



Chairwoman Shirley Tilghman
Chairman Kenneth Frazier
Governor's Restart and Recovery Commission Members

Dear Chairwoman Tilghman, Chairman Frazier and members of the Commission,

As a member of the Governor's Restart and Recovery Commission you have significant work and challenges ahead. The New Jersey library community stands ready to assist in any way we can as we move towards the safe reopening of New Jersey's libraries. Libraries will play a crucial role in the robust economic recovery New Jersey must have.

LibraryLinkNJ or LLNJ, the statewide cooperative established by statute for all NJ libraries, has taken a proactive role shaping the future by establishing the *Taskforce on Post COVID-19 Alignment, Trends and Strategies*, or TOPCATS.

TOPCATS has developed best practices and guidelines for safe, sanitary conditions for staff, patrons and library materials for when the Governor's order closing libraries is lifted. Attached please find our **Best Practices for Reopening New Jersey Libraries** document detailing the recommended phased in opening of library buildings and services mindful of staff safety and public health protections. Additional information is available at www.TOPCATSNJ.org which will serve as a resource for libraries and local decision makers in this evolving situation.

With nearly 2,600 public, academic, school and special libraries in its membership, LLNJ is best equipped to manage this initiative. TOPCATS has representatives from the New Jersey State Library (NJSL), New Jersey Library Association (NJLA), New Jersey Library Trustee Association (NJLTA), New Jersey Association of School Libraries (NJASL), municipal, county, school and academic libraries and the LLNJ Executive Board. We seek to partner with you and the Commission as we plan for the opening of libraries and our role in economic recovery.

Road to Recovery

As you may be aware, the doors to all New Jersey libraries were closed to the public by Executive Order 107 dated March 21, 2020 Section 9, paragraph H. Since that time New Jersey's library staff, both professional and support, have been serving the state's residents virtually. Borrowing of digital materials has increased in some communities by as much as 50% over last year while story times, author programs, classes and reference services have all moved online. In Middlesex County alone, over 1000 new digital library cards have been issued since our doors were closed. We think it is important for the Commission to understand that our libraries are vital parts of our communities.

When we reopen our doors we know that we will soon face strong community use of public libraries once again. Per a recent Gallop poll visiting the library was the most common cultural Americans engaged in during 2019 averaging 10.5 visits, as compared to watching a movie at the theater (5.3) attending a live sporting event (4.7) a concert or play (3.8) or visiting museums or casinos (2.5). *

Libraries serve as critical 2nd responders throughout the state. As we did during the Great Recession and in the aftermath of Super Storm Sandy, we will continue to be a crucial community resource whether we are serving our residents inside their homes or inside our buildings. A 2019 study by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development documents this by noting that during the Great Recession 10% of the US population reported using libraries for employment related activities.**

Libraries are engines of economic development. Our trained professionals regularly assist jobseekers with job searches, resume assistance and provide training for developing workplace skills. We provide information, tools and support for entrepreneurs and small businesses. Libraries provide equity for disadvantaged communities and individuals with internet and computer access for all. Library computers are used for email, to create resumes, locate job openings, submit applications and file tax forms and census information.

Even now, while library staff reinvent and deliver virtual services and plan for safe reopening, we have expanded our focus to develop plans for how we can best serve our residents during the recovery.

Investment in the existing public library system will accelerate the State's economy to both rebound and be positioned for long-term success. We are the people on the ground directly training and assisting jobseekers and small business startups. We did it more than ten years ago during the Great Recession and we have already rolled up our sleeves and begun doing so in response to COVID-19.

Considerations Prior to Opening the State

Because items in libraries are shared, from computers to seating to materials borrowed, returned and borrowed again, there is an added layer of precaution and procedure required to reopen our physical buildings and collections. In short:

- Staff will need a supply chain for adequate PPE and sufficient, effective disinfecting and cleaning supplies for shared work services, computer access and public assistance without impacting the supply needed for medical workers and first responders.
- NJ Libraries seek support in following anticipated recommendations based on results of research being conducted on the federal level by the Institute of Museum and Library Services regarding the virus's viability on library materials and their safe handling.
- The Library community urges the Commission to work collaboratively with the TOPCATS Task Force in crafting approaches and policies prior to the rescinding of Executive 107 as it pertains to libraries.
- NJ Libraries need continued and stable funding at the state and local levels to maintain their significant role in economic development and recovery at a time when history shows us the need and demand for library services will significantly increase.

We wish to partner with you and the Commission for the consistent, systematic and safe reintroduction of full library access and services. We ask your consideration of the following:

- Appointment of a liaison from the Commission to serve as a point of contact and planning partner with the TOPCATS Taskforce.

- Endorsement of our **Best Practices** document to promote a unified and phased approach to the reopening of the state's libraries.
- Advance notice (as much as practicable) for lifting of Executive Order 107 as it pertains to libraries.

We thank you for your willingness to lead the State on the critical tasks of restart and recovery. The library community is ready to assist on the ground in each of New Jersey's communities.

For more information, questions and to continue this dialogue please contact Juliet Machie, Executive Director at LibraryLinkNJ at juliet@librarylinknj.org .

We look forward to the Commission's response and wish you continued safety and much success as you embark on your mission.

Thank you,

Juliet Machie, Interim Executive Director
LibraryLinkNJ

Ralph Bingham, Taskforce Chair
TOPCATS

*In U.S., Library Visits Outpaced Trips to Movies in 2019

<https://news.gallup.com/poll/284009/library-visits-outpaced-trips-movies-2019.aspx>

** Public Libraries: A Community's Connection for Career Services

http://heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/products/uploads/Public_Libraries_Career_Services_Report.pdf