



“We Did What We Had To Do!” Library Workers Responding to COVID-19.



Cornelia Posch

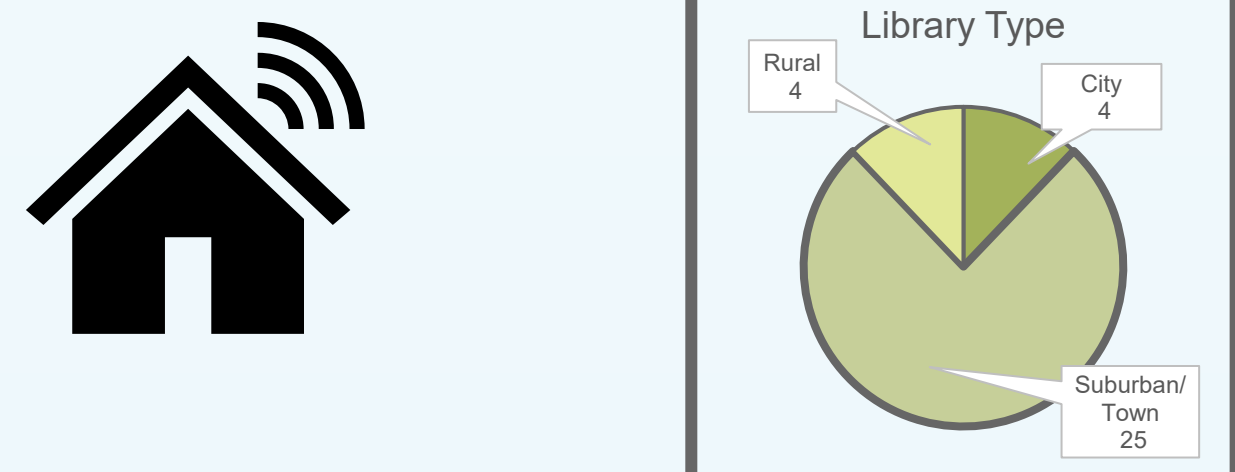
University of Delaware | Disaster Research Center | Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration

Background

Public libraries are increasingly being recognized as social infrastructure that has the potential to positively impact disaster outcomes in a community. This research investigates the experiences of library workers in the state of Delaware and what they learned serving their patrons during a global pandemic. The poster highlights some early findings from the ongoing analysis. Aspects of the improvised response and adaptation of library workers to COVID-19 can be formalized or structured for better local-level preparedness and response to future disasters.

Public Libraries in Delaware

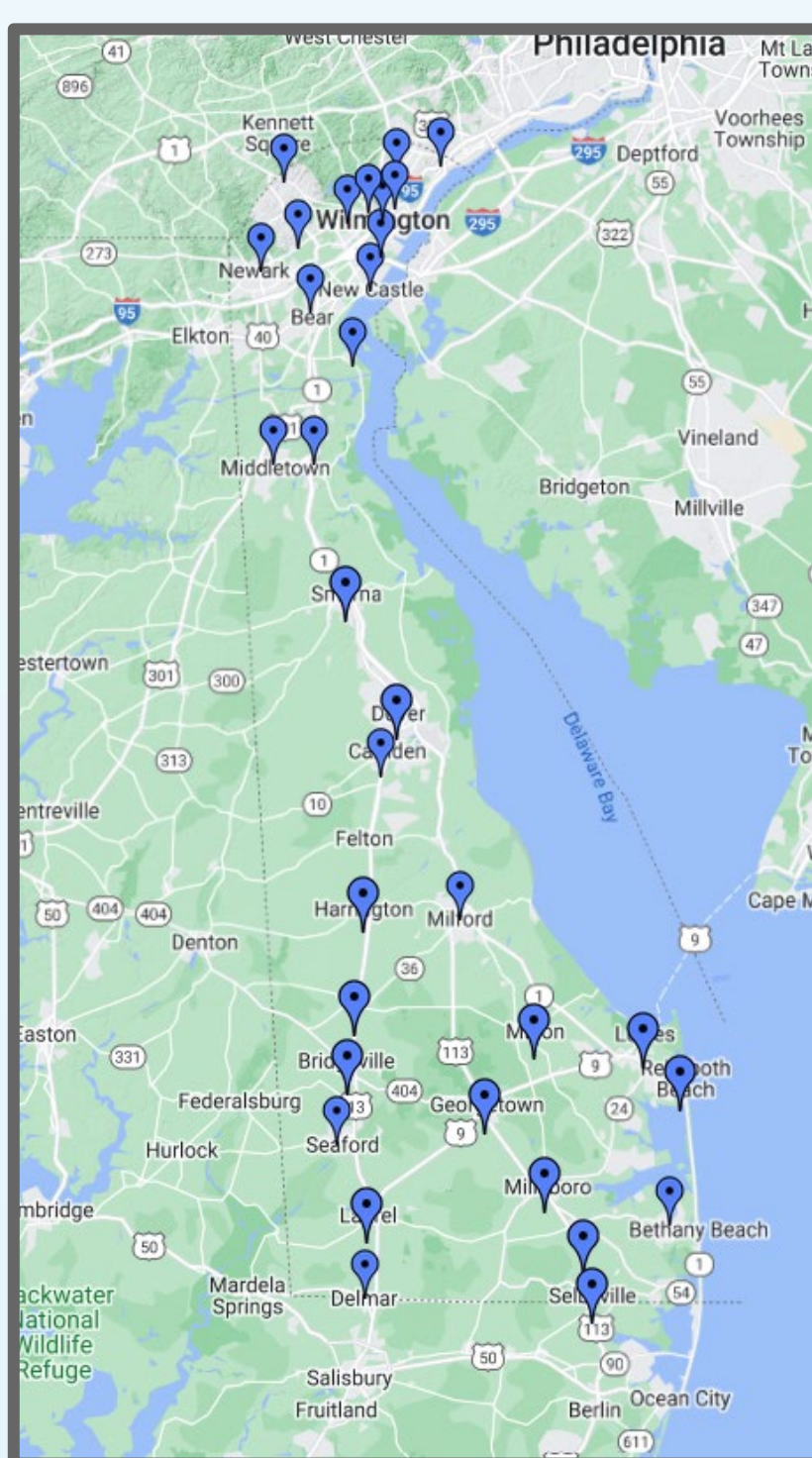
35 branch libraries (incl. 2 book mobiles)



Staff
350.65
(Full-Time-Equivalents)

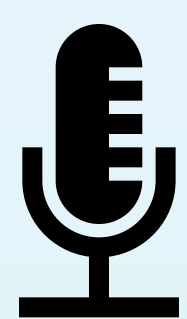
Population served
New Castle County
532,374
Kent County
155,916
Sussex County
209,268

Annual Visits
4,110,364
Annual Events
21,418

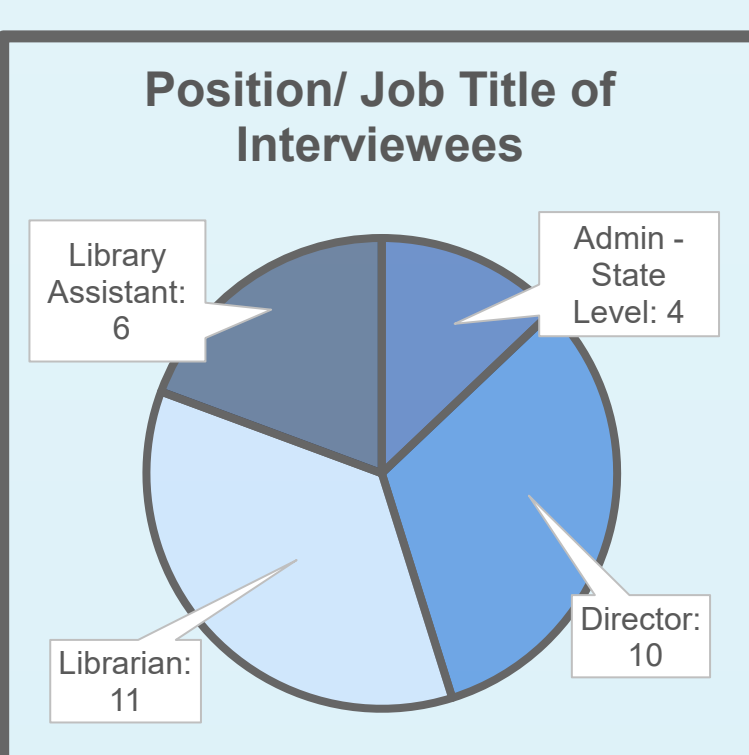
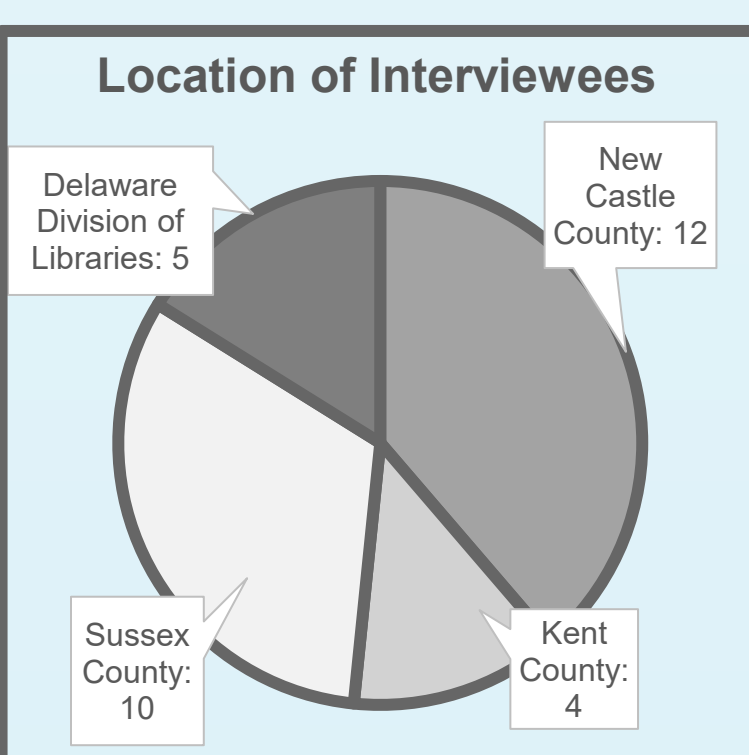


Note: Total population of Delaware ~ 1 mio. (2023), most recent numbers regarding library use currently available: 2014.

Methodology: Interviews



- * 31 interviews conducted
- * across 21 libraries and at the state level
- * between August 2023 and January 2024

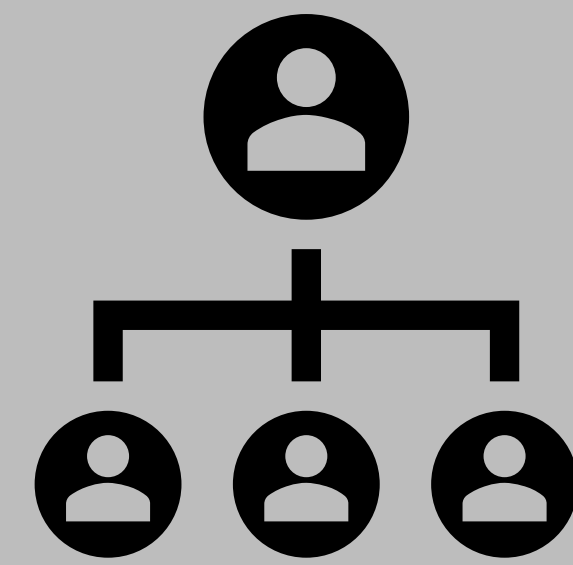


60% of all libraries and > 50% of each county are represented

Some Early Findings

Organizational Structure and Decision-Making

- ❖ Collaborative problem-solving led to better outcomes.
- ❖ Top-down decisions impacted work negatively.
- ❖ Poor communication impacted work negatively.
- ❖ Differences in treatment between county/ state employees led to frustration.



The stakeholders weren't necessarily the decision makers, you know. And how does that, **how does that impact what you're able to deliver and what you want to deliver, when you can't make the decisions for yourself?**

(Librarian, New Castle County)

Because it just highlighted that... Okay, maybe you don't know what's happening and you're the top person, but even that is valuable to communicate down. You know, that I know just as much as you. [...] **Because the sitting and waiting and not knowing and speculating and... I know that caused a lot of anxiety for a lot of people.**

(Librarian, New Castle County)

Yeah, we're pretty, we're pretty focused on teamwork here. [...] **we all recognize that decisions are made better through conversation and through thinking things through** [...]. I mean, it just really helped to have like, the different perspectives and different thoughts and, you know, [...] And one of the things we ended up doing as part of the pandemic was having weekly staff meetings, which we hadn't done for a while... and just realizing the value in having conversations and puzzling things through, because you've just got so much different knowledge and [...]. It's definitely leadership by committee, but with the understanding that there is somebody who is in charge and they are... if they want to overrule, they can overrule. But I think the recognition that everybody has something to throw in [...].

(Director, Kent County)

And being part of the Delaware library system and the County Library System is good, there's a security to that, but the fact that the libraries are public facing and there was pressure on us to get back to serving the public as quickly as possible when we didn't know what the best practice was, and didn't know what was safe, what wasn't... when other administrative offices or other county offices could all work from home for another 18 months. [...] And you know, I think they were only told everybody had to be back in the office maybe at the end of 2022. **It was a long time after the libraries were open to the public.**

(Librarian, New Castle County)

Impact and Community-building

- ❖ Libraries are a trusted institution.
- ❖ Libraries build networks in their local area.
- ❖ Libraries provide space for relationship-building.
- ❖ Libraries went beyond their mandate.
- ❖ Libraries held space for difference of opinions.

People make such friends and lifelong relationships at our library that I know three different sets of families who did COVID together, and I know they met at the library. [...] and so, during COVID they would hang out, and those were the only families to hang out with. And I thought that was interesting because **I know that the library was a part in building those relationships for them to have company during COVID.**

(Director, New Castle County)



I'd say that we really learned how to be flexible, how to... where there's a need, how to think outside the box and how to fill that need. **How to reach out to the public in a time where sometimes the public doesn't want to be reached.** Sometimes they want you to leave them alone.

(Director, Kent County)

I do think the libraries are a place that... people view us in their community as a safe space, **as a space they can go to not only get information but to gather.** So, I think all that we heard when we finally did reopen the doors... they were so happy that they had somewhere else they could go besides like the grocery store, you know. That it, it took them back more to their normal life and routine, rather than in some kind of panic, Let's survive mood.

(Librarian, New Castle County)

I mean, it was just, it was just an interesting time because you just had so many different perspectives... and still have different perspectives. **And how do you impose procedures and policies so that everybody still gets to be served.** Whether we believe in it or not, or whatever our thoughts are, you know, we... we knew that it was serious, but some of our patrons were like, It's a joke.

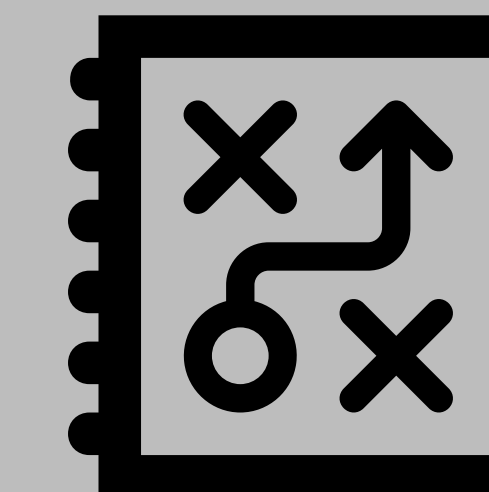
(Director, New Castle County)

Partnering with...

a local independent book store | a small comic book shop | Camden Fire Department | Camp Rehoboth (LGTBQ+ Community Center) | Cape Henlopen Senior Center | Chamber of Commerce | Delaware Air Mobility | Delaware Children's Museum | Delaware Riverfront Corporation | Delaware State News | Delaware State Police | Dolly Parton's Imagination Library | Dover Comicon | Dover Police and Fire Department | Fire Department | Freeman Stage (music venue) | local businesses | local church | local gardening groups | local schools | Longwood Gardens | National Guard | Opera House | Paws - Read to the dogs | the physical therapy guy | Veterans of Foreign Wars

Challenges

- ❖ Library workers operated in a high-risk environment.
- ❖ The digital gap impacted the ability to participate.
- ❖ Lack of planning was reported in all cases.
- ❖ Working in isolation influenced staff morale.



Did your library have a plan for a pandemic scenario or any other disaster scenario that involved you working outside of the library space?

know nothing
never no came fire
management no laughs
higher place think

... even though we weren't really frontline employees... workers, like, **I had family members that felt like we were frontline in some ways**, and they were very happy when we close[d], just knowing like, how we work with the public and how some members of the public have no boundaries. But my family were very happy that we did close for safety reasons.

(Librarian, Kent County)

So... and other people, as I said, we do have some rural individuals, and there are some people that lived in areas where there was no WiFi. **And some folks don't even have cell phones.** So there was no electronics [...] they couldn't even attend meetings. So yeah. So some folks didn't have as many opportunities to do the work that other folks did.

(Director, Kent County)

Yeah, it was kind of the... one of those times when I really doubted myself, as far as you know, **Am I even being effective... is anybody out there watching this?** It... I just second guessed myself a lot because there was literally no contact with anybody at all.

(Library Assistant, Sussex County)

Limitations

- Partial data and early stage of analysis.
- Known hesitation among interviewees to speak freely.
- No site visits.

What's Next?

- Analysis and Write-up
- Presenting this work in academic and professional settings
- Collaboration on events that bring together libraries, emergency planners, first responders, public health professionals, community organizers

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