

# Libraries are turning a page and reopening with safety in mind

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## FULL TEXT

Public libraries have begun reopening their doors, albeit in a tightly controlled fashion.

The innovations bred by the need to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus include curbside pickup and return of books and other materials; a “grab and go” kiosk installed by Plymouth Public Library; and special hours for seniors.

A month into the reopening, the pandemic version of the public library appears to be working well, said Plymouth director Jennifer Harris.

“My whole vision was bringing as many staff back as possible and getting the library open to the library-loving community of Plymouth,” Harris said.

After what she called a “soft” reopening in mid-September, Plymouth’s library users are getting used to innovations such as online scheduling of their 50-minute visits to browse the collections in the adult sections of the library. It’s a big change for a popular public service, Harris acknowledged.

“People are just learning about it and it will take a lot of staff time to explain all the different routine changes for patrons,” she said.

“Our staff is being as helpful as they can,” she said. But under the restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the library is unable to operate as openly as it did before the pandemic.

“We call it ‘opening with care,’” Harris said.

Given the social distancing limits on how many people can be safely permitted inside their buildings, libraries in Plymouth, Quincy, and other communities are encouraging patrons to go online to place “holds” on books, DVDs, and other materials they wish to borrow and pick them up “curbside” when an e-mail tells them they’re available. The exchanges take place outside library buildings.

Curbside pickup does a brisk business in Plymouth, Harris said. “We serve up to 80 customers in a two-hour morning period.”

Her library reserves an hour inside the building for seniors only at 1 p.m. The general public is granted entrance beginning at 2 p.m. for scheduled 50-minute periods that include browsing the fiction and nonfiction shelves, using the library’s four public computers, and other services.

Patrons may find their next good read in the library’s “new book room,” an area that stocks multiple copies of bestsellers.

On an average day, as many as 50 to 70 patrons come to the main door for a “grab and go.” But first, all patrons receive a temperature check.

“What’s really exciting is we have a non-contact thermal protector,” Harris said. It resembles “a Kindle screen” and reads your body temperature without physical contact. If your temperature reads above 99.6 degrees, “the librarian tells you very nicely to leave the building,” Harris said. “We follow CDC [Centers for Disease Control] guidelines.” The kiosk is staffed by a circulation librarian who has a list of names and a stash of materials set aside for them at their request. The librarian fetches the book for the patron who then “grabs and goes.”

Patrons seeking to browse their reopened library in Plymouth are required to schedule an available time through the library’s website, [plymouthpubliclibrary.org](http://plymouthpubliclibrary.org). The Plymouth library’s total safe-distancing capacity is 60 people,

including staff. The town's smaller Manomet branch has a capacity of 10.

If browsers take a book off a shelf to look at it but decide not to borrow it, signs instruct them to put it on one of the nearby carts, so it can be cleaned by staff before being reshelfed.

"The signs are everywhere," Harris said.

Some formerly popular spaces, however, continue to be out of bounds. The capacious Otto Fehlow Room is closed because it's not practical to meet social distancing requirements for public meetings or events in that space, Harris said. The children's room can accept only one child —plus a caretaker —at a time.

Other libraries south of Boston appear to be taking a similar cautious opening approach. Ventress Public Library in Marshfield reopened in mid-September for limited hours, permitting patrons to browse adult and young adult shelves and use public computers on Wednesdays and Thursdays, with special hours for seniors, and to visit the children's room by appointment. The number of visitors at one time is limited to 25.

The Sharon Public Library also is allowing a small number of visitors who are required to "self-limit" their stay to one hour. Like other public libraries, it requires patrons to wear masks, use a hand sanitizer, and observe a 6-foot distance from others.

Milton's main library allows "limited browsing," computer use, printing, faxing, and copying for 30 minutes during regular weekday hours. Its children's department is open for 15-minute appointments only.

Other public libraries, such as those in Quincy and Brockton, provide outdoor pickup service, but have not opened their interiors for routine visits. Quincy permits in-person visits by appointment to use the library's technology services, such as computers and scanners. Brockton's libraries are open only for similarly "limited service." Its children's library is open by appointment only.

For more information about library services available in their towns, residents are urged to check their library's website or call the library directly.

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Credit: By Robert Knox GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

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