

# Memory Institutions Think Tank on the Post-COVID-19 Landscape

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## Session 3

### BUILDING CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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*Presenter's Discussion Paper*

## **Building Capacity at the Local Level**

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*Note: The document provided by the presenter has been modified slightly to make it easier to read on the web. The meaning has not been altered.*

### Introduction

The disruption and uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 health crisis have profoundly affected GLAM institutions (or GLAMs).

For nearly a full year, we as GLAMs have struggled to adjust and adapt to the new reality. Some organizations have remained shuttered as a result of a lack of resources, expertise or capacity to transition services online. Others have been able to find creative solutions to overcome the issues and reinvent their service models from “business as normal” to “business as possible.” For those organizations whose facilities have reopened to limited capacity, audiences have returned but have done so in reduced numbers. Many institutions have succeeded in branching out into new areas of community engagement, working with existing and new partners to “do more with more.”

This paper will provide a brief overview of how local GLAM institutions are serving their communities in unique ways during this historic health crisis. Selected examples will illustrate that the goals of the 2016 [Ottawa Declaration](#) are more relevant than ever. It has been through increased collaboration between our institutions and our networks, the development of

innovative programs and services, and the adoption of technologies that GLAMS have been empowered to make significant contributions to the public good during these turbulent times.

That “necessity is the mother of invention” is a recurring theme in exploring the remarkable achievements of Canada’s galleries, libraries, archives and museums that have leveraged their unique strengths to meet the new reality. Not only have they succeeded in reinventing and retooling core services, but they also have repurposed subject expertise, resources and infrastructure to support local community partners in collaborative efforts to assist those with critical needs.

There are so many examples of how GLAMS are contributing to community resilience at the local level. Those referenced in this paper provide only a very limited glimpse of the broad range of work being done by GLAMS across the country. These examples are reflective of the inspiring efforts being made by all our colleagues to serve our communities during this extraordinary time of crisis.

### The pivot to digital

With the initial closure of our physical spaces at the outset of the pandemic, it was imperative to quickly expand our virtual service delivery options in order to continue sharing information and resources. This pivot necessitated significant service adjustments to support the unprecedented efforts to accelerate online access to research, resources, services, collections and exhibits.

In addition to offering virtual access to homegrown exhibits and art sessions, museums and galleries have steadily increased their online presence to local audiences through creative partnerships, including shared program initiatives such as Field Trip: Art Across Canada (<https://www.fieldtrip.art/>).

Individual GLAM institutions have demonstrated tremendous creativity in their online presence enhancements, including interactive podcasts, and noteworthy ingenuity, as reflected in projects such as Archives Ontario’s online jigsaw puzzles of historic Ontario scenes created to “piece together Ontario’s history.”

Virtual author readings, artists’ talks, and demonstrations are increasingly popular features on GLAM websites, as is the myriad of online programming offerings created locally. In addition to introducing an array of virtual programming, libraries and archives have worked with local partners and community organizations to develop online information resources accessible to users. Not only has the surge in digital programs and resources generated by GLAMs broadened our audiences in many ways, it has significantly expanded the range of online self-learning and home-schooling resources available to teachers and students (not to mention home-schooling parents!).

### Bridging the digital divide

Given the reduced access to physical spaces and services resulting from provincial health orders, connectivity has never been more important. The greater emphasis placed on digital service delivery has made access to the Internet critical to the work that GLAMs perform.

Creative ways of providing Internet access to community members with limited digital connectivity abound. The Toronto Public Library (TPL) developed Internet Connectivity Kits for Torontonians experiencing the greatest need for home Internet. The TPL kits comprise a laptop and a Wi-Fi hotspot with two years of unlimited data access. The Vancouver Island Regional Library has introduced Digital Care Packages, containing a range of services and technologies, such as Chromebooks, Chromecasts and Smart TVs to help combat social isolation and foster increased digital literacy in care homes and other facilities in their local service area. These initiatives, as have others with similar deliverables, were funded through donations and grants from various donor agencies, in collaboration with community partners. Some libraries, such as the Calgary Public Library, have worked with local social agencies to repurpose hardware normally used by members of the public inside community libraries.

In addition, many libraries and other GLAM institutions with physical locations adjacent to outdoor public spaces or parking areas have expanded their Wi-Fi capacity to provide external Wi-Fi 24 hours a day.

Significant strides have been made in the development of user-friendly digital content. However, despite having adequate connectivity, many of those isolated at home are without the technical skills to enable them to fully utilize the resources and tools offered online by GLAMs. Bridging this digital divide is a priority for GLAMs in order to ensure that our audiences can engage with our digital presence.

Recognition of the need to provide user support is generating new collaboration opportunities for GLAMs. As more and more community service agencies have had to rapidly move to virtual service delivery, their volunteers and staff also need training and assistance. In many communities, local librarians are assisting by providing support and expertise. Such projects include the virtual Community Technology Help Desk being established by the United Way of Greater Victoria.

Use of telephone customer service has become much more widespread as institutions take steps to further engage audiences in making use of digital resources. GLAM staff can provide one-on-one technology support to assist callers isolated at home who wish to access the many online options that are unfamiliar to them.

### Happiness and human warmth

In addition to the telephone serving as a means of providing technical support and guidance for accessing institutional resources and services, connecting by phone has enabled GLAMs to combat social isolation within their local communities. Wellness calls to seniors are being conducted by several institutions, including the Hamilton Public Library and the Toronto Public

Library. The notion of wellness calls has been embraced by many other cultural organizations. For instance, Pacific Opera Victoria staff regularly call subscribers to engage in conversations as a way of mitigating the loss of social engagement previously enjoyed through attending live performances and other in-person events that traditionally enhanced the subscriber experience.

In Cambridge, Ontario, Idea Exchange gallery staff who had experience presenting programs for seniors were assigned to make wellness calls to elderly library patrons. In Montreal, the Friends of the BAnQ are offering “Un Brin de Lecture” [a short reading] to individuals 65 and older, who can register for a 15-minute phone call with a volunteer who will read aloud from a work in a range of literary genres to provide “un moment de bonheur et de chaleur humaine” [a moment of happiness and human warmth].

### Utilization of physical spaces

While the physical access to our spaces for in-person services is still subject to many restrictions, some GLAM venues have been “seconded” to support the delivery of essential community supports.

In Halifax, public library branches have been serving as centres for community mask distribution as well as pop-up rapid testing sites. In the early stages of the pandemic in Montreal, the “grand hall” [main lobby] of BAnQ’s Grande Bibliothèque was used as a temporary shelter for the homeless. During the current lockdown, it has been designated as an essential public space to support students in need of accessible student study spaces.

Other GLAMs with large or flexible facility spaces have served as warming or cooling centres, designated locations for virtual court appearances, recording studios for local musicians to live-stream concerts, and vaccination sites, to mention just a few.

In addition to such utilization of facility spaces, existing operations have been repurposed to augment community capacity. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Toronto Public Library’s retooling of its book distribution infrastructure to provide support to the city’s food bank program further to the pandemic-related closure of over one-third of Toronto’s food banks. Library staff, space and vehicles were redeployed in support of the city’s efforts to maintain services to the most vulnerable. As it continues to support the North York Harvest Food Bank, the TPL is piloting a new service model to meet the changing needs in the community.

### The road ahead

The truth of the proverb “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” has been demonstrated again and again since March 2020. The COVID-19 experience has shone a light on GLAMs’ strengths and weaknesses, proving that those who turn to innovation in order to survive have the greatest potential to thrive.

Over the last year, we have been pushed well beyond our comfort zones as we have dealt with the uncertainty and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as I hope this paper has demonstrated, there is hope and opportunity in our future as we strive to “build back better.”

Nobody knows—or can know—where the road ahead will lead. However, it is clear that, by working together and continuing to break down silos, we can meet the challenges the lie before us.

While it is certainly true that local circumstances require different approaches, there are many benefits in sharing content, ideas and lessons learned across GLAM sectors. As a colleague so eloquently put it, “Why repeat things that don’t work?” Conversely... why not replicate things that do (work)?

Judging from the examples cited in this paper, we have much to learn from one another. As Dr. Guy Berthiaume presciently said in his remarks to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries and the Canadian Urban Libraries Council in 2017, on the topic of collaboration between galleries, libraries, archives and museums: “[...] by working together and breaking down the silos of the past, the challenges facing all of us will be met.”

In the spirit of the Ottawa Declaration, GLAMs must continue their important work by maintaining their collaborative efforts. Collaboration is key to their success, as expressed in this African proverb: “He who travels fastest travels alone, but he who travels furthest travels with others.”