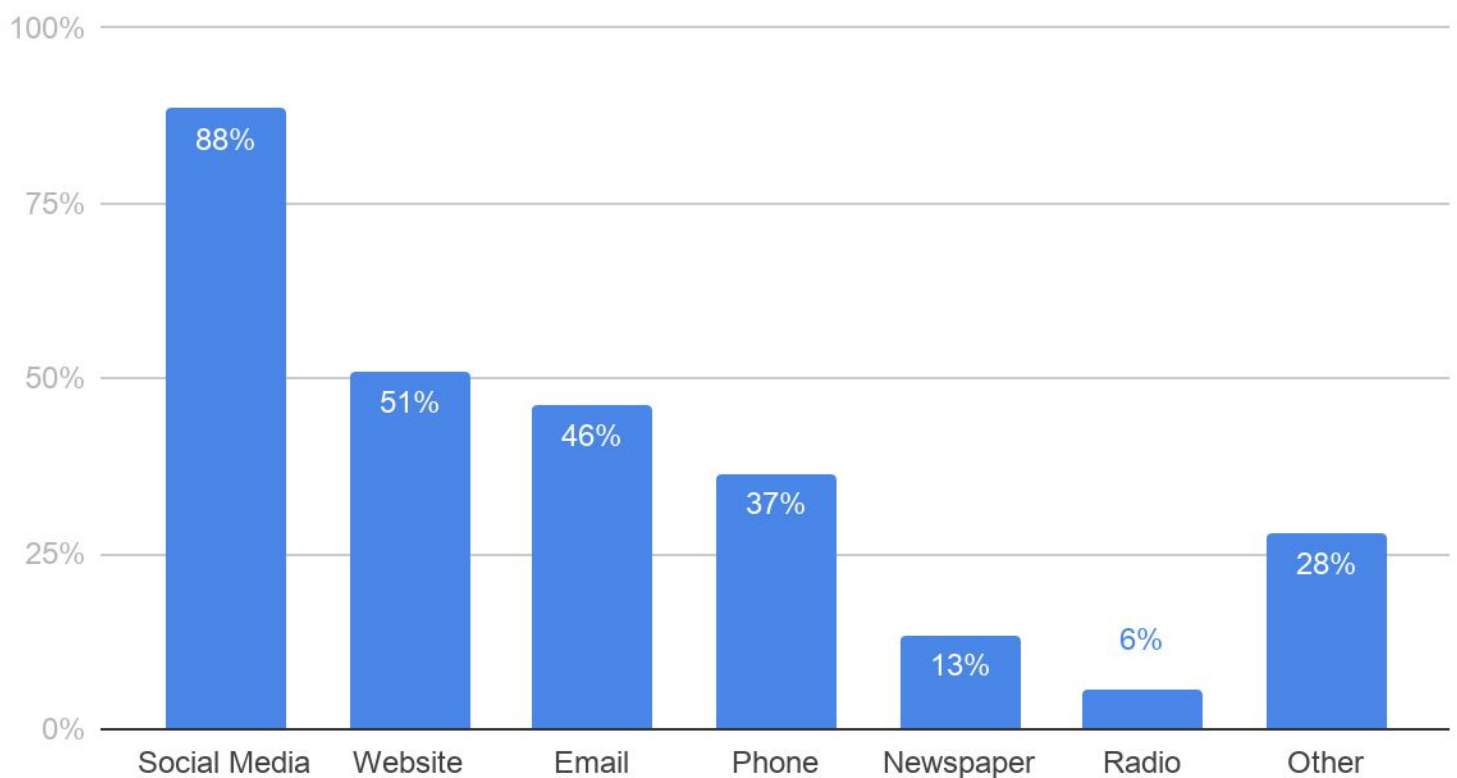
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The cards offered vary between libraries: with some setting no restrictions on new card registration, some offering temporary cards that will expire after 1-3 months, and some providing “virtual only cards” that can be used by members to access digital collections.

### Communications with community

Public libraries continue to use a wide range of communication methods to stay in touch with their communities. Nearly all libraries have taken advantage of social media as part of their ongoing communications strategy.

% of libraries that mentioned each method of communication (n=104)



# Impact on Library Staff

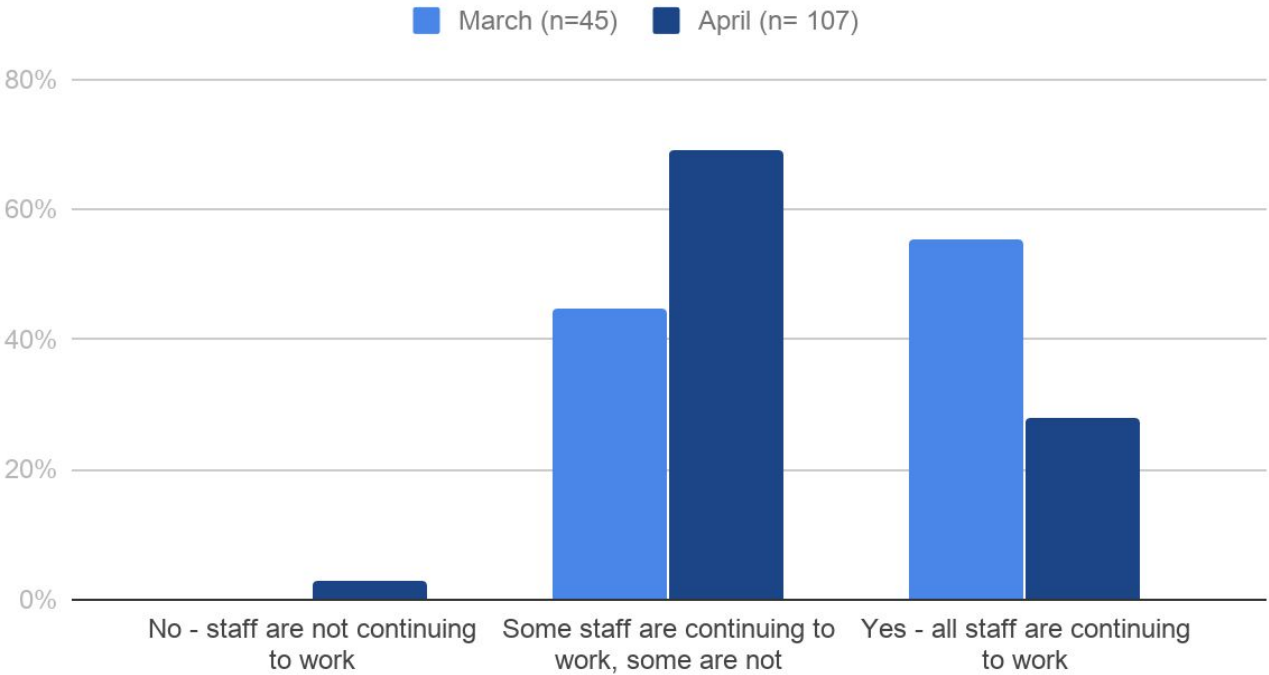
The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the ways in which library staff are working, with libraries noting that some staff have been temporarily laid off, have shifted to working from home, and/or have changed their work priorities.

## Are library staff working?

With library physical spaces closed, many libraries reported that at least some staff were no longer able to work. When details were provided, often libraries noted that some staff responsibilities were not easily transitioned to a “work from home” model, particularly those positions that are required to be in a physical library branch (e.g. pages and other front-line staff).

In April, nearly 70% of libraries reported a combination: some staff continuing to work and some staff who had stopped working. This represents an increase from the figures reported in March at 45%.

% of libraries

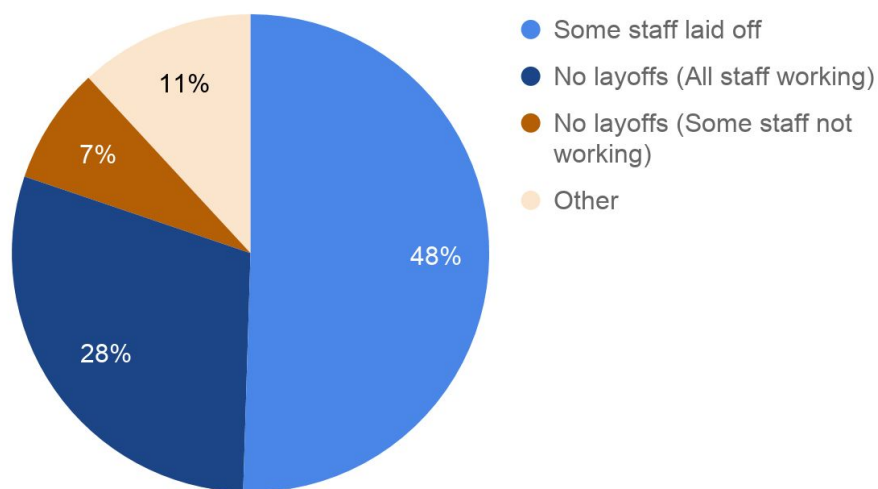


### Layoffs: 50% of libraries laid off some staff members

COVID-19 has caused significant financial pressures on municipalities, resulting in partial layoffs at half of the libraries who responded.

- 50% of libraries have had to lay off some staff members. Many have noted that these layoffs are temporary.
- 30% of libraries noted that **all staff were continuing to work**.
- 8% of libraries noted that at the time of the survey, though some staff were not working during the period of library closure **all staff had been retained**.
- 12% of libraries noted other changes to staffing, such as casual employees not working during this time or contracts not being renewed.

April responses (n=101)



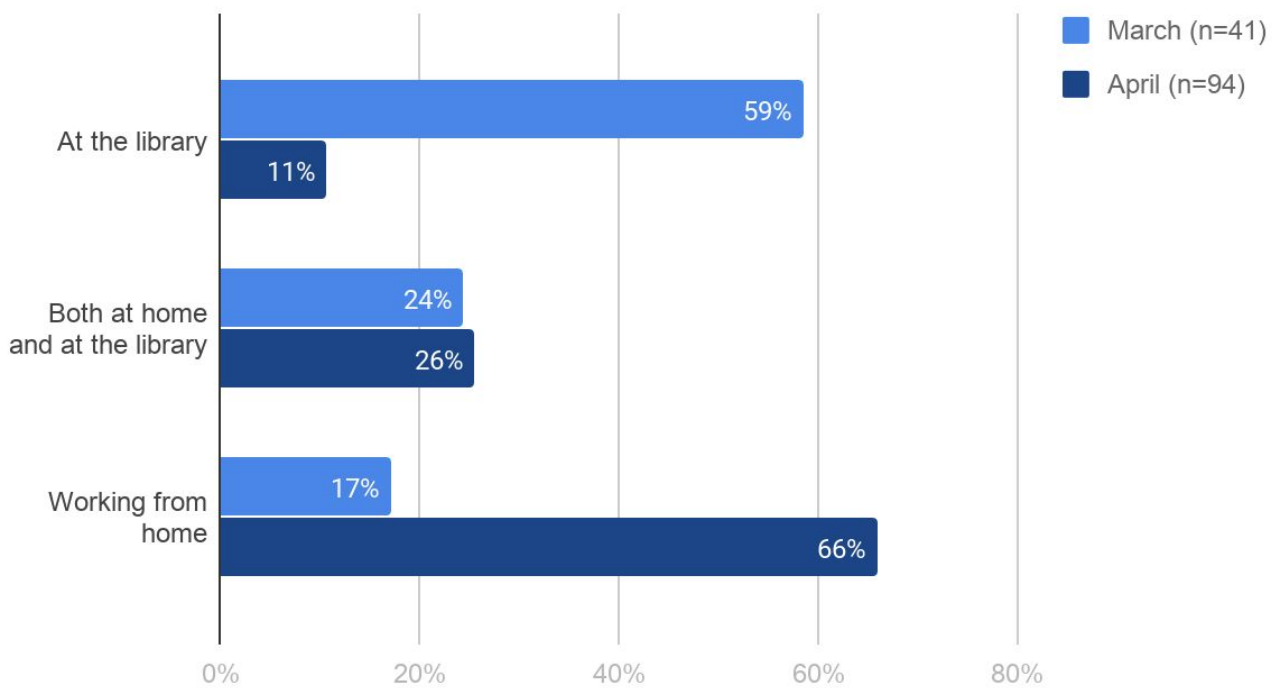
While not captured in the responses to this survey, three libraries noted elsewhere that some staff had been redeployed to support other municipal departments, including public health, foodbanks, shelters and long-term care homes.

## At most libraries, staff are working from home

With physical library branches closed, many library workers transitioned to working remotely. Those who indicated that they were working *in the library* typically mentioned that only one staff member at a time was in the physical branch. Respondents mentioned that when working in the library, staff were often working on tasks such as cleaning, shelving materials and other duties that cannot be done remotely.

There is a noticeable increase in the percentage of libraries with staff working remotely in April compared with March.

### % of libraries indicating each work location



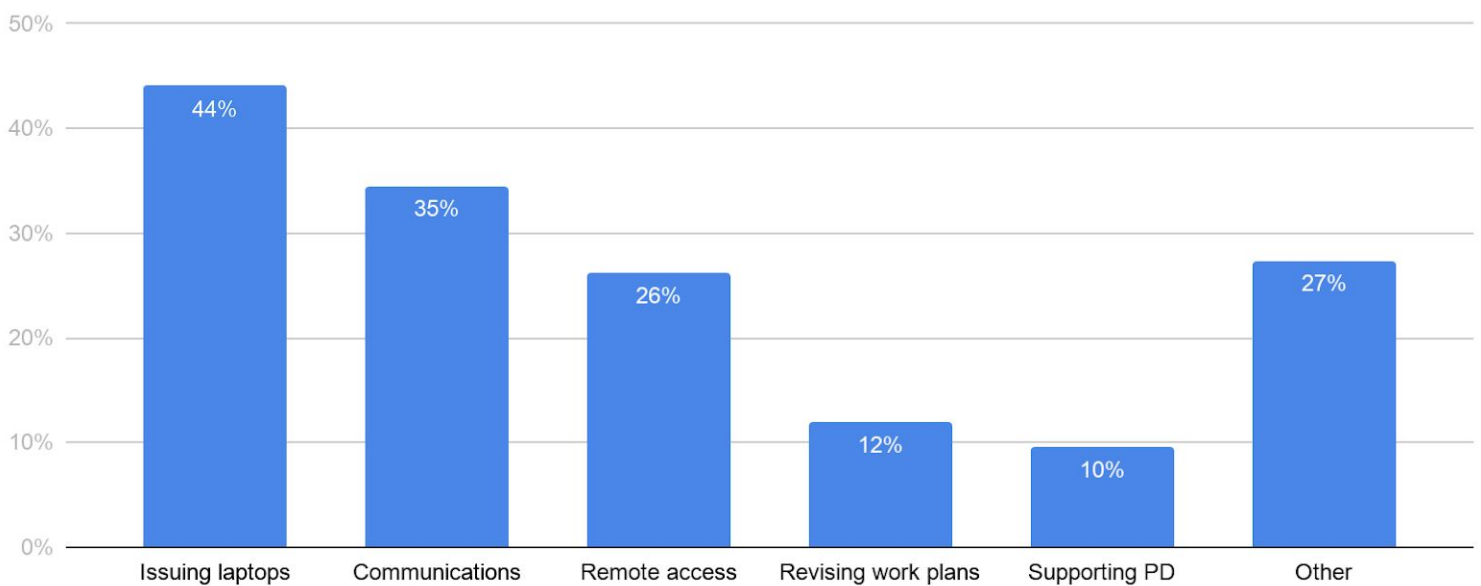


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### Supporting staff in working from home

Libraries staff have demonstrated a great deal of agility in the transition to work from home. Libraries mentioned a range of interventions to help support their staff in this transition, including helping to bridge a technology gap by lending laptops or other devices and adjusting work plans to reflect the changing circumstances.

% of libraries mentioned each intervention (n=84)

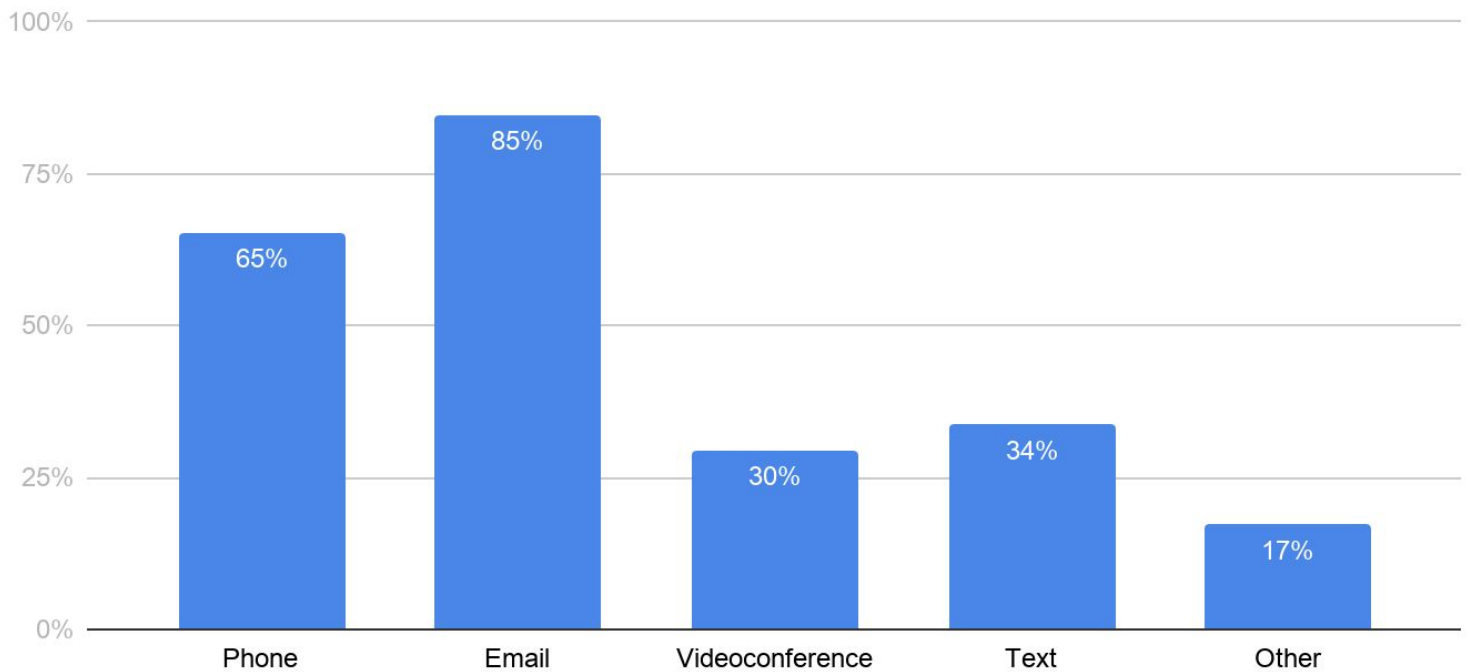


## Communications with staff

While working remotely, libraries are using multiple communication methods, including informal communication methods such as text messaging. For the purposes of this survey, “text message” includes communication methods like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

Those who mentioned “other” forms of communication included the library website, intranet, and in-person (distanced) meetings

### % of libraries who mentioned each communication method (n=98)







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## Appendix A: Survey Questions March, April, and May

### March Survey Questions:

Library name [open-ended]

City / Town [open-ended]

Province [open-ended]

Status of library: [multiple choice]

- Library is temporarily closed
- Library remains open

Timing of closure, if applicable [open-ended]

If your library remains open, have services offered been modified at this time? [open-ended]

Details of modified services, if applicable [open-ended]

Are library staff continuing to work during the closure? [open-ended]

If staff are continuing to work, where are they working? [open-ended]

If staff are continuing to work, what are they working on? [open-ended]

If staff are NOT continuing to work are they: [multiple choice]

- Continuing to work
- Laid off / will apply for EI

Link to any communications (URL) [open-ended]

### April Survey Questions:

*Unless otherwise indicated, new questions were added on March 30th,*

Library name [open-ended, required]

City / Town [open-ended]

Province [open-ended]

### Staffing

Are library staff continuing to work during the closure?

- Yes - all staff are continuing to work
- Some staff are continuing to work, some are not
- No - staff are not continuing to work

*Staff continuing to work*

If staff are continuing to work, what are they working on? [open-ended]

How is your library facilitating staff professional development during library closure period?  
[open-ended]

**\*[added April 20]** What professional development topics would you or your library be interested in learning about? [open-ended]

Staff are: [multiple choice]

- Working from home
- Other

How is your library facilitating the transition of staff to working from home? [open-ended]

*Staff not continuing to work*

If staff are NOT continuing to work are they: [multiple choice]

- Still employed
- Laid off/ will apply for CERB

### **Library Response to COVID-19**

What type of programming / services, if any, are being offered during the library closure period?  
[open-ended]

Link to any information on programming (URL) [open-ended]

How is the library supporting your community's COVID-19 response? [open-ended]

What changes, if any, have been made to facilitate access to e-collections during the library closure period? [open-ended]

What other approaches is your library employing to serve patrons during this time?  
[open-ended]

### **Library Cards:**

How are you approaching library card renewals during the period of library closures?  
[open-ended]



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How are you approaching library card registrations during the period of library closures?

[open-ended]

### **Communications:**

How are you communicating with residents during the period of library closure? [open-ended]

Link to any communications (URL) [open-ended]

How are you communicating with library staff during the period of library closure?

[open-ended]

### **May Survey Questions:**

*In May, many open-ended questions were changed to multiple choice questions. Select questions added to capture further details not captured in multiple choice options..*

Library name [open-ended, required]

City / Town [open-ended]

Province [open-ended]

### **Staffing**

Are library staff continuing to work during the closure? [multiple choice]

- Yes - all staff are continuing to work
- Some staff are continuing to work, some are not
- No - staff are not continuing to work

*Staff continuing to work:*

If staff are continuing to work, where are they working? [multiple choice]

- Professional Development
- Communications (social media, website, marketing, etc.)
- Virtual/Online Programming
- Planning Future Programming
- Membership renewals
- Virtual Reference

- Phone outreach to vulnerable populations
- Collections Development / maintenance
- Redeployed
- Administrative duties
- Planning / preparing for re-opening
- Other

How is your library facilitating staff professional development during library closure period?

[multiple choice]

- Management is sharing free online learning opportunities with staff
- Library is covering the cost of online learning opportunities
- Library is coordinating internal training opportunities
- Staff are responsible for choosing their own PD
- Other:

What professional development topics would you or your library be interested in learning about? [open-ended]

How is your library facilitating the transition of staff to working from home? [multiple choice]

- Issuing laptops
- Connecting staff to a remote desktop / VPN access
- Revising staff workplans
- Scheduling regular meetings / communications with staff
- Supporting professional development
- Other:

*Staff not continuing to work*

If staff are NOT continuing to work are they: [multiple choice]

- Still employed
- Laid off/ will apply for CERB

### **Library Response to COVID-19**

What type of programming / services, if any, are being offered during the library closure period?  
[open ended]

Link to any information on programming (URL) [open ended]



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How is the library supporting your community's COVID-19 response? [open ended]

What changes, if any, have been made to facilitate access to e-collections during the library closure period? [multiple choice]

- Expanding collection of e-resources
- Providing Temporary Library Cards
- Developing or sharing tutorials on how to access e-resources
- Increasing promotion of e-resources
- Other:

What other approaches is your library employing to serve patrons during this time?  
[open-ended]

#### **Library Cards:**

How are you approaching library card renewals during the period of library closures?

[open-ended]

- Renewing cards by phone
- Renewing cards by email
- Renewing cards online
- Automatically renewing cards
- We are not renewing cards at this time
- Other:

If you are automatically renewing cards, what is the revised expiration date? [open-ended]

How are you approaching library card registrations during the period of library [open-ended]

#### **Communications:**

How are you communicating with residents during the period of library closure? [multiple choice]

- Phone
- Email
- Social Media

- Website
- Newspaper
- Radio
- Other:

Link to any communications (URL) [open-ended]

How are you communicating with library staff during the period of library closure? [multiple choice]

- Phone
- Email
- Videoconferencing
- Text
- Other:

\*[NEW] What platform, if any, is your team using to facilitate communications with staff?

- Microsoft Teams
- Google Groups
- Zoom
- WebEx
- Chime
- Other:



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## Appendix B: Full Survey Responses

Full survey results are online and can be accessed [here](#).

## Appendix C: Large Font Graphs

Large font versions of all graphs can be accessed [here](#).