



The Third 100 Days

Vaughan Public Libraries Ongoing Response to COVID-19

January 13, 2021



Rose Savage Chair, Vaughan Public Library Board

"Vaughan Public Libraries continues to evolve to ensure that we provide you with superior access to our outstanding collection and high-quality programming. I am proud to share our response with you in this report, *The Third 100 Days: Vaughan Public Libraries Ongoing Response to COVID-19*, and to reassure you that we will always be here for our community."

Vaughan Public Libraries closed its doors on March 15, 2020 and pivoted to a digital delivery model. Since that date some branches have reopened, and the physical collection has been made accessible to all. Along the way, many innovations and successes have been catalogued. What follows is a summary of days 201 – 300 of VPL's response.



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From December 14, we are your **Lockdown Library!**



We're here for you during the lockdown, whether you want a curbside pickup or to enjoy our digital library.

Find out what's available!



Access to Branches and New Restrictions

Resource Libraries reopened after Labour Day and when York Region moved into a modified Stage 2 and subsequently Red Level, they remained so with strict safety procedures in place. The three open branches operated with a customer capacity limit of 50, at which point further customer entry was only allowed as users left. Standard safety protocols, including mask wearing, social distancing and no outside food and drink, were enforced by staff and explained to customers upon entry.

Upon announcement of York Region's move into the Province's lockdown phase (Grey Level), all staff were informed that as of Monday, December 14, VPL would move into Modified Stage 4 of its Recovery Strategy. Customers were notified of the changes on the same day through the VPL website, social media and a dedicated eblast, as well as signage at all locations. VPL's cautious approach has meant that the required changes only affected the three Resource Libraries that had reopened in early September. All other branches remained closed, but with curbside pickup service in place. Bathurst Clark Resource Library, Civic Centre Resource Library and Pierre Berton Resource Library remained open to the public, but with extensive modifications in place. Customers were only allowed into the area directly inside the main entrance, and there was a strict occupancy limit of 10. In this area, customers could pick up holds, use public computers for a maximum of 15 minutes or apply for a library card. Some other limited services were available with staff assistance, including photocopying and email to print.

The subsequent Provincial lockdown included regulations that defined additional restrictions and as of December 26, all locations are now offering touchless curbside pickup only. This migration to curbside pick up as the only option to borrowing library materials was embraced by the community. In the first 6 days of January under this more restrictive lockdown phase, 2,473 customers visited VPL locations and, using curbside pick up, borrowed 12,239 items.

In the early days of the pandemic, VPL created a robust full-service digital library, with extensive online programs and enhanced digital collections. This remains in place and allows for a strong continuance of service delivery during the current restrictions. Existing safety measures also make the physical collection accessible at all ten branches through curbside or hold pickup. Part of the joy of libraries is the ability to browse and discover the unexpected. While this may not be physically possible at this time, staff are able to offer a personalized service and curate items for customers. The curbside pickup service includes a form that customers can complete to provide direction on the items they are looking for, and staff use this information to create a custom package for pickup. Board book bundles are also available at all locations. These bags contain a mixture of books for reading to children ages infant through to kindergarten. Both services continue to be heavily promoted throughout the lockdown period.

A Collection in High Demand

January 9, 2021 marks the 300th day of VPL's new operational model, which has evolved since libraries initially closed on March 15. Since then over 730,000 items have been borrowed via curbside pickup and from Resource Libraries while they were open. During this time the VPL website has received just shy of one million page views, and aside from the homepage its most popular destinations are the digital downloads home page (60,500 views), curbside pickup (56,000 views) and VPL @ Home (38,000 views).

In the past 300 days, 6,761 customers have registered on library platforms that enable digital downloads of e-books, e-audiobooks, movies and more. A total of 254,000 items have been borrowed from Hoopla and Overdrive – the two most popular platforms for e-books, e-audiobooks and e-videos available to customers. Hoopla experienced an almost 300% jump in borrowing once the Pandemic hit, while Overdrive borrowing has increased by 50%. 24,236 digital magazines have been borrowed by customers using RBDigital, and due to growing demand, the online magazine collection will be increased to include 3,700 titles in January. Use of Naxos Music Library, containing over 1.6 million streaming audio tracks of classical, jazz, world and folk music has been accessed 1,090 times and Pressreader, which provides access to digital versions of 4,000 newspapers from 100 countries in 60 languages, was consulted 47,000 times.

In the past 100 days, the digital downloads section of the VPL website has been accessed over 15,500 times and the databases homepage has been accessed over 4,700 times. The most popular resources have been Tumblebooks (online books for children), Brainfuse (a newly acquired virtual tutoring and learning resources) and Lynda.com (online learning classes).



Virtual Programming

VPL introduced online programming soon after doors closed in March, and this has adapted to customer needs and tweaked to deliver the topics that they want. In fact, the demand for online programming has been so strong that it will continue in some form, even after in-person events can resume.

VPL online programming continues to entertain customers of all ages, and sessions comprise a mixture of staff-led programs and those led by guest speakers. An average week in December saw author Rukhsana Khan share her stories from her childhood and show children and parents how this inspired her own writings on poverty, immigration and family. Later that week, Chef Maxine Knight from the York Region Food Network took customers on a journey of food, history, culture and tradition, highlighting a foundational dish from her Barbadian culture. These guest speaker activities are all in addition to VPL-led virtual storytimes conducted in English, French and Mandarin, STEAM programming, book clubs, writers' rooms and other weekly programs and videos. It is anticipated that in-library programming will continue to be suspended for many months and not be reintroduced until safe to gather in groups again.

VPL's flagship programs continue to be extremely successful. The Halloween Family Party, hosted via Zoom, was joined by 60 families, with a total attendance of 160 people! This event included Halloween jokes, STEAM activities, scary stories, and trivia. Families were highly engaged and over 10 of them contacted staff to provide positive feedback. One customer said: "Thank you for hosting the online party - it was seriously the most fun I've seen my daughter have during an online party through the whole pandemic! She had a blast, which made me, as her mom, so happy!" Another said: "Thank you to you and the team at VPL who took the time to put this wonderful event together. We had a lot of fun...and did the experiments multiple times,". Other flagship programs included a virtual author visit from Jennifer Robson and a sold-out family magic night attended by 264 people.



Virtual Programming



During the holiday season VPL created a lineup of programs to lift spirits and give back to the community. Customers were encouraged to donate non-perishable food items as part of the annual Food Drive and VPL took part in a Toy Drive in partnership with the City of Vaughan. Staff also coordinated the creation of greeting cards for local seniors and hosted an online session to assist customers with the process. This complemented outreach activities focused on providing items to seniors in long-term care residences. For those looking to bring some peace and joy to their own lives, a number of virtual sessions were available, including the ability to remotely design a wooden ornament and then pick up the final creation via curbside, an introduction to some great books for gifting, and instructional videos on how to gift wrap practically anything.

Taking an average week in November, there were 1,711 computer accesses of VPL programs and videos posted for that week. This number is solely for log-ons and will be higher due to multiple viewers in each computer session. Programs also receive some international visitors, and the VPL website is used as a resource for people outside of Vaughan. Since closure, the site has received international visitors from 159 countries, with at least 10 visitors from 82 countries and at least 100 visitors from 33 countries! The countries beyond Canada, from which the VPL website was accessed most frequently in descending order are: United States, India, United Kingdom, China, Australia, Germany, France, South Korea, Spain, Brazil, Philippines, Netherlands and Israel. VPL's global reach is evident.

Innovations

Resource libraries were open for a little over three and a half months before a provincial lockdown required them to close again. During this time staff were required to be innovative with their use of our spaces and customers were exposed to changes in policy and technology aimed at improving safety. One important innovation upon reopening was touchless checkout, where customers were able to use self-check machines to borrow items - scanning and receiving an emailed receipt without any need to touch a screen. This method will replace interactions with staff for the significant future, which means items will no longer be passed back and forth to facilitate borrowing. The move to touchless checkout is a result of VPL's safety audit in response to COVID-19 and further highlights a commitment to staff and customer safety.



The delivery of information assistance continues to evolve in response to customer needs, with the most recent achievement of note being the successful implementation of a Virtual Information Desk including live chat service, which allows customers to directly converse with staff in real time. The response from the public has been enthusiastic and the following is a sample of the comments received: "I was very impressed with how easy chat was to use and how quickly my problem was resolved. Thank you!"; "Excellent service!!"; "Wow! so helpful and fast"; "Best experience with live chat so far! Got answers to all questions - quick and easy - very helpful!" and; "Super helpful and friendly". Live chat is visible as an interactive pop-up icon in the bottom right corner of the VPL website.

Innovation also extends to outreach programs. VPL was the recipient of a Federal Government grant allowing for the purchase of MiFi portable wifi hotspots as part of the program 'Connecting Vaughan Seniors with Information and Loved Ones Through Technology'. These devices will be distributed to seniors' residences throughout the City and will provide internet access that allow our older customers to browse online as well as communicate with friends and family.



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VPL's What's On magazine is now made available monthly in digital format and features digital links to all programs and services for ease of use. This publication is hosted on the VPL website and distributed to customers via email and social media. VPL has also developed an online Welcome Brochure that is distributed to new customers via email once they register for a library card. This brochure is also hyperlinked to introduce them to parts of the website that may be of interest to them.



While these changes are visible to customers, there are a number that are not, but which will have a significant and positive impact on staff. The requirement to adapt library services in the past six months has accelerated several process improvements and the embrace of technology within the organization. Laptops have replaced staff desktops, and more flexible work arrangements will be incorporated on an ongoing basis, with some staff working partially from home. Additionally, a greater proportion of collection funds has been allocated to digital resources. These changes and others have been presented to staff in a new strategic positioning paper *Advancing VPL: The New Normal* and has been reviewed at a staff Town Hall.

Staff Engagement

VPL continues to update its recovery strategy to adapt to the changing requirements of the Province and York Region Public Health, to maintain the high levels of safety that have been exhibited to date. Part of this recovery strategy includes consideration for staff interaction, and as a result, the annual Staff Appreciation event was recreated and instead, staff gathered for an online celebration attended by VPL Board Trustees to recognize the remarkable achievements of their colleagues, service date anniversaries, and the presentation of the Annual Award of Excellence. This has been a remarkably challenging year for staff, but their response and commitment has been extraordinary, and this event provided an opportunity to reflect on that.

Everyone in the organization has worked incredibly hard and VPL continues to prioritize staff engagement to ensure a robust workforce that is recognized, respected and valued. In early December all staff attended the fourth virtual interactive staff training sessions on resiliency and positivity. At these Zoom seminars, staff learned how to reframe their experiences to encourage a more optimistic approach to problems and recognize their achievements. This was further strengthened during breakout sessions where staff were encouraged to share their experiences with colleagues, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

Extensive and frequent communication continues with staff through monthly virtual Town Halls and frequent Updates from the CEO (43 to date) to ensure all are well informed. Throughout late Summer and into the Fall, VPL recalled 65% of the 162 staff members who were laid off as demand for services increased. Frequent communication continues with colleagues still not back in the workplace as we look forward to their return.



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COVID 19 Cases at VPL

Two staff members at VPL contracted COVID-19 from interactions outside the workplace in the Fall and have fully recovered. In both cases, there was no transmission within the workplace or risk to the general public. The first positive case was received on Tuesday, October 6. As a precaution, VPL immediately closed and thoroughly disinfected both locations where the staff member had worked. Customers were informed of the closure and the reason for it via social media and the VPL website. VPL's Live Chat team were also briefed, as was Access Vaughan. Public response has been sympathetic, but also appreciative of the safety protocols that have been put in place for the wellbeing of all.

Two employees deemed as close contacts isolated as a precautionary measure. The second case amongst staff was flagged on November 10. The employee's last shift was eight days prior on November 2, and during the shift all safety protocols were observed and no one else was within close contact.



Provincial Visits

In October Vaughan Public Libraries was pleased to host the Honourable Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, and MPP for King-Vaughan. Minister Lecce used the Maple Library to announce the hiring of more teachers and followed this with a virtual press conference. Then, on Monday, November 30 VPL hosted the Premier of Ontario, Doug Ford, former Minister of Finance, Rod Phillips, and Minister of Education, Stephen Lecce. The Premier and Ministers were joined by Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua for a virtual announcement and press conference introducing additional support for families to cover education-related expenses. Both Premier Ford and the Ministers were effusive in their praise for VPL and the Civic Centre Resource Library, which Premier Ford

described as "beautiful." Minister Lecce added "Its amazing to be hosting this announcement in Vaughan at the very modern and wonderful Civic Centre Resource Library. Thanks to Vaughan Libraries for hosting and for everything they are doing to support families, and particularly students, during the Pandemic – we are very grateful for your leadership."

In December the Vaughan Public Library Board approved the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan. This new plan outlines VPL's direction and is divided into three areas: enrich people, inspire opportunities and transform community, with each of these categories divided into a number of objectives that will support VPL's growth and value to the community. This Strategic Plan is the result of extensive public and staff consultation, and hard work from the planning team, Executive Management Team and the Board of Trustees.

Fiscal Impact

As highlighted in previous 100 Days reports, the closure of locations and staffing reductions resulted in significant fiscal savings of approximately \$3.4 Million in 2020. In addition to this savings, VPL was successful in the application for a Canadian Emergency Wage Subsidy of approximately \$4.1 Million cumulative for the period March – December 2020.

For more information and news about Vaughan Public Libraries, visit us online at www.vaughanpl.info

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