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# Despite Pandemic, Library Circulation Continues to Climb

by Jack Lakowsky

East Hampton Public Library Director Ellen Paul said Monday the library is still on track to exceed last year's checkout rate, despite the library's lengthy closure between mid-March and July 6.

Paul told the *Rivereast* that the library was originally predicted to reach 100,000 items checked out this year, but COVID-19 disrupted this steady traffic flow.

"Despite being closed for more than three months, we still did more than 82,500 checkouts between June 2019 and July 2020," said Paul.

Paul said this is still an increase over checkout rates for the 2018-19 fiscal year, which saw 70,000 items loaned out.

Paul said e-book borrowing has also increased by almost double.

The library's children's programs and activities also saw an increase in participation in 2019-20. Even with the months-long closing, Paul said about 7,500 attended the library's programs, compared to about 5,900 the prior year, a difference of 1,600 attendees.

"Imagine what we'd have done if we were open the entire year," said Paul. "Imagine if we'd been able to have summer reading as planned."

Paul said the number of children who participated in the library's summer reading program was down to about 200 this year, compared to 400 last year.

"We knew we wouldn't sustain 400 this year," said Paul. "We're proud of 200, at this point."

Paul said, although the number of participants may have decreased, actual participation rates increased. The group was smaller, but more engaged, she said. Paul explained that, last year, 55% of the 400 children returned for three consecutive weeks. This year, participation was more consistent, with that figure rising to about 70%.

The library partnered with Belltown's Epoch Arts to create for summer reading participants eight serialized short films, one for each week of the summer reading program. The one-act shows were tailored to this year's theme of "A Hero's Journey." As kids met their weekly reading goals, they unlocked episodes in the story to be viewed online.

"Hopefully, next year, we're able to boost those numbers back up," said Paul.

Paul said the library's momentum continued because it was propelled by years of previous work, and therefore able to withstand the statewide shutdown started in March through executive order by Gov. Ned Lamont. The shutdown was initiated to combat the spread of COVID-19.

Paul said, over the past few years, improvements have been made to the library building, its services and collections. Paul said the community is seeing returns on its investment. Paul said patrons who hadn't visited the library in years have once again become regular visitors.

"People are recognizing that we're an integral part of the community," said Paul. "And that we're here for them."

Library-goers have been diligent about COVID prevention protocols, Paul said.

Cyndi Shirshac, vice chairperson of East Hampton's Library Advisory Board, said instilling these safety rules was the board's first priority. Shirshac said the board ensured safety measures were in place and well-known to staff before the library reopened.

"Our main concern was safety for staff, safety for patrons, and having enough PPE and sanitizer," said Shirshac.

Shirshac said that, once the "hurdle" of safety was dealt with, library staff and the board worked on delivery of materials, specifically offering curbside pickup from an outdoor bookrack.

Shirshac said finding the best ways to reintroduce the library's activities and programs through streaming and platforms like Zoom will be the board's next tackling.

"We already know that a benefit of streaming is that you can reach a larger audience," said Shirshac. "But we're also aware that people may be burnt out from their computers, so we're trying to work with that, too."

Both Paul and Shirshac commended library staff for their efforts. Paul was on family leave while her staff retrofitted the library and worked

with town officials to ensure the library was ready to reopen promptly, and safely.

"I can't say enough about how they picked up the ball and ran with it," said Shirshac. "Its not in their job description to be on the front lines of [a pandemic response]."

Shirshac added that Paul has also gone "above and beyond."

Paul said the library's "laser focus" has been aimed at community relations and communication.

Unlike many libraries in the state, the East Hampton library is open for browsing. Computers are also available for use, although every other device was removed to accommodate social distancing. Also, to this end, some furniture has been removed. Visitors must wear masks.

Paul said, due to reduced hours and capacity, library's traffic has yet to reach pre-pandemic checkout rates, seeing about 60 patrons per day. But she said this is rising steadily. Paul said the library saw a spike in visitations during the widespread power outages caused by Tropical Storm Isaias, jumping to about 80 per day before leveling back out as electricity was slowly restored.

Paul said reduced hours are currently the library's biggest challenge.

Paul said the library's crowd has been made up of older adults and seniors. She said she is happy to have them back, but that she also severely misses seeing children and families in the library. She said she understands this caution. As a parent to a toddler and newborn, Paul said she is only bringing her children out for absolute necessities.

Paul knows many are not yet comfortable browsing and perusing the bookshelves. Therefore, the library will continue curbside pickup service indefinitely. Curbside pickup has been popular with patrons, Paul said.

In fact, Paul said she and library staff had discussed curbside pickup before the onset of the pandemic, a rare instance of COVID-19 not stalling plans but accelerating them into fruition.

Patrons can reserve items over the phone or go to the library's website. The materials will be prepared and can be picked up on a rack near the building's entrance.

"We're working on a number of things to enhance browsing for those who don't want to come in," said Paul.

One way of improving browsing for patrons

who want to walk the safe route can try the library's newly created "exploration kits." Staff will curate these mystery kits, whose contents will be unknown to the borrower.

"It's a great way to discover something new," said Paul.

Another new library offering is the "family fun pack." Packs are sorted in one of three categories: vacation, hobby, or esoteric. Vacation packs, for example, will be stuffed with an array of memoirs, cookbooks, and folktales, all originating from diverse cultures. Paul said these offer the enrichment of learning about a new culture from the safety of the home.

Paul said these fun packs have been popular, with 30 families checking them out in three weeks. Paul said, given their popularity, they are likely to remain a permanent offer.

The library, Paul said, has plans to bring back its popular weekly program, "baby-rhyme time" through an online, remote platform. Paul said this program was sidelined due to the pandemic, and that between 30 and 40 people take part each week. To celebrate the program's return, Paul said the library is planning to host a diaper drive sometime in September.

Along with returning programs, Paul hopes to in September expand the library's schedule to normal hours. Paul guessed this could happen sometime around Labor Day, but that the ever-changing pandemic situation makes any future planning tenuous.

However, despite the uncertainties of the COVID-19 era, Paul said the Library Advisory Board will continue with plans it developed in response to a strategic planning survey which was issued to the public at the beginning of the year.

"The community is going to see a lot of their thoughts in the plan," said Paul.

The board, Paul said, will present its final draft of the plan to the Town Council at its Sept. 22 meeting.

## Old Home Days Items Available

Even though East Hampton Old Home Days was canceled this year, organizers are selling 2020 commemorative merchandise to help fund next year's "glorious celebration."

Items include various styles of T-shirts, a mug, tote, leggings, sweatshirt, tank top or baby onesie. Order by visiting [ehohd.org/ohd-store](http://ehohd.org/ohd-store), and use the promo code OHD2020 for free shipping for a limited time. Items can also be ordered by calling Pam Joslyn at 860-294-4845. Items available through Aug. 31.

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