

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Libraries provide nutritious meals to children and families during the summer and connect at-risk patrons with social services and health resources. They support physical health by hosting fitness programs and loaning out exercise equipment.

Libraries reduce loneliness and isolation by engaging community members of all ages in cultural events, discussion groups, and social activities. In doing so, they help build community resilience and combat illnesses like depression and dementia. This helps offset the estimated \$210 billion in annual costs associated with depression in the United States.¹

BOLSTERING PUBLIC HEALTH EFFORTS

- Public vaccination programs reduce the number of severe flu infections by an estimated 40 percent,² and public libraries can play an important role in these programs. The Los Angeles County Library has worked to offer free and low-cost seasonal flu vaccinations in library branches.³
- Almost one in four libraries in the United States have offered some kind of exercise class or outdoor activity programming, such as StoryWalks, Zumba, Yoga, and Tai Chi.⁴
- Public library programs that lend pedometers and other equipment have been shown to increase physical literacy and activity levels among borrowers.⁵ The range of items available for users to borrow from Sacramento Public Library includes a disc golf set, bird watching kit, soccer set and hiking gear.⁶
- Many libraries now employ social workers as part of the library team. A report in *Social Work Today* states that library social work “serves patron needs through building community networks, crisis intervention, and meeting unmet social services needs where patrons are.”⁷

Libraries are trusted providers of health information and partners in public health efforts.

IMPROVING MENTAL AND COGNITIVE HEALTH AND WELLNESS

- A review of 29 studies concluded that following a program of psychologist-directed reading (including the use of self-help books) has positive effects in the treatment of mild depression in adults.⁸
- Libraries and literacy programs can be important partners for clinicians treating depression in their communities, especially where literacy rates are low. In a clinical trial, patients assigned to receive literacy training along with standard depression treatment improved their reading abilities and reported less severe symptoms.⁹
- Greater engagement in reading books, magazines, and newspapers has been correlated with a lower risk of dementia—independent of other factors including overall health, educational level, age, and gender.¹⁰
- Bibliotherapy—using reading materials for help in solving personal problems and psychiatric therapy—helps children heal after trauma, and acquire skills to cope better with feelings of bereavement, anxiety, and loss.¹¹

COMBATING LONELINESS AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

- A survey of over 4,000 adult readers and non-readers found that readers feel closer to their friends and communities than non-readers. They also “*have higher levels of self-esteem and a greater ability to deal with difficult situations.*”¹²
- Seventy-seven percent of Americans live within walking distance or a short ride from a public library. A recent study found that such proximity to neighborhood amenities corresponds with increased levels of social connectedness, satisfaction with their communities, and feelings of safety and trust.¹³



PROVIDING HEALTH INFORMATION AND HEALTH LITERACY

- Literacy directly impacts how much people know about healthy living and how well they care for themselves. Literacy skills increase the percentage of patients who recognize the symptoms and warning signs of serious conditions like diabetes, as well as identify and properly take prescribed medications.¹⁴
- Seventy-three percent of Americans aged 16 and over say libraries contribute to people finding the health information they need. Forty-two percent of Americans who have used the library’s computers, internet, or Wi-Fi have done so for health-related searches.¹⁵ Nationwide, 59 percent of libraries provide visitors with help identifying health insurance resources.¹⁶
- Library-sponsored health information courses increase the capacity of older adults to find and understand basic health information and make appropriate health decisions. In one study, 97 percent of those participating in a library-sponsored health information course said they learned “*a lot.*” Seventy-five percent reported that information they learned affected their decision on a health or medically-related issue.¹⁷

Sit and Be Fit, a low-impact exercise program for older adults and adults with disabilities in Fresno County, has inspired a number of copycat programs across the state. In Fresno, the library partnered with Fresno Parks, After School, Recreation, and Community Services and the local Area Agency on Aging to provide exercise programs for seniors and host conversations on senior health and wellness. Azusa, Monterey Park, and Alhambra public libraries are now partnering with local senior centers and adult recreation centers to keep seniors fit in southern California.^a



LUNCH AT THE LIBRARY

California's Lunch at the Library initiative, launched in 2013, has made it easier for libraries to provide free meals to children and teens when the school year ends.

In the summer, children and teens in families with low incomes often struggle to have their basic needs met. They have reduced or limited access to healthy food, safe places to congregate, and learning opportunities. In fact, 13 percent of California families who eat meals at the library report that they don't get lunch anywhere else during the summer.¹⁸ Food insecurity has been linked with cognitive delays in children, as well as with poorer overall health.^{19 20}

During summer 2019, California public libraries served 289,587 summer meals and 39,737 snacks to children and teens, and engaged them and their families in games, sports, and learning and enrichment programs. In 2020, when communities were unable to congregate because of the pandemic, library staff gave out 296,124 grab-and-go meals and over 350,000 free books and activity kits in the summer, and extended their programs into the fall.²¹

Libraries participating in summer meal programs also partner with local food banks and other agencies



to provide meals for adults. They report increased library cards issued and increased participation in summer reading initiatives and programs for adults and children.^{22 23}

Lunch at the Library has been cited as a model for increasing library participation in the USDA Summer Food Service Program in numerous other states, including Ohio, Colorado, Montana, Minnesota, and Texas.²⁴



NOTES

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