

Public Library Pandemic Response

Plan of Service During the COVID-19 Outbreak

The Libraries Regulation requires all municipal and intermunicipal library boards (Section 13), as well as library system boards (Section 18), to develop, review, and regularly update a Plan of Service.

The Plan of Service is an important governance tool, allowing library boards to tailor service to the needs of their community and keep on track to meeting goals and achieving positive outcomes. It guides decision making, ensures accountability, and fosters continuous improvement of service through a cycle of assessment, implementation, and evaluation.

During this time of crisis, library boards are continuing to govern and make decisions, adapting and innovating to meet the needs of their community, and the Plan of Service remains a crucial component in fulfilling that role.

While many boards may be concerned about how the COVID-19 pandemic will affect their ability to carry out Plan of Service activities and meet legislative requirements, rest assured that there is a significant amount of flexibility built-in to the process and Public Library Services Branch (PLSB) will continue to support you in your planning efforts.

This document seeks to explore and clarify Plan of Service requirements and offer suggestions for strategic planning in uncertain times. While it focuses on issues of most concern to boards with expired or expiring Plans of Service, the information presented is of value to boards at every stage of the planning cycle.

Legislative requirements

As per the Libraries Regulation, all library boards in Alberta are required to develop and file with the Minister (i.e. PLSB) a Plan of Service that:

- includes a mission statement;
- includes goals and objectives; and,
- is based on a needs assessment of the municipality or municipalities served.

A library board must also review its Plan of Service at least once annually and may make adjustments to their plan at any time over the course of its duration.

Finally, every library board is required to file with PLSB a current Plan of Service, with goals and objectives, at least every 5 years (for municipal and intermunicipal boards) or every 3 years (for system boards).

Plan of Service timelines

Considering the challenges presented by the pandemic, boards may be concerned about their ability to complete and submit a new Plan of Service on time. However, there are various factors involved in determining when a Plan of Service is “due,” and boards likely have more time available than they realize. Below are answers to frequently asked questions that should help clarify these timelines.

When does a Plan of Service expire?

December 31 of the end year stated on your Plan of Service document.

The duration of a Plan of Service is expressed as a range of years, for example 2016-2020. When submitted to PLSB, a Plan of Service is deemed to be filed as of January 1 of the start year and therefore expires on December 31 of the end year.

This is always the case, regardless of the exact date the document was completed, approved by the board, submitted to PLSB, or any other milestone in the planning process.

When does PLSB require a new Plan of Service?

Within the first six months of the following year.

PLSB does not expect boards to have a new Plan of Service submitted immediately following the expiry of their previous plan.

The requirement to have a current Plan of Service on file is only formally assessed at the time a board

submits their provincial operating grant application. In a typical year, the deadline for that application is June 15 which means boards effectively have a six-month window after expiry to get their new Plan of Service submitted.

For the 2020 grant year, this deadline has been extended to October 1.

As a general rule, boards should aim to submit their Plan of Service before—or at the same time as—they submit their grant application.

This year boards will receive a first installment of 50% of their grant amount without having to submit an application or any other required documents. The second installment of 50% will be paid in Fall 2020 when boards are able to submit their applications.

What happens if we need more time?

PLSB will work with you to address challenges and achieve a practical solution.

We strive to be as flexible as possible and will be especially so during these unprecedented times. If your board anticipates challenges in meeting the above timelines, we encourage you to contact us as soon as possible so we can explore options and find a solution that works for your circumstances.

Needs assessment

Besides any potential impact on timelines, the pandemic and resulting physical distancing measures are also having an effect on how boards are able to conduct their needs assessment.

What constitutes a needs assessment?

The Libraries Regulation requires that a Plan of Service be based on a needs assessment of the community served by the board; however, it does not define what that assessment must look like. This intentional ambiguity allows boards to determine and carry out whatever works best in their local context.

While many library boards in Alberta have traditionally engaged their community through in-person focus groups, sometimes called “community meetings,” this method is by no means required.

Boards may gather feedback from their community by entirely remote means, whether by online survey,

engagement through social media channels, virtual focus groups, or any other methods they deem appropriate and effective.

Satisfying the needs assessment requirement

This requirement is considered to be satisfied as long as a board indicates in their completed Plan of Service document that something was done to engage their community and assess need.

Going beyond public engagement

It should also be noted that a needs assessment can—and ideally *should*—include more than just public engagement.

Physical distancing does not impact a board’s ability to review their library usage statistics, seek out community demographic data, look to work that has already been done by other organizations, and consider trends in the broader library world. All of this, together with public engagement, creates a more complete picture of community need and helps a board in planning their service accordingly.

In fact, boards currently in the needs assessment stage of their planning cycle may need to rely more on these methods than they would under normal circumstances.

Planning during uncertain times

Despite our collective efforts to mitigate challenges, we recognize that this is still a difficult time to be planning. The following suggestions address some of the more general concerns around planning during these uncertain times.

Acknowledge the circumstances

Although public libraries across the province have shown incredible resolve in maintaining as much normalcy as possible, it is important to acknowledge that these are not normal times and planning efforts should be adjusted accordingly.

When carrying out public engagement activities, recognize that responses will likely be influenced by the context of the current situation and its associated challenges. Design your activities (survey questions, social media posts, etc.) accordingly, acknowledging the “elephant in the room” and seeking feedback on

how the library can help now and in the future when we begin to move back into our physical spaces.

Similarly, when planning library services in response, it is okay to focus more on the things that are most relevant now (e.g. e-content, phone and virtual service, remote programming). These services will still be relevant in the future, so no planning effort is wasted, and more traditional services and means of delivery can always be incorporated later on.

Consider a short-term Plan of Service

The 3- and 5-year limits from legislation are *maximums*, a shorter Plan of Service (e.g. 1- or 2-years) is perfectly acceptable and may be more appropriate depending on the circumstances.

A short-term Plan of Service can still be an effective governance tool over the course of its duration while also providing the opportunity to “start over” in the near future when new information will be available or conditions are expected to be more favourable.

Boards often take advantage of this flexibility to mitigate uncertainty during normal times (e.g. move to a new location, retirement of long-term manager) and this option may be especially effective now.

Reviewing your Plan of Service

For boards with a current Plan of Service in the implementation stage, it is important to continue with regular review and consider how current circumstances may impact your ability to meet goals and objectives.

In most cases, the priority areas or service responses identified in a Plan of Service will still be relevant even if the activities that support it need to be adjusted. For example, a focus on early literacy is still relevant even if the means of delivering programs or providing access to materials has to change. Therefore, boards should not feel that they must completely change course.

Adjustments may need to be made to timelines or targets. Some activities may no longer be possible in any form. Whatever the case, your Plan of Service is not set in stone and may be modified at any time.

If a board makes significant modifications, such as removing some goals entirely or altering high level priority areas, an updated copy of the Plan of Service may be submitted to PLSB to ensure we have the most current version on file. Minor changes, such as adjustments to targets and measures, do not necessitate resubmission.

Conclusion

As communities across Alberta navigate these unprecedented times, public libraries have the opportunity to serve as a much-needed source of support and Plan of Service remains a valuable tool in ensuring responsiveness when it is most critical.

Although planning under the current circumstances is not without its challenges, nothing is easy during a time of crisis. Remember that your efforts now will not only serve the community during this time of increased need but can also strengthen connections and improve library service for years to come.

Finally, library boards are not alone in dealing with this situation. There is an extensive network of support available, from PLSB, library systems, and hundreds of fellow boards. Reach out for help if you need it and share your successes with others.

Questions?

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us.

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