

STRATHCONA COUNTY LIBRARY

2020 Annual Report



Strathcona County
LIBRARY

Dear Community,

2020 was not the year any of us planned.

2020 was destined to be a notable year for our library, one that saw us welcoming Sylvia Chave as our first Musician in Residence in the spring, and celebrating our 10th Anniversary of residence within the Strathcona County Community Centre in the fall.

Instead, we changed how we offered our services and programs to support Strathcona County residents facing urgent COVID-19 pandemic needs.

While health restrictions in 2020 required us to close, then open, then close to the public, we took opportunities to re-think our spaces and reinvent our delivery methods. We are proud to say that through it all, we continued to provide services that we know were a lifeline to some and a support for many in our community.

We adapted to communicating online and by phone, offered more digital collections, moved our programming online, and stepped up our collaboration with County initiatives that were already underway to reach out to residents.

In 2020, we had also planned a large-scale community engagement project, inviting residents to help us identify library priorities—to address community needs now and in the coming years. When the pandemic struck, we knew this project was happening at the perfect time to tell us how the library could help our community weather the impacts of COVID-19. Our engagement project led us to people who needed our immediate support as well as to many great ideas that will inform our plans for the future.

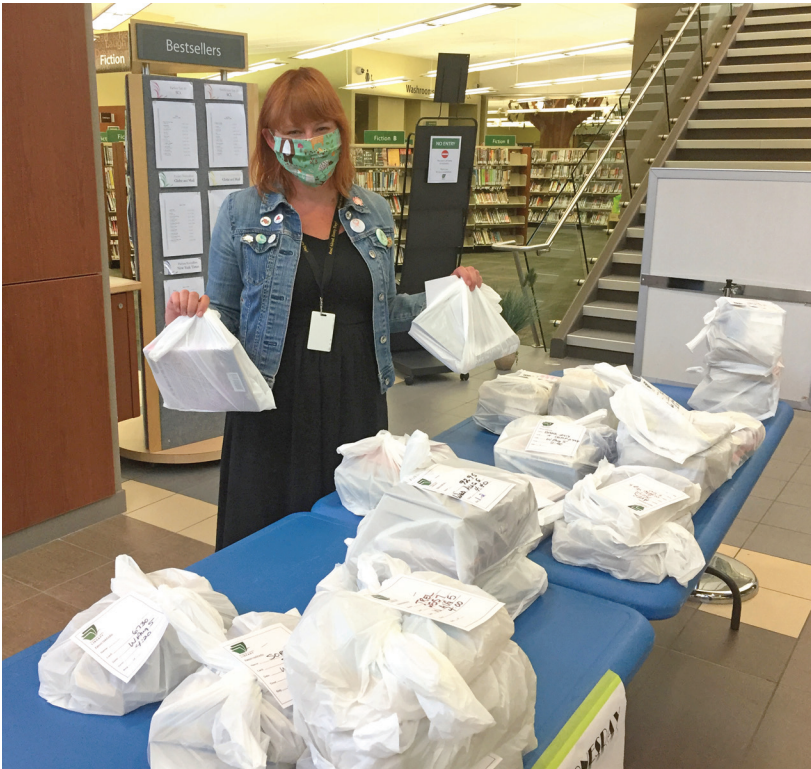
Read on for details about some of the innovative ways that our staff connected with County residents. We are so proud to share with you some of the messages we received, telling us how the library improved their quality of life in such an unprecedented year.

Sharon Siga, CEO
Meagan Olive, Board Chair

Land acknowledgement

We acknowledge that we are on Treaty 6 and Métis Nation Region 4 lands, a traditional meeting ground, gathering place and travelling route for centuries of peoples whose histories and cultures continue to inform our community. We dedicate ourselves to working together in the spirit of partnership, reconciliation, and collaboration.

“ ... Being able to pick up new books during Covid was life saving. Literally... the ease for getting new books, the online booking tool ... love all of that. But especially how [library staff] still came to work to ensure their community had access to beloved books. ”



Community Needs Identified

The library’s public engagement project identified urgent community needs, and then used the information to change our programs and services. This information also determined our priorities for library services for 2021-22, and our Board and staff developed our new strategic plan focused on just these crucial pandemic years.

Category of Need	Description
Mental Health Challenges	Need for awareness, access and activities that support mental health.
Financial Challenges	Need for affordable services, especially for struggling seniors, families and job-seekers.
Educational Challenges	Need for affordable and accessible educational resources, support to build reading and online learning skills.
Technology Access and Digital Literacy	Need for reliable and affordable high-speed internet access, digital devices, and support to build digital literacy skills.
Diversity and Inclusion	Need for support for and celebration of diversity including factors such age, gender, sexual orientation, ability, race, religion, and socio-economic status.
Public Spaces	Need for spaces to work, study, access learning and support services from a distance, and to connect with other people and places as soon as health restrictions allow.
Recreation	Need for activities that spark joy, creativity and fun.

Please see our website for details of the community needs assessment and our 2021-2022 Plan of Service.

“...There are very few in person, indoor programs running right now for my son to join and we’re hesitant to get him to join them anyways because of all his health issues. So instead, [he] is tuning into all the library programs he can.... Best of all, they are free because heaven knows all his medical treatment right now is not cheap.”

Here’s How We Responded

WE SUPPORTED HEALTH & WELLNESS

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut our doors to the public, the library explored and innovated to maintain services and relationships.

- In the early days, we focused on increasing digital content and launching online programs.
- Once health restrictions eased, we offered contact-free holds pickup to unite people with the physical materials they had missed while isolated.
- We reached out to seniors, families and others who we knew to be feeling the impacts of isolation, to check on them and help them connect to library resources.
- We worked with our many County Social Framework partners to help people find and access community support services.
- When libraries were shut again in December, we added an online reservation system to enable self-booking for holds pickup appointments. This and a few other changes helped us to reduce both wait times and anxiety levels for patrons.

WE SUPPORTED FINANCIAL SECURITY

Library cards have been free to County residents since 2016, and in June 2020, the Library Board voted to stop charging overdue fees for late materials, to ease financial burdens.

- We extended due dates and launched an email newsletter to help library cardholders keep track of changing restrictions and services, and to alert them to free resources.
- We provided recently-weeded books and movies free for pickup outside our doors.
- We introduced new digital resources like **Creativebug**, for crafting ideas and instruction, and **A to Z World Food**, for free cooking inspiration.
- We worked with our vendors to extend access to resources like **Ancestry** for genealogy research, and **AllData**, for vehicle repairs. These resources were transitioned to be accessible for at-home use.
- We ran career-related workshops online and continued to offer phone-based access to local resume tutors.

WE SUPPORTED EDUCATION & LEARNING

Library staff reached out to schools, homeschool families and other learning organizations to offer digital devices and other learning supports.

- We switched to virtual visits to elementary classes in Sherwood Park.
- In rural schools, our Bookmobile partnered with primary grade teachers to offer Squiggle Park to their classes, a Canadian-developed online educational game that helps new and reluctant readers to build literacy skills through play.
- We added Brainfuse, an online resource for both K-12 curriculum-based homework help and for career help, including access to live homework and resume tutors.
- We moved our summer reading games to Beanstack, an online portal where patrons of all ages can read to earn points and badges, take part in reading challenges, and enter for prize draws.
- In June, we staffed an outside table to support families picking up Grade 1 Reading Kits. Designed to welcome Grade 1 graduates to the library, these kits are packed with fun activities to entice very young readers to maintain their skills over the summer.
- In between closures, we booked spaces in the Strathcona County Community Centre, as well as the Colchester and South Cooking Lake community halls to provide residents with spaces to use for study and work outside of their homes.



“Thanks to you all for continuing to provide as broad a range of services and resources as has been possible - it makes a tremendous contribution to people’s connection to continuous learning, mental stimulation, and cabin-fever prevention!”

“I spoke with a patron over the phone from rural Strathcona County. She was so grateful that we are answering phones and continuing to offer help. She mentioned that she lives alone with no one to help her with her technology questions, so she was so happy to hear another voice and receive technology help!”

WE SUPPORTED TECHNOLOGY ACCESS AND DIGITAL LITERACY

The library added laptops, Chromebooks, adaptors, microphones, web cameras and more to lend, support, and develop programs for residents.

- Our staff helped many residents struggling to sign up for email accounts, set up new devices, and navigate digital resources.
- We provided technology help sessions in person while it was safe, and then switched to assistance by phone and using remote assistance software.
- We provided advice and technical support to staff and residents of Heartland Housing to help them explore mobile devices prior to making purchases.
- We invested in Zoom accounts for community leagues so they and other groups, like the Girl Guides, could host their own meetings and online events.
- Thanks to the County’s Rural Internet Access Project, residents can access high-speed internet at rural community halls. During periods when the halls were closed, Bookmobile staff made regular rounds to ensure that access remained available—from the parking lots. This unconventional method for connection ensured that patrons could stay in the safety and comfort of their vehicles to access library, learning, health and other resources.

“Your services have added so much to my quality of life during Covid and before Covid for that matter. I have a vision disability and I never get anything but great help when I call so thanks again take care and be well.”

WE SUPPORTED DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The pandemic heightened the need for library outreach services, as many residents faced extra challenges with connecting to library resources.

- In addition to providing support by phone and email, our staff made almost 200 trips, delivering 2000+ items to over 300 individuals in seniors' residences, Robin Hood residences, A Safe Place shelter and the private homes of outreach patrons with limited mobility.
- We offer two services specifically for patrons with print disabilities: CELA (Centre for Equitable Library Access) and NNELS (National Network for Equitable Library Service). Between them, they offer a variety of books, audiobooks, magazines and newspapers in accessible formats. In 2020, nearly 50 CELA patrons checked out over 3500 items with accessible audiobooks, newspapers and Braille books being the most popular formats.
- Our staff added many new resource lists to the library's online catalogue, to support exploration on topics of diversity. Book lists like **Reading the (Non-Fiction) Rainbow, Exploring Black Lives through Fiction, Anti-Racist Books and Resources and Honouring National Indigenous History Month** remain available for searching.

WE SUPPORTED ACCESS TO PUBLIC SPACES

The library reconfigured its spaces to comply with health restrictions and ensure safe visits.

- We moved collections, altered traffic flow, enhanced cleaning protocols, installed an occupancy sensor, put up plexiglass at service desks, and introduced a greeter/screener desk at our front entrance.
- We even rigged up a book cart with plexiglass to create a mobile protection unit for staff to use when helping patrons on the public floor.
- We enhanced our online public spaces, adding pandemic-specific updates, invested in new digital products, and encouraged community interactions through our online catalogue and social media channels.
- We experimented with several delivery platforms for programs, technical training, reading games, resume tutoring and more, in our quest to find a good fit for our staff and patrons.



“I visited SCL yesterday to pick up a couple of holds. It is so great to be able access the library, and the safety procedures and layout are impressive.”



“...I am totally loving all the online classes (especially through the library and the County) from the comfort and convenience of our home!”

WE SUPPORTED RECREATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

Online programs were in the planning stages for our library before the pandemic, so like many other organizations, we just leapt right in to try them.

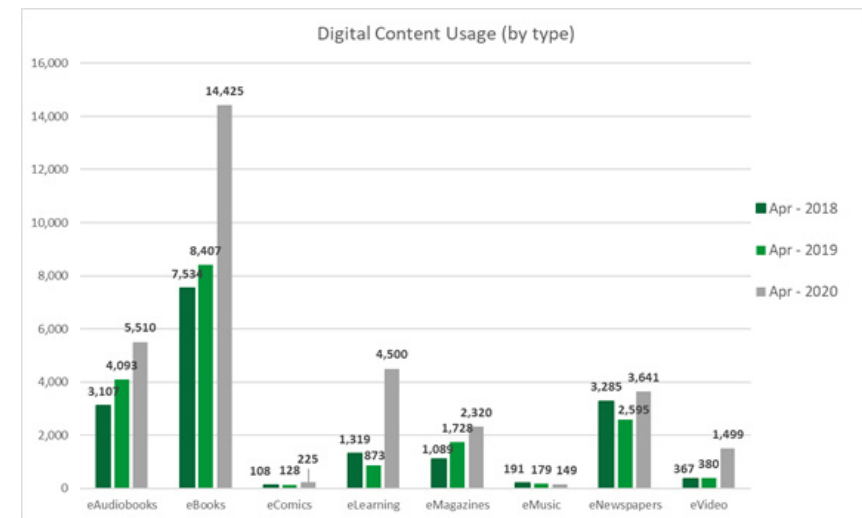
- We launched our first online program, “Storytime at Home” on April 8. These popular YouTube videos for kids and their families evolved into a pair of ongoing programs: Zoom Baby Laptime and Zoom Family Storytime.
- Not long after that, we started a weekly Facebook Live “Genealogy Chat” program for adults, then a series of online contests for teens.
- By the summer of 2020, programs like Rural Kids Can were drawing large audiences for activities like building gardens and cooking, and some of our reading clubs had made the switch to meeting over Zoom.
- Throughout the year, patrons enjoyed having access to reading and activity kits, some of which were designed to accompany our instructional programs.
- While in-person visits to the library were down (30 per cent lower in 2020), patrons continued to borrow and access materials at around 72 per cent of previous levels. Our holds shelves were often full to the point of bursting, even when we moved them to the back of the library, to give them room to expand. Although we were often restricted to offering service from behind our glass doors, they couldn’t muffle the sounds of joy from small patrons coming to pick up a box full of picture books.
- During 2020, the library offered 1389 program sessions for 29,908 participants.

Highlights from the year that was 2020

DIGITAL CONTENT SHINES

The sudden closure of the library in mid-March resulted in a large spike in the use of our digital collections. While we have had a steady and climbing core of digital users, losing access to physical collections spurred many patrons to learn how to use digital materials for both entertainment and learning. With the exception of music, all digital collections saw higher check out numbers, and there were dramatic increases in the use of eBooks (+72 per cent) and electronic learning resources like Lynda.com (+415 per cent). In the second quarter of 2020, we saw over 700 new users download or place a hold for digital materials through OverDrive, the library’s largest eBook platform. Library staff remained available for all of the library’s regular operational hours to provide help with these resources by phone, by email, and through online training sessions.

April snapshot of digital content usage by type



This shows an increase from April, 2019 to April, 2020 of:

- eAudio up 35 per cent
- eBooks up 72 per cent
- eComics up 76 per cent
- eLearning up 415 per cent
- eMagazines up 34 per cent
- eNewspapers up 40 per cent

COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS THROUGH PROGRAMS

One of the most significant impacts of the shift to online programming was the crucial connection it provided for community members at a difficult time. Some were isolated in their homes due to COVID-19, while others faced challenges such as lack of mobility, distance, timing, or just plain motivation as the pandemic dragged on. We built time into our programs for participants to chat, for kids to tell jokes, and for people to just check in with each other and share anecdotes. While many residents benefited from the content of library programs, these spontaneous interactions were just as meaningful. Our staff were moved as they observed seniors enjoying a safe laugh with friends, children excited to see their neighbours, and new moms receiving advice and much-needed reassurance from other parents.

FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY SOCIETY SPONSORS EARLY LITERACY

In 2020, the Friends of Strathcona County Library Society chose to take on the ongoing sponsorship for the library's Welcome Baby early literacy initiative, designed to support parents and caregivers of newborn babies, and to encourage early literacy skills at home during this crucial period in a child's development. The library's Welcome Baby kits provide new parents with information, tools and activities to help them connect with their babies. Each kit is packaged in an attractive reusable tote bag, and includes a board book, a booklet of rhymes and songs, and helpful tips about a new baby's learning and development. Welcome Baby kits can be picked up at the library or Bookmobile, and also at a baby's two-month immunization appointment at the Strathcona County Health Centre.

WRITER IN RESIDENCE FOSTERS CONNECTION

The library's Writer in Residence program is a shared initiative with Edmonton Public Library and St. Albert Public Library. Writers are encouraged to apply through a submission process and two individuals are chosen to help metro Edmonton area residents access local expertise and support to explore and develop their own writing skills. Conni Massing, as Regional Writer in Residence for 2020, deftly switched from in-person to online consultation and programming to keep the creative connections going for library patrons through online literary jam sessions, script workshops and more in the spring.

Fall Feast of Words is the library's annual opportunity to celebrate all things literary. When we approached local writer Katie Bickell to join us as a presenter for 2020, she shared her appreciation for the Writer in Residence program, and particularly Margaret Macpherson. In 2014, Margaret encouraged Katie, gave her feedback, taught her how to apply for grants and more. If not for the Writer in Residence program, Katie said, instead of a published novel, she would have "a few short stories in a box".



MUSICIAN IN RESIDENCE ENCOURAGES CREATIVITY

In early March, we hosted children's entertainer Sylvia Chave for a week-long Musician in Residence program. As well as children's programs and a family concert, Sylvia offered a workshop on singing with children, for parents, caregivers and educators. Sylvia's non-stop energy, warmth and enthusiasm made her a delight to be with, and inspired both patrons and staff to dance and create along with her.

RURAL KIDS GET COOKING

Among our most popular online programs in 2020 was the Bookmobile's "Rural Kids Can" series. Elyse Chatterton, a classically trained British butcher and food blogger, became a beloved repeat host. A natural teacher, Elyse Zoomed with hundreds of kids (and more than a few adults) during the year, teaching them how to make easy, delicious recipes like green onion cakes and Christmas cookies. The series attracted several regular patrons, as well as some who were new to library programs, because they were able to do so from the comfort of their own kitchens.



BOOKMOBILE SERVICE DURING COVID-19

Our award-winning Bookmobile innovates once again! During the COVID-19 pandemic, they developed book display carts with robust wheels so that collections could be rolled outside the bus in good weather, giving rural patrons the opportunity to browse our collections in safety. Through all types of weather, they offered holds pickup with a smile behind their masks.



Holds shelves were overflowing!

Strathcona County Library

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