



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2021.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Roanoke County  
Program Title: From Crisis to Transformation: Local Solutions to a Global Pandemic  
Program Category: Customer Service/Human Services

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Name: Dan O'Donnell  
Title: County Administrator  
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## **From Crisis to Transformation: Local Solutions to a Global Pandemic**

### **Addressing the Challenge and Defining Our Response**

As county agencies across the nation began reacting to the global pandemic, we at Roanoke County Public Library (RCPL) observed libraries across America shutting their doors to the public, and we did the same. Some libraries quickly began offering virtual programs and services, some supported other departments by redeploying their staff to help, and still others began to assess what reopening and serving the public needed to be at this moment in time, and other libraries used the opportunity to catch up on training sometimes missed due to the demands of day-to-day operations. Based on the size of and wide range of talents on staff, RCPL chose to go wide rather than deep, and try to do a bit of everything. And yet, we realized how woefully unprepared we were for what would come next, and yet, what came next displayed astonishing resilience and unmatched resolve to provide for real-time community needs and interests, no matter the odds.

RCPL, a medium-sized library system nestled in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains, is well connected both across Virginia and America. Thanks to national recognition gained a few years ago when we became the first library system in the nation to recruit Pepper<sup>®</sup>, the humanoid robot (manufactured by SoftBank Robotics), several staff members are active on national listservs and participate in regular meetings with colleagues representing the biggest, best, and most forward thinking libraries in the United States and Canada. These staff members were able to draw on expertise from others and then coordinate internally to employ ideas that fit their demographic and capacity. With a mission stating "RCPL is here to guide you from your now to your next" took on new and ambitious meaning. Staff demonstrated tremendous flexibility moving operations from buildings to homes and back again, while delivering a range of programming and services, and supporting other units of government. Over the course of 12 months, in addition to transitioning to new service delivery models and updating buildings according to COVID-19 protocols, the library provided key support for

first responders, the Treasurer's office, schools, the Census Bureau, the Registrar's office, and the Virginia Department of Health, and contributed to conversations and tasks force state- and nationwide. We were the first library in the Roanoke Valley to permanently re-open our buildings to patrons, and continued to add more access and services as the environment allowed.

We needed to outfit staff with necessary technology and training to use it, and provide meaningful work for those whose main job duties consisted of on-site operational tasks and in-person interactions. We came up against the cold reality that as an entity that had in recent years billed itself as community gathering place, we were now closing our doors, storing furniture, and putting up glass shields. We needed to ensure patrons dependent upon the library for internet access continued to have it, and find a way to deliver services and materials upon which they relied. Perhaps most daunting, we needed to continue to find a path toward fighting the rise of disinformation, especially with public health at risk. But most urgent were critical needs being revealed daily – how to ensure the community got necessary consumer health information, and how we could support other county agencies with our resources, talent, and now empty buildings. The safety, welfare, and education of the community weighed on our minds, and we knew we had tools to help support each area.

The pandemic afforded us a unique opportunity to make some course corrections and expand traditional definitions of library specific values in terms of how we could support needs across the county and the region. We recognized the need to provide more online access to our materials and programs; if the community couldn't come to us, we'd go to them, at least while we figured it all out. We assessed the larger climate to see how staff might use talent and resources to support the safety, access to county services, and education county-wide, and also to grow professionally adding to their individual repertoire in a way that also benefitted the community at large.

## Implementing Our Response

First, we resisted going into survival mode, took stock of our resources and talent, and met online in groups ranging from two people to the entire staff. Among other things, we asked ourselves:

- How might we rise to this occasion to be a force for good?
- What might we do even better than we were doing before?
- Where are the opportunities in this moment?
- What are the critical needs that we have the capacity to address?
- How do we adapt some of our plans to celebrate milestones such as the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment Centennial and the Library's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary anyway?

On top of the more typical library services, we also considered community-specific challenges such as schoolchildren without Wi-Fi in their homes, the dire need for PPE for public safety and health care workers, the proliferation of disinformation, and the importance of the 2020 election and Census collection. We thought about our primary role as the public's access to information and resources regarding safety, and about community and our own well-being during the crisis. Staff needed laptops, iPads, cameras for virtual programming, and in some cases, Wi-Fi. We took the following actions:

- Equipped staff with technology to work from home
- Identified our core professional values, asking ourselves "How might we meet this challenge?" as they were raised
- Divided into two types of teams – unit teams (regular reporting structure) and themed teams based on interest areas, giving staff a unique opportunity to learn things and contribute to areas they may not have otherwise been expected or able to do
- Identified areas of need and began to coordinate with other county departments
- Reimagined all programming as virtual, with the possible exception of distanced outdoor programming for when we began to reopen

- Determined training needs, and considered ways to increase morale

Within a few days, staff had been issued laptops and/or iPads, cameras for virtual programming, and in some cases, Wi-Fi hot spots. All staff were asked to bring whatever supplies they thought they would need to do their jobs from home. The library's administrative coordinator worked closely with branch managers to identify laptops stored for programming, and then with our technical coordinator to get everyone's laptops set for work. When laptops ran short, we reconfigured iPads used for programming and magazine browsing, and sent those home (later, we'd buy enough laptops for everyone via CARES funds). Programming librarians who needed cameras and other technological devices used iPhones or were given cameras we had on-site, and we purchased more. We began ordering Wi-Fi hot spots to send home with staff who needed them.

We were driven by our values and internal strategic plan, including our responsibility to provide reliable information and a marketplace of ideas, equity and access, freedom to engage and learn, and to be a place, even if virtual, leading the nation in innovation. Staff reimagined the library's role in civic and community engagement. In addition to hosting hundreds of virtual programs, adding to our online resources, providing curbside service to thousands of people, and distributing tens of thousands of craft kits for all ages, the library leveraged its brick and mortar, technological, and intellectual resources to serve as satellite stations for the Treasurer's office, provide PPE to first responders, lead Census efforts, and highlighted voter education. Over the course of 12 months, in addition to transitioning to new service delivery models and updating buildings according to COVID-19 protocols, the library supported first responders, the Treasurer's office, schools, Census Bureau, and the Virginia Department of Health.

Innovation and collaboration were key components to our successes and impact, as we came up with several ways to serve our own clientele while supporting other county departments in broader ways. By the time we began lifting restrictions and proceeding back to a new normal, the library's assistant director had completed her tenure as the County's Census Count Chair. Due to concerted

efforts from all on the committee, our county achieved a remarkable 79.9% self-response rate, which will help deliver a complete, fair, and accurate count of our residents. The response rate for Roanoke County was the 9<sup>th</sup> highest county in the state, and the 44<sup>th</sup> highest county in the country. Among working to promote the census, we hosted three voter registration drives, spent over 140 hours supporting the Virginia Department of Health by making phone calls to help register residents for vaccines, circulated 215 hot spots, many of which made it possible for children to do their homework and adults to work from home, [provided 300 3D printed face shields to first responders](#), and added drop boxes for tax payments to three of our locations while permanently renovating a former cafe to a drive-up window and office for the Treasurer ([4,000 people used this service](#)), the program manager set up voter registration tents on three of our sites, all while adding 10 databases and over 2,500 e-books to our collection, ushering in a 133% increase of use in our electronic resources, and growing our social media impressions by 76%. Reference librarians gathered [Resources for Resilience](#) for those needing health, unemployment, and other critical information. We had offered 670 programs drawing 11,500 participants, and provided over 18,000 patrons of all ages with take home crafts and learning kits to help assuage boredom, learn, and entertain themselves while quarantined.

We answered the telephone seven days a week to deliver reference services, and instituted a “Let’s Stay in Touch” program where patrons scheduled weekly calls with staff to socialize. We uploaded videos to our new YouTube channel, ranging from storytimes to database tutorials, and we worked with Roanoke Valley Television to record children’s storytimes for people without internet. We developed new programs such as Couch Trivia, Take & Create craft kits for all ages, and STEM themed crafts for families. Missing in-person interactions, staff created a “We Are Here for You” video, another featuring our robots instigating a mischief while alone in our buildings, among others. We used Zoom for teaching technology from basics to Python coding and robotics, and hosting an author visit with Dr. Julie Shah, co-author of *What to Expect When You’re Expecting Robots*. Our genealogy club grew and our book clubs

and knitting groups carried on, and in further support of the Census, we delivered 200 *We Count* books to area schools and Social Services to encourage participation. Along with print and A/V materials, we began circulating Happy Lights, now one of our most popular items. The press we have received from all efforts has raised the level of awareness of our value beyond our brick-and-mortar buildings, including a feature in [The Roanoke Times](#).

We launched curbside services in June, began opening our buildings with limited services and capacity in September, and continue to add services, hours, and staff. We've maintained online programming, and capitalized on the opportunity to add more authors and more topical discussions as the day called for, and also because they were more affordable. We held our 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment Celebration with the Library Director interviewing several female leaders from local government, businesses, and non-profits organizations. On Zoom we hosted author Larry Palmer, who wrote his memoir *Scholarship Boy*, to talk about the experience of attending an elite private school as a young Black man in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. We moderated a discussion on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, delving into five of his speeches and how his words impact us today. In May, we hosted authors Lucinda Robb and Becca Boggs Roberts as they discussed their new book *The Suffragist Playbook*, where they encourage teens to draw from lessons of Suffragists that can be applied to advocacy today, something of growing importance to young people.

When we could, we hosted in-person programming outdoors. Clever children's librarians designed PVC candy chutes so children could experience Trick-or-Treating in the library parking lots, held a drive through Santa on the Rooftop event in December, and invited the community to decorate our sidewalks with chalk to spread kindness.

### **Supporting One Another While Supporting the Community**

Internally, we held a t-shirt design and tag line contest, yielding two designs and the phrase "Choose Kindness, Find Wonder" printed on shirts distributed to all staff. Perhaps most importantly, we

contracted with the National Center for Behavioral Health to host two trauma informed care workshops, one centered on caring for ourselves and each other, the other focused on caring better for patrons who are experiencing trauma.

### **Funding**

Staff who would've otherwise been serving in our buildings were part of designing and implementing all of the ideas as outlined, so no additional staff costs were necessary. We were able to call upon our Friends of the Library organization and utilize CARES funding to continue offering services for patrons and the community.

### **Friends of the Library Funding:**

Summer Reading Program	\$15,000
e-Book Purchases	\$15,000
3D Printer & Printing Supplies for PPE	\$5,000

### **CARES Act Funding:**

Databases	\$50,000
Hot Spots: Verizon (75)	\$16,000
Hot Spots: T-Mobile (100)	\$11,500
Circulating Laptops	\$60,000
Software for Laptops	\$15,000
Charging Stations (12)	\$4,000
Self-Standing Check-Out Stations (5)	\$100,000
Remote Printing Services	\$5,000



## **Conclusion**

Throughout the pandemic, RCPL strengthened our connections with one another and furthered our reach in the community. The press we've received from all efforts has raised the level of awareness of our value beyond our brick-and-mortar buildings. [The Roanoke Times article](#) features how RCPL adapted to pandemic precautions. All the programs important to us before COVID-19 became even more so during the crisis. Maintaining regular programs and services while adding more in response to critical real-time needs, we grew our trust in the region and demonstrated the essential nature of our work, intangibles that will last well beyond the global health crisis. RCPL's vision is to be the community's source for connection, inspiration, and exploration. Because a particular philosophy drives that, we often use the tagline, "We'll meet you at your wonder." What we learned perhaps most of all during the pandemic is that amazing things can happen when staff is empowered to enter into their own wonder in order to help others meet theirs.

## Executive Summary

Amidst a global pandemic, Roanoke County Public Library (RCPL) demonstrated tremendous flexibility moving operations from its buildings to home and back again, while delivering a range of programming and supporting other units of government. Over the course of 12 months, in addition to transitioning to new service delivery models and updating buildings according to COVID-19 protocols, the library supported first responders by creating 300 3D printed face shields, the Treasurer's office by allowing them to use three of our drive-throughs and renovate a former cafe, schools by providing hot spots to students, the Census Bureau by dedicating our assistant director as the County's Census Count Committee Chair, and Virginia Department of Health by providing staff who would spend about 140 hours making phone calls to help mostly older residents schedule vaccines.

While closed, we answered the telephone seven days a week, offered 670 virtual programs drawing over 11,000 people. We added 10 databases and over 2,500 e-books, ushering in a 133% increase of our electronic resources. Our Facebook page attracted 600 new followers and our social media impressions increased by 76% in six months.

We launched curbside services in June, began opening our buildings with limited services and capacity in September, and were the only library system in the Roanoke Valley to remain permanently opened from then through mid-April.

Internally, to support staff, we held a t-shirt design contest yielding two designs and the phrase "Choose Kindness, Find Wonder" printed on shirts distributed to all staff. We contracted with the National Center for Behavioral Health to host two trauma informed care workshops, one centered on caring for ourselves and each other, the other focused on patrons.

RCPL strengthened connections with one another and furthered our reach in the community, grew our trust in the region and demonstrated the essential nature of our work, intangibles that will last well beyond the global health crisis.

**Brief Overview**

As Roanoke County Public Library (RCPL) shifted its services home and back again, staff reimagined the library's role in civic engagement and in providing support across the area. The library leveraged its brick and mortar, technological, and intellectual resources, and over the course of 12 months, transitioned to new service delivery models, updated its buildings according to COVID-19 protocols, supported first responders by creating 300 3D printed face shields, the Treasurer's office by opening our three drive-through windows and renovating a former café for their use, schools by providing hot spots to students, the Census Bureau by dedicating our assistant director as the County's Census Count Committee Chair, and Virginia Department of Health by providing staff who would spend about 140 hours making phone calls to help mostly older residents schedule vaccines.

Throughout the pandemic, RCPL strengthened our connections with one another and furthered our reach in the community. All the programs important to us before COVID-19 became even more so during it. Maintaining regular programs and services while adding more in response to critical real-time needs, we grew our trust in the region and demonstrated the essential nature of our work, intangibles that will last well beyond the global health crisis.