

9 Tips for Board Decision Making During COVID-19

1. Resume library board meetings virtually – see Ministry email and professional resource.

In an email to all public libraries, dated March 27, 2020, Assistant Deputy Minister Kevin Finnerty provided the following guidance on holding board meetings:

Due to the need for 'social distancing', public library board meetings that are open to the public under the Public Libraries Act (PLA), may be held using a live video interface platform or conference call service, so long as the public may attend virtually, in real-time, and be able to ask questions. As with all library board meetings, advance notice is required and sufficient information of the topics to be considered should be made available to the public to enable them to make an informed decision as to whether or not to attend.

Remote participation by board members has been an option for a number of years, but meetings where every board member is participating remotely/virtually requires new practices. Please see the one-page document, [Public Library Board Meetings and Remote Participation](#) available on the [Governance HUB](#).

For some helpful tips about managing virtual board meetings, see the recent [blog post](#) by an Ontario Library Service—North advisor.

2. Take time to understand the current reality.

It is important for board members to understand the various emergency orders that have been enacted and where to find daily updates from federal, provincial, and local health officials. See [COVID-19: Informational Resources for Public Libraries](#) for links to information from Canadian and Ontario leaders, as well as from various other sources that are tracking COVID-19 and its social and economic consequences.

As well, take time to check in with what the municipality is saying about COVID-19 in your community, clarifying whether a state of emergency has been declared locally, and what actions are being taken by local officials. The municipality's and local health unit's websites are good places to start.

3. Encourage the Library CEO to collaborate with the municipality to the greatest extent possible and to make every effort to contribute to the community's emergency response and wellbeing.

In this unprecedented time of crisis and disruption to community life, it is absolutely crucial that the library positions itself as a helper, willing to contribute to the municipality's response to the pandemic, and ready to support the changes arising from the social distancing solutions being implemented. The contribution of the public library looks different in every community. In some cases, the library CEO is a member of the Emergency Planning Team and the Emergency Operations Centre. In others, library staff have been redeployed to assist with important social services, for example, food banks, and the delivery of groceries to needy households.

4. Develop an understanding of the library's online/virtual services and the work associated with developing and delivering those services.

While the provincial order was that the physical libraries were to be closed to the public, there remain many options and possibilities for virtual services. Check out your library's website and Facebook page. What services are being offered? How is staff reaching out to the community, offering assistance and solutions? Public libraries are showing themselves to be incredibly innovative and adaptive. There is much to be proud of! Has the board indicated to staff an appreciation for the ways in which they are adapting and finding new ways to serve the community? Check out the ideas found in the [Programming, Staffing and Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) resource, available in the [Resources](#) section of LearnHQ.

5. Step up as the employer and spend time at the board table having the difficult conversations about staffing.

The same March 27, 2020 email from the Assistant Deputy Minister (see #1), includes a reminder that as the library board is the employer, *“under the PLA [Public Libraries Act], any decisions related to public library staff and remuneration remain the purview of the public library board.”*

It is imperative that the board understand the work required to support the continuation of the library's online services and have the information it needs to assess staffing requirements as the situation evolves. Here are a few suggestions to guide that process:

- Understand the range of options available. Look at what other libraries are doing; also, pay attention to what is happening to other municipal services and staff. Make sure municipal leaders and the community understand that, unlike some community services, the library continues to provide important services at this time.
- Become acquainted with the legal terminology and options
 - lay-off versus Declared Emergency Leave (DEL)
 - seek legal advice as the employer
- Work with municipal officials to understand the financial implications for library service during and following the state of emergency; also build an appreciation for the financial pressures on the municipality. They are, at this time, trying to plan for the continuation of core services without knowing where the money will come from or when the cash will flow
- Agree on guiding principles of accountability, commitment to service, and respect and compassion for staff as the library's greatest resource
- Talk about both short-term and long-term consequences of the closure of the library, perceived changes to the role of the library, and any staff lay-offs/redeployment.

For more about board decision making, see [Board Meetings & Decision Making](#) in the Governance HUB.

6. Develop a plan for the continuation of library service throughout the state of emergency.

Ask staff to identify risks and suggest strategies for minimizing those risks.

Recognize that the library, like every other player in the community, is facing an evolving situation and the best decisions right now are short term, with a view to being reliable and responsive in the long term. Some of the important, but not urgent, considerations for staff are looking ahead to the feasibility of summer and fall programming. Since we do not know how long it will be before libraries can re-open, it's important for staff to develop contingency plans for programs and services.

For some libraries, a request that may come before the board, is for money to invest in a stronger, more robust technology infrastructure. The extent of virtual programming, and range of online services being offered during the library closures may require upgraded servers, better Internet, and/or other technology enhancements.

7. Identify pivotal opportunities to revisit the plan, thereby creating constant cycles of deciding and implementing, based on changing circumstances and new information.

Very few decisions can be made for more than a few weeks at a time, sometimes no more than the next few days. All decisions need to be made in consultation with the Library CEO, and in keeping with the latest projections available from health officials and municipal, provincial and federal leaders. There are very few decisions that won't need to be revisited throughout the duration of the pandemic.

8. Communicate the board's decisions regarding services so that the public knows what to expect.

Using the library's website, social media, and possibly, local media, the board should ensure that the community knows what to expect in terms of library service during the pandemic. Also, without breaching confidentiality, the board might want to be prepared to share with the community, possibly through the media, staffing decisions that have been taken and the reasoning behind those decisions. By being prepared, and putting a short statement out, the library might be able to control the message. Admittedly, for smaller libraries, it becomes more challenging to address staffing decisions because individuals can be more readily identified.

9. Support staff in developing a recovery plan to manage the process of calling back staff, and preparing facilities and services in advance of the re-opening of the library.

While the library remains closed, and some staff work from home, one of the many projects staff can be engaged in is the development of a recovery plan for when the library re-opens. If staff have been laid off (or placed on unpaid emergency leave), the recovery plan needs to include calling staff back from lay-off/leave, providing ample time for any necessary re-orientation, and communicating of new rules and changes to policies and procedures. There may also be changes to physical space required.

Given the realities of social distancing that have been imposed in recent weeks, some library leaders are asking whether new measures need to be put in place that increase the physical distancing of concurrent users of the library. Measures that limit large gatherings and provide more space between users are currently under consideration. Once again, local, provincial and national health officials will likely offer guidance in these matters over the coming weeks and months.