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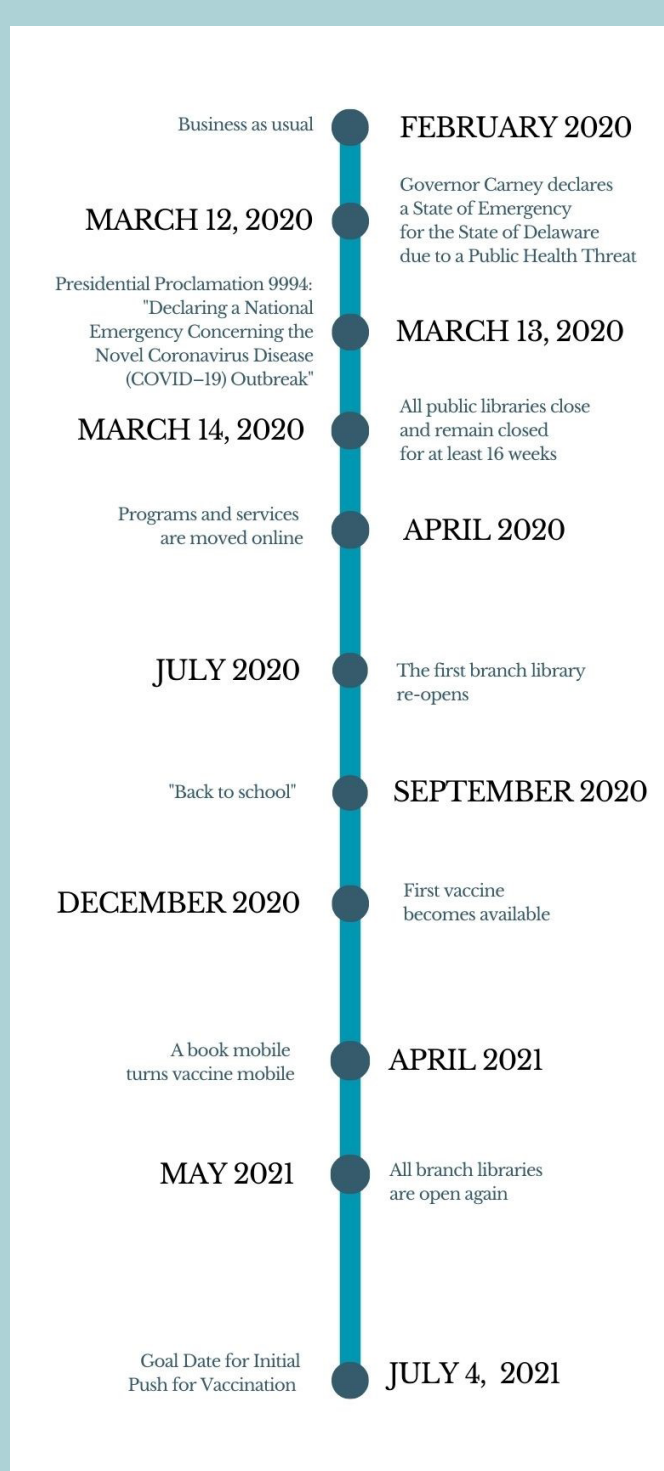
Background

Public libraries played a crucial role in supporting their communities during the initial months of the pandemic. Despite having to close their physical locations, and therefore losing a crucial part of their “traditional business model”, they found ways to stay in touch with most of their patrons, continuing to offer programming and services, many of which are a lifeline for the most vulnerable members of society.

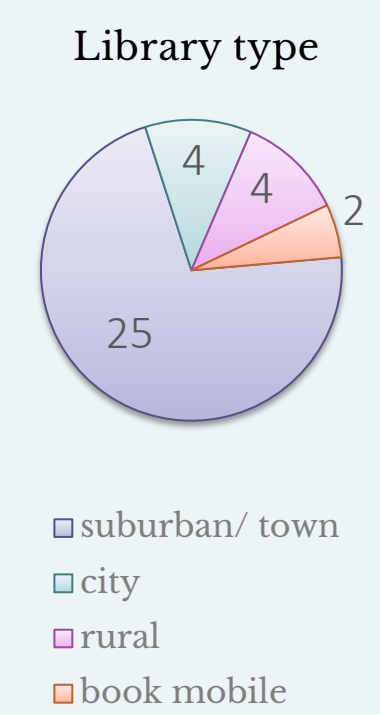
This poster presents results from a preliminary study conducted in 2021, and from preparations for dissertation research. Fieldwork is expected to start this summer.

Data sources: back-end records of the Delaware Division of Libraries, Facebook pages of the individual branch libraries, governmental documents, newspaper articles, the American Community Survey (2020), scholarly and popular articles studying the pandemic and libraries.

Timeline (for this study)



35 Public libraries in Delaware



Staff
350.65 (FTEs)

Annual visits
4,110,364

Annual events
21,418

Population served

New Castle County
532,374

Kent County
155,916

Sussex County
209,268

Delaware Libraries
(most recent numbers currently available: 2014)

17,278 Public libraries in the US

Libraries are considered “essential community services”, i.e., “services which are necessary to save lives, or to protect and preserve property or public health and safety”. (FEMA, 2010: Recovery Policy 9523.3)

They are particularly important for the most vulnerable parts of society, for two main characteristics:

- their (almost) omnipresence across the country (87% of incorporated communities have a public library)
- their free or low-cost programs and services

Public libraries offer:

- programs for all age groups
- books & other media
- reliable information
- no-fee space
- IT assistance
- hygiene kits
- food pantries
- tax assistance
- charging stations
- internet access
- health and social services
- bathrooms
- warming/ cooling safe spaces for children

Delaware Facts

Total population
1,003,384

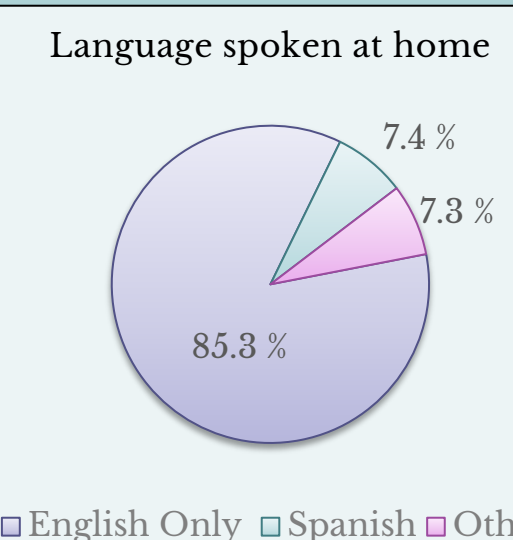
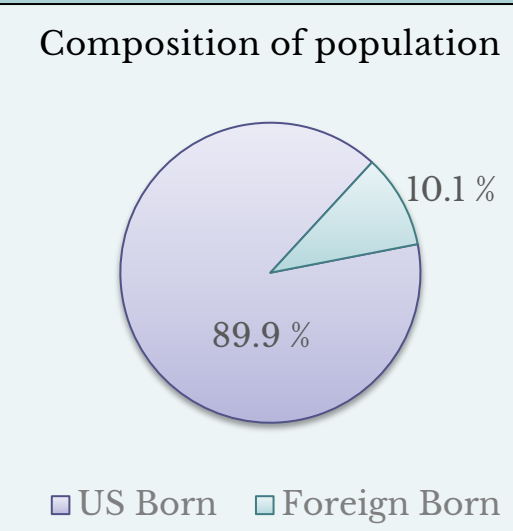
Population under 18
20.8%

Households with one or more residents age 65 and over
35.7%

Seniors living alone
12.6%

Households earning less than 50k
34.4%

People living with a disability
13.2%



People without health insurance coverage
5.7%

People without high school diploma
8.7%

People unemployed
3.3%

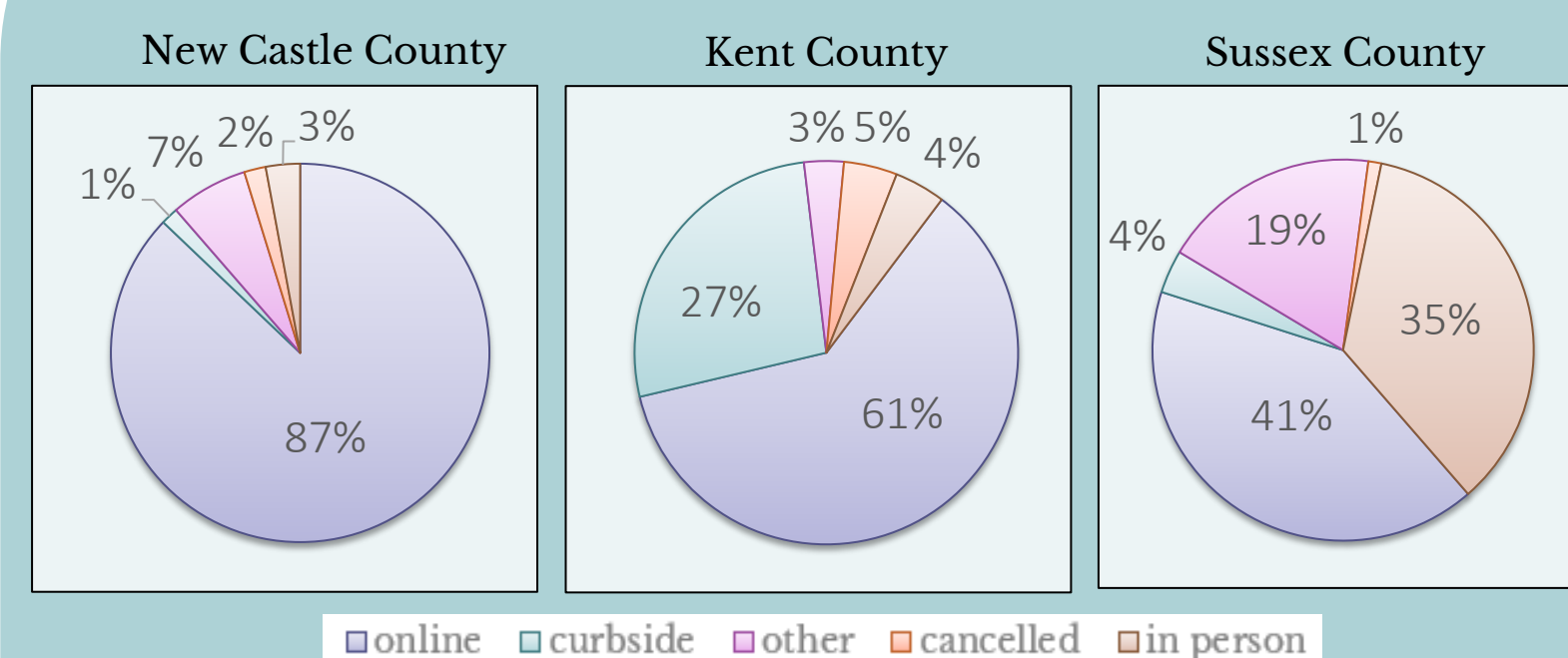
People living below poverty level
8.6%

Single mothers with children under 5, living below poverty level
58.4%

Source: American Community Survey, 2021

What did libraries do to adapt and continue serving their communities?

programs and events
July 1, 2020 to February 28, 2021



Distribution of information and services, in collaboration with other state and local entities

Tech instruction and assistance

Partnerships with mental health support organizations

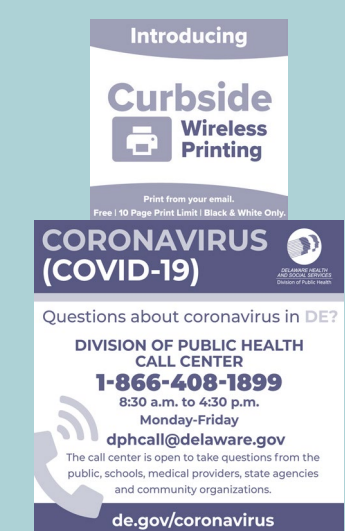
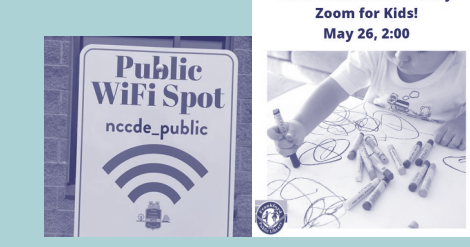
Online programs for all age groups

Test kits, health information, and vaccination centers

LibGuide – curated information with links to verified and trustworthy sources

Outdoor activities

Curbside pickup: library materials, crafting kits, and more



Enhanced Wi-Fi, curbside printing, access to e-media

Focus on children and families with homeschooling needs

Hotspots, tablets and Chromebooks for check-out

Food pantries and information about meal distribution

No late fees, online distribution of library cards

Hygiene kits for those relying on the use of the library’s bathroom

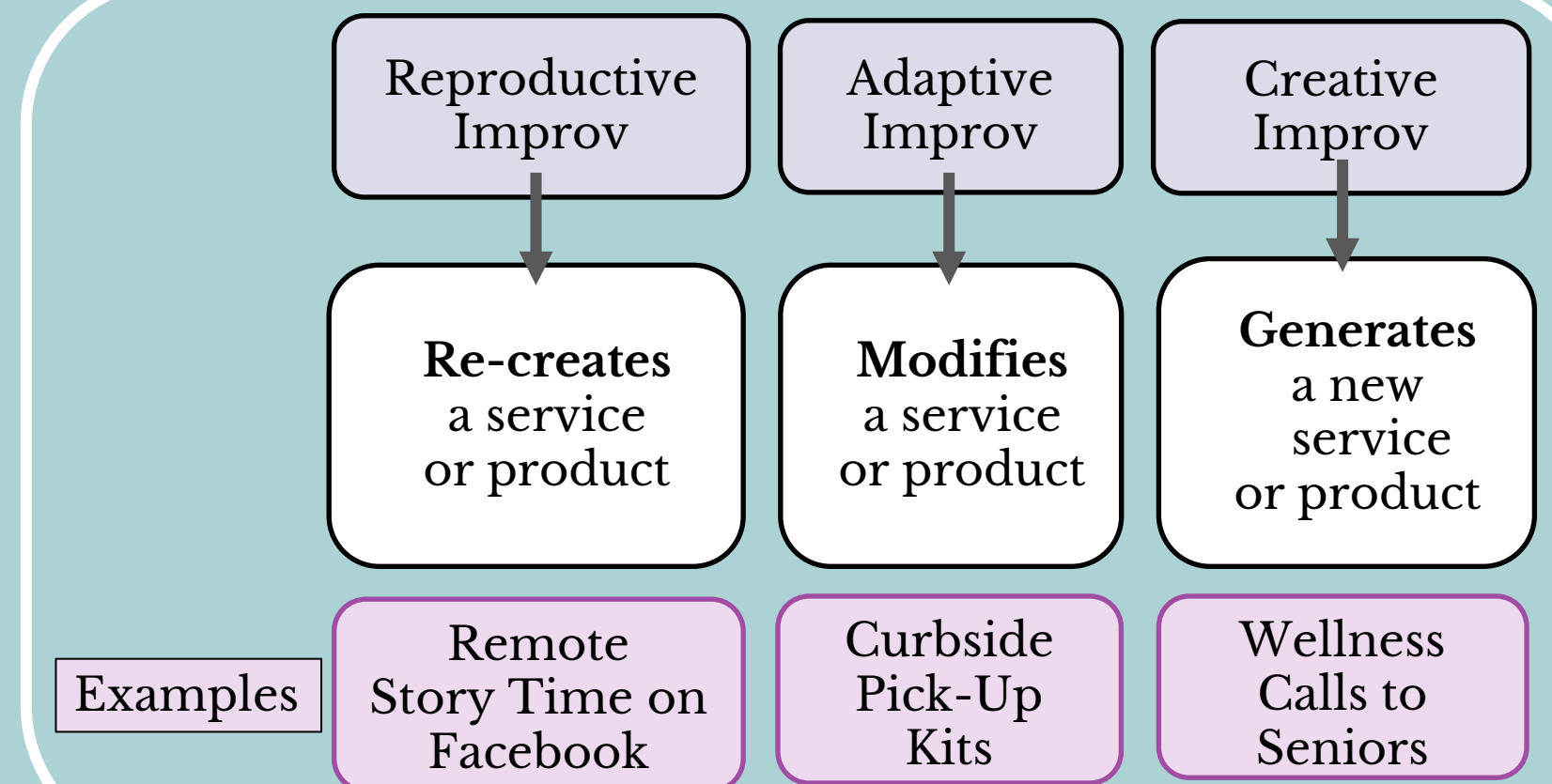
Telehealth kiosks

Virtual live events, Pre-recorded/Self-guided Programs

Access to databases, online magazines

Theoretical Lens: Improvisation

(Wachtendorf, 2004)



What’s Next?

Interviews with library staff and administrators in Delaware (Summer/Fall 2023) to study the human and structural aspects guiding adaptation and improvisation.

Deep dive into the existing data to understand where the variations among different libraries/ counties came from and what they mean for future preparedness.

Outreach 1: working with existing collaborations (e.g., DLDI – Delaware Libraries and Disasters Initiative) to encourage libraries and emergency management to combine resources and networks.

Outreach 2: using research findings to advocate for more, and more stable funding for public libraries, given their fundamental contribution to the functioning of society in blue sky and during disasters.

References

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Images

(1) https://www.researchgate.net/figure/County-map-of-Delaware-On-the-World-Map-nd_fig1_347345799

(2) screenshots from individual libraries’ Facebook pages

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