

# Pandemic Puts Libraries in the Forefront as Public Health Partners

*With social workers and blood pressure screenings, Long Island library becomes ‘that community center that libraries are striving to be.’*

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## A quick note...

*As we pause and reflect, we continue to ask ourselves how we have made it through this extraordinarily challenging time, with its cascading and overwhelming stresses, multiple kinds of losses, and continuing uncertainties. Amid all of this, what have we learned about the value and practice of family and community engagement and about local, state, and national support for it? What can all who support children’s learning now do together to ensure kids catch up after years of disrupted and lost learning opportunities?*

*The pandemic has reshaped the country’s collective understanding of how, where, and from whom kids learn. It’s clear that we count on not only schools, but a much broader and equitable learning ecosystem for kids to develop, learn, and succeed in school and life. This ecosystem includes schools, but also early care and education and afterschool programs, libraries and museums, and health, mental health, and social services. The pandemic has also powerfully underscored the essential role families play in their children’s learning and the crucial importance and value for all of us across the learning ecosystem in enabling them to do so.*

*There are now thousands of inspiring stories of how educators have rallied and are creating new practices, initiatives, partnerships and connections with families and each other. They are strengthening learning, addressing gaps, and building strong, equitable, anywhere anytime learning pathways for kids from birth on.*

*As we look back on National Library Week and move ahead, we will be sharing stories of how public libraries – free, highly trusted key players in the learning ecology – are helping families access key information and essential community resources. In future pieces, we will describe ways libraries are strengthening their family and community engagement practices with help from state library agencies and national funding. We send our thanks to the libraries who have shared their stories and resources with us and welcome more.*

Tweens and teens can find more than books when they visit the Middle County Public Library in Centereach, New York, a working-class community in central Long Island.

Weekly craft workshops led by a social worker allow them a “safe place to talk” and process how their lives have been disrupted over the past two years, said Debra Hempe, the coordinator for outreach services at the library.

“So many of them had virtual learning for so long,” she said. “They were struggling.”

The arts and crafts program is just one example of how public libraries are increasingly responding not only to patrons’ search for information and a good read, but also their needs for accessible health and mental health care services.

“The current coronavirus pandemic is an excellent example of how libraries in general, and especially public libraries, can support community wellness and well-being,” Pat Young, a staff member at the South Coastal Library in Bethany Beach, Delaware, wrote in a [2020 journal article](#). The article cited libraries’ role as trusted sources of public health information as a critical part of communicating with their communities during a crisis.

That’s one reason why libraries played a significant part in [distributing COVID-19 test kits](#) when the Biden administration ramped up its testing program. They followed up with handing out [masks](#), and some libraries have hosted child vaccination clinics to spur increases in school-age children getting vaccinated and make the process as convenient as possible for families.

A [December Spectrum News article](#) featured a library-based vaccination effort in Brevard County, Florida. Cat McAndrews, a nurse with Health Hero Florida, a company that runs in-school vaccination programs, said the convenience of not having to make an appointment was a major draw for families.

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– Debra Hempe  
Middle County Public Library

But public libraries were at the forefront of responding to critical health care needs long before the pandemic. They have addressed the [nation's opioid crisis](#) by training staff members to administer Narcan, a drug that reverses an overdose. Some host [telehealth appointments](#) — especially important for patients who don't have reliable Wi-Fi at home. And others offer [fitness programs](#).

The Middle County branch exemplifies this type of approach to partnering with health agencies and serving the broader needs of families. That's because it's a [national model for Family Place Libraries](#) — a long-running initiative that features trained staff members, specially designed play spaces for children, and parent-child workshops where parents can interact with each other and learn about other community resources available.

The arts and crafts workshops — one for students in grades 4-6 and another for 7th-12th graders — grew out of the library's partnership with Family Service League, a social service agency in Suffolk County, which includes Centereach.



*A father and toddler participating in the Middle County Public Library's parent-child workshop*

“People were hesitant to go to a clinic or mental health provider,” said Kristen Todd-Wurm, the coordinator of early childhood services at the Middle County Library and national coordinator of Family Place Libraries. “They felt less stigmatized to talk to a counselor at the library. They could just be here for a book.”

Community partnerships extend to physical health services as well. Through a relationship with the local health department, Middle County Library is a “shots for tots” site, offering free childhood immunizations once a month.

Todd-Wurm said she hopes the library can eventually offer the COVID-19 vaccine as well.

“Parents say they'd rather bring their kids here for the vaccination, not a doctor's office,” she said.

The library also participates in Help Me Grow, a developmental screening program, and is one of eight pilot sites for [Healthy Libraries](#), a project based at Stony Brook University that sends social workers and public health nurses into libraries to conduct blood pressure screenings and provide information on nutrition and other aspects of healthy living. The library also loans at-home blood pressure kits.

Blood pressure screenings are “an icebreaker for people,” Hempe said. They'll sit down to get their blood pressure taken and in the process, the nurses can find out whether they have a primary care doctor or need insurance.

The array of health- and mental health-related services at the Middle County library are especially meaningful for the culturally diverse community in Suffolk County, home to many essential workers.

Parents “had to go to work even if their kids were home on virtual school,” said Todd-Wurm. “All of this helps us become that community center that libraries are striving to be.”

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– Kristen Todd-Wurm,  
Middle County Public Library

*Staff members from Help Me Grow Long Island and the Middle County Public Library run 'Books Balls and Blocks,' a program to promote developmental screenings for young children.*



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