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Creating New Correctional Programs and Services in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the changed and changing COVID-19 pandemic programming implemented by Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Public Library's correctional outreach teams. Every program or service offered by the correctional outreach teams was required to change to meet the needs of the pandemic. Additionally, the libraries created two new services: Library Hub, a tablet program for people in Rikers Island jail complex, and Immediate Access, a technology and resource access program for people on parole. The article explains the new services, provides the findings associated with almost two years of providing these services, and presents insights and suggested best practices.

Keywords: Correctional Programs, COVID-19 Pandemic, Queens Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library

INTRODUCTION

Faced with the changes wrought by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the correctional outreach teams of two public library systems in New York City, USA -- Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Public Library -- created new programs and services and updated existing programs and services. They also worked together to offer new services with the municipal jail service: New York City's Department of Correction ("DOC"). Before and during the pandemic, these two libraries offered several services to people who were incarcerated or detained, people who had formerly been incarcerated or detained, and people who had family members that were either incarcerated or detained. Although these groups have disparate needs and interests, we call the services to this population "correctional outreach." Two major new correctional outreach programs created by library staff were the Library Hub tablet program within Rikers Island jail and the Immediate Access: Technology Reentry program for people on parole. This case study describes these two new programs.

History of Brooklyn Public Library

Established in 1896, Brooklyn Public Library is one of the United States's largest public library systems, with more than 850,000 active library cardholders. Brooklyn Public Library has 66 branches; most of Brooklyn's 2.7 million residents live within a half-mile of a library branch. In 2016, Brooklyn Public Library was awarded an Institute of Museum and Library Services "National Medal for Museum and Library Service," in large part due to the work of its Outreach Services department and its efforts to serve Brooklyn's most vulnerable populations.

History of Queens Public Library

The first library in Queens, New York was organized in 1858. That library was the foundation of the Queens Public Library system, which was established in 1896. Queens Public Library began offering service to prison populations by 1915. Between 1915 and 2014, there was intermittent service provided to patrons in prisons and jails. Beginning in 2014, Queens Public Library had one full-time position dedicated solely to outreach, including correctional outreach and programming. The Library's correctional outreach programming increased after 2014. By the start of the pandemic lockdown in March 2020, Queens Public Library had several correctional programs.

Jail, Prison, and Reentry Programs and Services Offered Pre-Pandemic

Before the pandemic started, Brooklyn Public Library provided library services to facilities in Rikers Island -- two of these facilities were shared with Queens Public Library -- and a facility in the Bronx, New York. Most of the patrons served are awaiting trial or serving short sentences, and it's common for these patrons to be moved from jail facility to jail facility. None of these facilities are equipped with physical library spaces. Instead the libraries provide services through the use of bookcarts that visit housing areas within each facility. The collections are stored in whatever space is available at the jails along with the book carts. The collections are composed of weeded library materials, donations, and purchased materials.

Given the transitory nature of the population at these correctional facilities, book retention is a challenge. A considerable portion of the items are not returned for a variety of reasons. People are moved from facility to facility, or are released before they can return their books. Also, books can be taken in a search or by another reader or can be easily damaged. The level of book retention and the lack of technology use allowed by anyone in the facility means that it is prohibitively challenging to maintain an item cataloging system, which requires the libraries to keep circulation records by hand. This, in turn, affects the library functions that can be provided; for example, fulfilling specific book requests can be challenging.

These challenges forced the library systems to be creative. The libraries began providing reference services while conducting book cart service. As the reference service caught on, both libraries teamed up with the Prison Library Support Network (PLSN), a New-York-based network made up of volunteer library professionals. Library staff were able to conduct brief reference interviews in person to assess the individual's information needs, which then would be passed on to PLSN coordinators (minus any personally identifying information), who would assign it to one of their volunteers. The information needs varied in nature, given the lack of access to information in jails.

Both library systems also provided different programs within the jail, though this is one of the most challenging aspects of providing library services to Rikers. The libraries partner with DOC Program Coordinators at the facilities. These Program Coordinators are essential because they are responsible for recruiting participants and finding programming spaces. Many of these library-sponsored programs are presented by contracted vendors, so if the program is delayed by unforeseen circumstances at the facility, it might not be conducted at all. Also, if a program has been presented without the full cooperation of the Program Coordinators, it might have no participants or be held in an awkward space. For more information about these complexities, refer to *Expanding Library Service in Jails and Prisons Through Hip Hop, Meditation, and Creativity* (Capers et al., 2021).

Brooklyn Public Library also conducted the program *Daddy & Me* at different city jails, as well as the Federal Detention Center in Brooklyn. As part of this program, incarcerated parents attended an early literacy workshop. Then, participants would be recorded reading a book to their children, assisted by library staff who would demonstrate storytime tips and tricks. The recording, along with the books, was given to the family during a Family Day, where a family gets to spend the day with their incarcerated loved one. In 2018, 71 people participated in the program and 123 children received books along with their parent's recording. Additionally, in 2018, Brooklyn Public Library received an internal library grant to conduct the "BPL Zine Project," in which participants created their own zine, after taking workshops about creating comic books, writing poetry, and making collages.

The Queens and Brooklyn Public Libraries also offered other programs and services to people impacted by the criminal justice system. The Video Visitation program was offered to friends or families who had loved ones inside of the Rikers Island jail complex. With this program, the library provided a space with a TV screen and the equipment necessary to connect to the virtual visitation equipment at Rikers Island. Families and other loved ones could use this space for a one hour virtual visit. In 2019, Queens Public Library hosted 416 Video Visits with 1,119 participants. Between January and March 2020, the Brooklyn Public Library hosted 205 Video Visits.

Queens Public Library also conducted programs and services with Queensboro Correctional Facility, a local reentry prison. One program at Queensboro was the resume-creation program, *See You On the Outside*. *See You On the Outside* was conducted in the prison, first with a resume workshop and then with a second visit where library staff distributed any completed resumes. Library staff also stayed in contact with participants who were interested in library services when they were released. In 2019, Queens Public Library assisted 359 people with resume creation through *See You On the Outside*. At Queensboro, library staff also provided one-on-one service for people, usually through their prison counselors. There was also occasional programming, and library staff had a strong relationship with staff at Queensboro.

Queens Public Library also had relationships with local community supervision offices. Through these relationships, library staff would attend periodic intake meetings for people on parole. Library staff also set up a table at the probation office that we would staff periodically. Queens Public Library interacted with 210 people in 2019 through probation and parole.

Queens Public Library also created a Reentry Resource guide: a small approximately 30-page brochure that we filled with resources from the Queens area that would be of interest to people recently released from incarceration. The guide was updated every few years.

At the beginning of 2020, before the pandemic, Queens Public Library had also created a pilot correctional outreach service, a staffed “Reentry Desk” at the main library branch. The idea was that library staff could refer individual questions that were received about reentry services to the Reentry Desk. This desk was staffed several hours per week starting in January 2020. Library staff interacted with 50 people via the Reentry Desk in early 2020. Library staff also used the Reentry Desk to distribute the Reentry Resource guide.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot has been written recently about the use of tablets, more specifically e-readers, in prisons. Much of this literature focuses on the prohibitive costs to use basic services, such as reading an ebook or sending an email, especially in the context of the privatization of public services and financial exploitations of people within the United States criminal justice system. There are different case models of prisons using e-readers to financially exploit incarcerated people and research that looks at the role of companies, such as JPay, who profit from these models (Eisen, 2017; Harris et al., 2019; Waters, 2019). Additionally, PEN America and other members of the Coalition for Carceral Access to Literature and Learning are working to push back against the prohibitive costs of these electronic devices and against proposals by correctional facilities to limit the access to physical books in favor of tablets or e-readers.

Another research topic that is heavily discussed is the use of surveillance technology within prison and jails and also after incarceration. In their work, *Library Services and Incarceration: Recognizing Barriers, Strengthening Access*, Dr. Jeanie Austin (2021) explores the ways in which carceral institutions have used technology as a form of surveillance and to regulate the flow of information. Other researchers have looked at the opportunities that technology provides for organizations looking to offer correctional resources (Reisdorf et al., 2021) as well as the role these technologies have played during the last public health crisis (Cloud et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020).

At the time the two libraries began the pandemic-era work with the New York City DOC, most of the literature focused on private companies like JPay and the role these companies had played in providing high-cost, low-value services to justice-involved people. Much of the literature did not apply to the situation the library staff were in, because the tablets used by DOC follow a different model from JPay. We could not find examples of librarians that had partnered with tablet providers and jails to provide library services and content to their local jail population. The role of surveillance was something that library staff took seriously, keeping in mind the role that library staff could play in contributing to surveillance. Library staff weighed the lack of access to basic resources during the pandemic against surveillance concerns and ultimately felt that access took primacy in this situation.

On the reentry side, a recent book that discusses the reentry process is *Homeward: Life in the Year After Prison* by Bruce Western (2018). The lessons captured in this book were used by Queens Public Library staff when creating and refining the Immediate Access program. One major lesson woven throughout the pages of *Homeward* is that reentry is complicated. Another, more specific, lesson stated in the book surrounds recidivism. The research in *Homeward* found that only three factors were related to an increased rate of recidivism and they are all factors related specifically to the formerly-incarcerated individual:

- Relapsing to addiction
- Being on probation or parole
- Being younger than average

(Western, 2018, p. 122). Library staff used this knowledge to temper expectations about recidivism.

Library staff also took into consideration another finding from the book - the finding that there are three commonly acute reentry needs: transitional assistance with every day and foundational tasks in the first weeks of release, continuous health care from incarceration to release, and independent housing, which is scarce and difficult to secure (Western, 2018, p. 183). These insights helped shape the Immediate Access reentry program. Library staff were more comfortable with being flexible about participant engagement, especially in the early days of release.

Our literature review search also revealed a recent article about public library services and the reentry population. Penin et al. (2019), discussed the design of services at the public library, in the context of working with people who are recently released from prison or jail. Penin et al. (2019) used design thinking to analyze the role of a public library when serving the reentry population. The authors discussed three “interconnected leverage points” that contribute to services provided to the reentry population: library as social capacity, library as community problem solvers, and library patrons as infrastructure (Penin et al., 2019, p. 7). Although we were not familiar with Penin et al.’s work when we began designing the Immediate Access program, the ideas discussed resonate. Penin et al. emphasized the inclusive and flexible nature of library work, the relational and emotional work performed by library staff, and the need to recognize that library patrons are an asset, not just a service population (Penin, et al., 2019).

JAIL, PRISON, AND REENTRY SERVICES IN RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

Jail Library Services - Library Hub

Library Hub is a shared space created by Queens Public Library and Brooklyn Public Library on the educational platform “Brightspace D2L”, which is used on the DOC-issued tablets for people incarcerated in New York City jails. The libraries used this digital space to offer on-demand, pre-recorded library programs, an Ask a Librarian! reference service, a Mail-a-Book/BookMatch service, and other resources. From the rollout of the project in April 2021 until the writing of this article in February 2022, Library Hub has sent 6,161 books to 3,648 people incarcerated at local jail facilities and sent 757 reference responses (which were often multifold requests).

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, library staff at both libraries communicated with Program Coordinators and other facility staff regularly to determine what the libraries could offer. Consistently, books were seen as being the most helpful resource. The libraries sent books to be distributed and also gave facilities staff permission to use library collections at the facilities. Library staff attempted to gauge what types of books would be most helpful by first using surveys. However, those surveys relied on a DOC staff that was already spread thin and overwhelmed. The

libraries then tried sending boxes that each contained a wide range of materials to be dropped off at housing units and also tried sending boxes of books organized by genre.

After a few months of the pandemic, in the summer of 2020, a Program Coordinator approached the libraries about adding content to the DOC tablets. DOC staff was interested in content that could be considered “edutainment.” DOC staff initially asked for content that had an educational component and they wanted to gauge engagement through quizzes, though these did not need to be rigorous. Because of the two libraries’ close coordination on book distribution and previously on library services, library staff discussed the prospect together.

Library staff wanted to provide programs that any community library would offer, namely, programs that were relevant and engaging for the community. Staff decided to base the initial programs on topics that were known to be of frequent interest to the population, along with suggestions from program providers. Staff also determined early on to include a survey for tablet users to create ideas for future programs.

Library staff were excited about the possibility of being able to offer services to patrons and discussed what, aside from programs, could be provided through this access. Since providing books had been the backbone of their services, library staff envisioned a “mail-a-book” type of service paired with readers’ advisory. Library staff also knew they wanted to provide a reference service. The previous reference service was more informal, and the tablets provided an opportunity to create a new, more formalized reference service.

In initial discussions, issues of privacy and access were paramount. One factor that influenced the initial creation of the services provided was that the company that the DOC was using, American Prison Data Systems (APDS), is a public-benefit corporation and Certified B Corporation. Tablet users are not charged for accessing library content. Of the three things library staff wanted to offer (programs, reference information, and materials), programs for people to watch on demand, free of cost to themselves, seemed unproblematic from a privacy perspective. Reference questions were a little more complicated. Though this was something library staff had previously done through mail with people incarcerated in prisons, and in-person at jails, library staff had to think through what privacy issues would arise from offering this service through the tablet. There would be a record of the information sought, and it would be clear who was making the request.

Library staff knew from experience that the vast majority of patron requests were completely innocuous from a correctional perspective. Library staff also knew that because of the pandemic and the lack of DOC staff, people were in a veritable information desert. There were few DOC staff to provide reentry information, health information, or programs. In order to mitigate the privacy issues, library staff decided to head the Ask a Librarian! section and the Mail-a-Book/BookMatch section with a boldface notice that any correspondence via tablet was subject to surveillance and also offered patrons the option to mail the libraries their requests. By adding these two components, library staff decided that the access that these services provided at such a critical time ultimately outweighed their remaining privacy concerns. After being as transparent as possible about the lack of confidentiality, library staff felt that they were giving patrons agency to decide whether they wanted to engage with us through the tablet.

As previously mentioned, the DOC had envisioned the libraries’ participation in the tablet project as providing what DOC staff called “edutainment.” The DOC had also reached out to other organizations in New York City, including local colleges, to provide video content and educational

resources for their tablet program. From working closely with people who had access to patrons in jail during the pandemic, and from the libraries' past work with this population, library staff identified areas of interest. Library staff wanted to have video content available at the launch of Library Hub to help draw interest to the new service. Library staff envisioned this part of the project as consisting mainly of bringing already existing recorded library programs to the tablets, though both libraries also received funding to hire people to create video programming for the tablets that was designed specifically for our patrons. This included programs about American Sign Language and job readiness as well as less formal programs such as drawing tutorials, astrology, and Tai chi workshops. The team at Brooklyn Public Library received \$15,000 in funding to support this project, including the video content.

There were certain technological limitations that the instructors contended with, such as not being able to provide live workshops and an inability for the patrons to ask direct questions to the instructors. Unlike colleges and other institutions, who may have the capacity to have more formal classes and provide feedback from instructors, the libraries don't have the same capacity. The video content needed to stand on its own without much instructor interaction. It was also very important to get input from patrons, so library staff created surveys to assess the videos. Funding by the Charles H. Revson Foundation and Robert M. Schiffman Foundation was instrumental in the creation of Brooklyn Public Library's original video content. Beyond video programming, Library Hub has also been used to provide reentry documents and information to library patrons, including voter information.

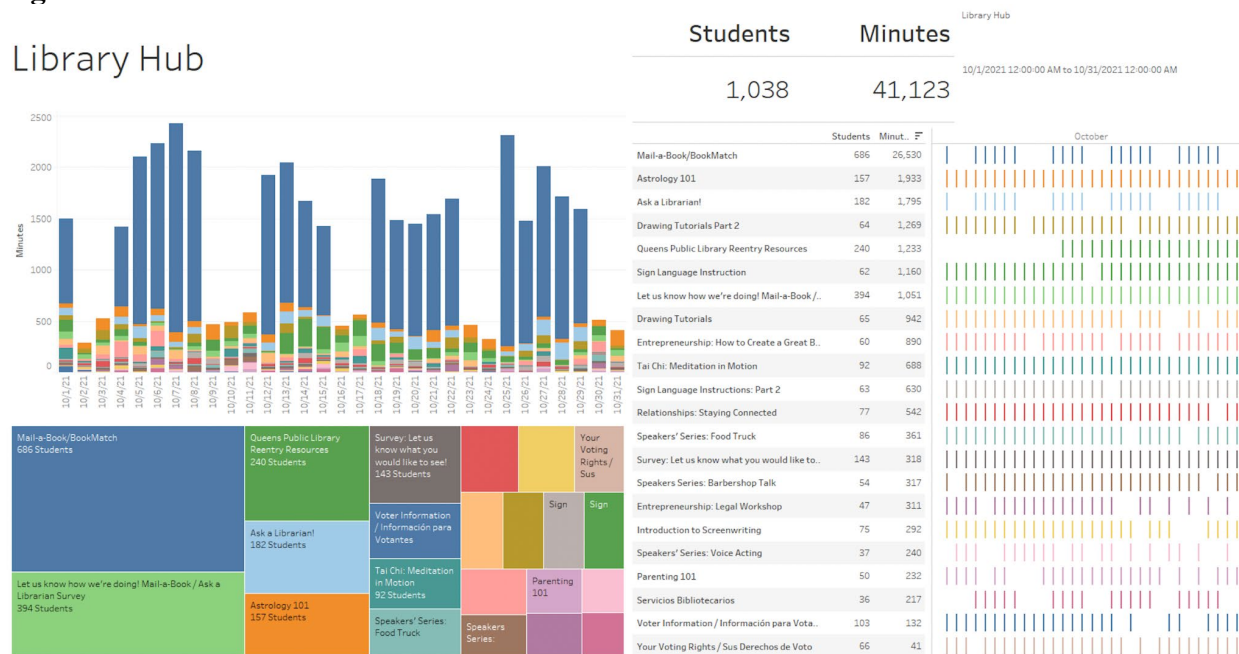
As for Library Hub's book distribution service, library staff wanted to approximate as closely as possible the usual library service and wanted people to have agency over which books they borrowed. Library staff limited the service to two books per person per calendar month. Instead of requiring immediate return of the materials via the mail, each book package included a form letter with instructions to either return the books to program staff, share with another reader who may be interested, leave in the occasional informal library spaces in housing units, or keep until the libraries resumed in-person services. As before the pandemic, the collection consisted of weeded, donated, and purchased materials.

Readers' advisory became a very complex task in this environment. With library staff capacity, it was impossible to track all the books coming in and going out in order to share an updated catalog with patrons. Instead, library staff would respond to individual book requests that could not be fulfilled with books within the current collection by offering an annotated list of similar books, of which the reader could choose two. One issue library staff encountered was patrons not responding after they were sent the readers' advisory list. Seemingly, some patrons were not able to figure out the messaging system and library staff were unable to view the system from the user's end. Library staff did not want to penalize people who were not able to message, so, if library staff did not hear back from patrons after a week, library staff selected two books to mail to the patron. Many book requests reflect the patrons' focus while incarcerated: understanding the law, mental self-help, relationship self-help, substance misuse recovery, business development, and educational materials, along with recreational materials. Some patrons wanted books to help them connect with their children, by reading to them or drawing pictures for them.

The Mail-a-Book/BookMatch system became very popular. Library staff were initially going to pilot the program in only one facility. However, as DOC was not far along with the tablet roll-out, library staff decided to open the program to all facilities. As word of mouth spread and the tablets became more widely distributed, the service became heavily utilized. For example, in

October 2021, of the 41,123 minutes that tablet users spent on Library Hub, 65% was used engaging with Mail-a-Book/BookMatch, as can be seen in Figure 1. It far outstripped any other Library Hub offerings.

Figure 1



Along with the Mail-a-Book/BookMatch services, the libraries also used Library Hub to implement reference services. Reference services were something both libraries did informally before the pandemic shutdown. The libraries had also done mail reference services before, but mostly for out-of-state prisons. To protect people’s confidentiality as much as possible, patrons had the option of submitting their requests through the tablet, with a notice that anything they wrote could be monitored by both APDS and the DOC, or mailing their request to the library.

Library staff used the software Airtable to keep reference and book requests organized. For reference questions, Airtable had a useful feature that allowed a finished reference response PDF to be uploaded. As the popularity of reference requests increased, the service was creating more work than the libraries had capacity to handle. Thankfully, PLSN was able to connect the libraries with volunteers within the profession. Volunteers were sent one information request per week without any identifying information and were asked to send a PDF of the response and fill all but the personal information into a form letter. After reviewing the response, a library staff person then filled out the personal information and uploaded it to Airtable along with the PDF and the response was then ready to be printed and mailed to the patron.

Prison Library Service

The local prison in Queens, Queensboro Correctional Facility, was locked down in late March or early April 2020 (Gross, 2020). Queens Public Library was unable to continue in-person workshops. In the confusion following the early pandemic, the amount of people held at

Queensboro fluctuated and whether they were work release, general population, or not at the end of their sentence also fluctuated. Library staff could not conduct in-person workshops, but staff attempted to create resumes over email, through prison staff. Library staff attended as many virtual meetings with the leadership at the facility as possible, to find out the needs of the facility and its population.

Library Services for People on Probation

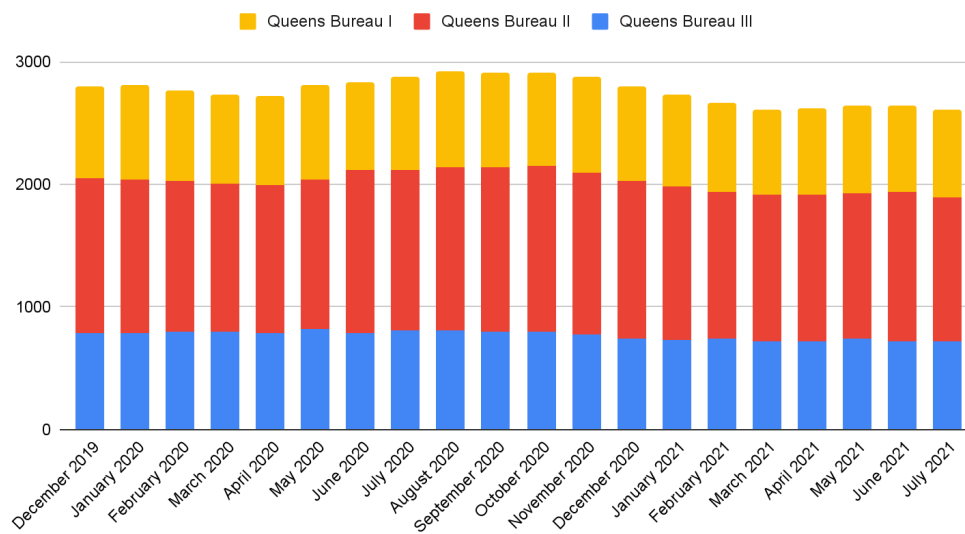
Library services for people on probation were heavily curtailed by the pandemic. By March 2020, probation offices were closed and staff communicated with participants by phone or in the field (Maisel, 2020; NYC Probation, 2020). Possibly because of the decentralized nature of probation during the pandemic, library staff were not able to create services or programs focused on this population.

Library Services for People on Parole

Parole began restricting office visits in March or April of 2020 (New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, n.d.). Although the offices were closed, the number of people on parole in the Queens bureaus did not fluctuate greatly. As can be seen in Figure 2, the population was 2,020 in December 2019; 2,051 in June 2020; and 1,930 in February 2021.

Figure 2

total parole populations in Queens: December 2019 - July 2021



Almost immediately, Queens Public Library knew it wanted to continue programs and services with the parole offices, even if the programs and services needed to be changed because of new parole office or library requirements. In April 2020, the Director of Community Engagement, Kim McNeil Capers, was in discussions with staff at the parole office. Capers asked what kind of virtual programming people on parole would be interested in. Parole staff informed her that any programming would be difficult for people on parole to engage with, because of a lack of technology devices and skills.

This conversation changed Queens Public Library's way of thinking about how to assist people on parole. In May 2020, library staff began work on a grant application to receive funding for a "mobile device for people on parole" pilot program. This program became Queens Public Library's Immediate Access: Technology Reentry program, funded by a CARES Act grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services. Queens Public Library conceptualized this program as providing technology *and* technology assistance to people on parole. Library staff wanted to provide people on parole with technology, but were also adamant that the program needed the staff to be able to give the participants instruction on how to use the technology in the pandemic virtual world, as well.

At the beginning of and throughout the Immediate Access program, library staff and the grant partner, Queens Defenders, had discussions about the best ways to provide this service. One initial discussion was whether to provide smartphones, tablets, or laptops. Library staff settled on phones for a few reasons: 1) most people own and use a phone, whether or not they also own a tablet or a laptop, 2) phones might be easier to take care of in a group living situation because they are smaller and have less equipment associated with them (no big chargers, bags, etc), and 3) although phones can be harder to use than a laptop, the program was providing staff who could help with the technological aspects. Another initial discussion was how many staff would be needed for this program. Library staff initially settled on three part-time staff, one to project manage and two to interact with participants. However, a fourth part-time position was created after a year of the program. Library staff chose a participant cohort size of 25 and a program length of 5 months.

Beyond the Immediate Access program, Queens Public Library also created virtual programming for people who were recently released from prison or jail. The library presented 17 virtual programs in 2020 and 2021 that were specifically geared toward recently-incarcerated people. These programs spoke on topics like housing, education, entrepreneurship, mental health, financial literacy, and the meaning of justice. The library also worked with the prison to show previously-recorded programs at the prison.

CHANGES IN PARTICIPANT NEEDS AND BEHAVIORS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Initially, because Library Hub was a service that patrons were not familiar with, a lot of the first requests were taken straight from the examples provided in our instructions. Eventually, as word of the service spread through the facilities, the nature of the requests evolved. Also, the frequency and amount of requests staff received surpassed that of previous in-person requests. The fact that patrons could submit their request through the tablets, instead of waiting to see library staff in person or only learning about the service in conversation, increased the amount of requests.

The fast DOC roll-out of these tablets was a response to the lack of in-person services available because of the pandemic. Library Hub's reference service started filling those gaps and the libraries received a lot of reentry-related requests. Additionally, library staff saw an uptick of people requesting information on mental health topics such as depression and anxiety. It is hard to know whether the uptick in requests about mental health resources had to do with the lack of effective resources at these facilities during this time, or because people felt more comfortable requesting these resources through the intermediary of technology and not face to face, or because

the pandemic conditions within the jails exacerbated people's health. Another topic that was notably more frequently requested than in the past was information on LGBTQ+ resources, which people were not necessarily as comfortable requesting in person.

Surprisingly to library staff, the separation inherent in a digital interface perhaps opened a space for people to be vulnerable in ways they often couldn't be in person. Both libraries work primarily with men, who oftentimes try to maintain a tough exterior to survive in a jail environment. Through the tablets, some of the patrons, male and female, shared their struggles of being incarcerated during the pandemic or opened up about past trauma. Other information needs were not that different from the requests received before the pandemic. However, it was clear that our patrons' information seeking behavior was heavily impacted by the general lack of available resources.

As for Immediate Access, when working with people on parole or soon to be released from prison, library staff did not notice any shifts in information-seeking behavior. People still preferred to communicate via phone or, to a lesser degree, text or were required to communicate through correctional staff. Library staff also did not notice any changes in information sought. There was still a heavy need for technology assistance, state IDs, stable housing, and jobs. Figure 3 is a word cloud of any item or assistance asked for by participants in the Immediate Access program for the August to December 2020 session.

Figure 3

Participants on parole requests from August to December 2020



Note. A request for smartphones is not included in the word cloud, because participants were automatically given smartphones.

FINDINGS

Insights

One insight for Library Hub was that the most basic function of the library was the most sought after. Libraries are often looking to see how they can expand their offerings, but in this scenario, working on accessing books was what people spent most of their time on in Library Hub. People articulated a deep value in access to books to a surprising degree. Unfortunately, it was also by far the most time consuming aspect of Library Hub. Providing the books through Mail-a-Book/BookMatch also helped library staff create a more full picture of the types of books that people are interested in reading, because people were selecting their books based on their interest, instead of the library's provided collection. Additionally, despite the faceless nature of communication through the tablets, people still appreciated feeling heard. There was still a humanizing aspect to Library Hub communications. One of the themes evident from survey responses was that these services made patrons feel not forgotten.

For the work with recently released people, one insight that library staff discovered is that staff time is the most heavily utilized resource. Immediate Access participants appreciated the \$50 incentives, the job skills training, and the unlimited data, but the portion of the program that received the most positive feedback was the staff time and staff ability to research and connect participants with community resources. Even the provided phone, which was the linchpin of the program, was not as appreciated as the staff time. After several months of working in the program, library staff began to see the phone as a vehicle to provide connections to Immediate Access staff and other non-profits, rather than the main portion of the program. The phone was extremely important, of course, because otherwise library staff might not have a reliable connection with a participant, but the phone was more of a tool to accomplish other goals, than the goal in itself.

Another insight that library staff learned was that the stronger our pre-pandemic relationships were with correctional staff, the more likely a program was to be successful during the pandemic. The libraries were able to create Immediate Access and Library Hub partly because of the strong relationships library staff had with correctional staff within the parole office and at Rikers. These strong relationships allowed for quicker, more direct communication and afforded a trust to speak frankly about what was needed and what was able to be offered.

Best Practices

Some best practices that library staff would recommend for creating similar tablet services or technology reentry services are:

- Tailor your offerings carefully to staff capacity and think through ways to scale back. Appropriate staffing is important. For Immediate Access, a caseload of about eight participants per part-time staff member worked.
- Have clear instructions for participants. New technology can be challenging for some people. If library staff can access the equipment that will be used by participants, consider making a video to walk users through how to access different functions.
- Provide space for feedback. There are so many insights to be gained by politely asking for feedback, and people feel respected when they feel heard.

- Have clear policies and take the time to explain them. People can be quite understanding when we are able to take the time to explain policies or changes.
- Meeting people where they are. Flexibility can be key. People have a lot going on in their lives, people on parole sometimes even more so because of requirements for training or curfews set by their parole officer.
- Don't forget that this kind of work can be emotionally laborious. If there is capacity, provide some staff training or resources on dealing with the emotional aspects of this work. Also, library staff found that giving each other space to vent and ask for advice was incredibly helpful.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, the libraries will change their programs to reflect the current public health situations surrounding COVID-19. For example, Rikers Island and the libraries are allowing for more in-person programming, which means library staff will stop our BookMatch program and move back to the more efficient rolling cart library service. Library staff will also continue to expand the virtual program offerings, as it allows the libraries to provide consistent programming that reaches exponentially more people than in-person programming. However, virtual programming should supplement, not replace in-person programming. Library staff will also provide a modified version of Ask a Librarian! Additionally, for the Immediate Access program, library staff will encourage more in-person interaction if desired by the participant or by staff. The libraries will also keep up-to-date with the changing offerings of local non-profits and other resource organizations.

Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Public Library's pandemic-created correctional programs and services do not look like the programs and services from before the pandemic. After two years of pandemic, the programs and services do not even look like they did at the beginning of COVID-19. The main core of these programs are flexible enough that they can be provided in times of social distancing or in times of in-person social connection; they also can be provided at libraries much different from ours. If your library directs staff time toward assisting these populations, creates connections with correctional and non-profit organizations, and keeps a flexible attitude, you can use these programs as a foundation for creating your own responsive programs and services.

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