



County closes libraries to slow spread of COVID-19, critical health and law enforcement services remain unchanged

[The interim guidance we're providing is based on what is currently known about COVID-19. Multnomah County will update this interim guidance as additional information becomes available. \(http://multco.us/web/20200316003340/https://multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/notifications/interim-guidance-were-providing-based-what-currently-known\)](http://multco.us/web/20200316003340/https://multco.us/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/notifications/interim-guidance-were-providing-based-what-currently-known)

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Multnomah Chair Deborah Kafoury appeared Friday evening alongside Sheriff Mike Reese, Health Officer Dr. Jennifer Vines and Library Director Vailey Oehlke to announce the [immediate closure](https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://multcolib.org/blog/20200313/multnomah-county-libraries-close-due-covid-19) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://multcolib.org/blog/20200313/multnomah-county-libraries-close-due-covid-19>) of the county's 19 library branches and underscore the public health plea to every resident: wash your hands and stay home if you feel ill.

Chair Deborah Kafoury called on community to connect in creative ways as social distancing measures set in.

"We're here tonight to ask for your help," Kafoury said. "This is a virus that before January, no one in this country had ever seen; That no one is immune to; That is potentially deadly for members of our community; That thrives on people coming together. A virus we have to work together to beat."

Friday's announcement comes as Oregon reaches [30 cases of COVID-19](https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/DISEASESCONDITIONS/DISEASESAZ/Pages/emerging-respiratory-infections.aspx) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/DISEASESCONDITIONS/DISEASESAZ/Pages/emerging-respiratory-infections.aspx>), on the heels of Governor Kate Brown's Thursday night order closing public schools for four weeks. On Wednesday night, Brown enacted a four-week ban on all gatherings of 250 people or more.

Also on Wednesday, Kafoury declared a state of emergency.

"We know that each of these decisions are dramatic, painful and affect people very differently," Kafoury said. "Those consequences are real, and I can promise you we are listening to you and working with you to mitigate these issues. But we cannot back down from the fight."

If communities hope to slow the spread of a virus that causes mild illness to many — but severe complications to some — they must take early dramatic steps. And that includes keeping people from gathering inside and nearby.

Library Director Vailey Oehlke to announce the immediate closure of the county's 19 library branches.

Vailey Oehlke said her decision to close the county's 19 branches is one of those steps.

"Closing public libraries in Multnomah County like this is an extraordinary measure. It's never happened in modern times," she said. "We did not come to this decision lightly."

Patrons are asked not to return library books during the closure. Instead the county will eliminate late fines and continue to reserve books on hold.

Patrons are also encouraged to use [digital library resources](https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://multcolib.org/e-books-and-more) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20200316003340/https://multcolib.org/e-books-and-more>) like e-books, downloadable audiobooks and streaming music and video through the library's website.

"We know how much this community loves its library. We know its services will be sorely missed by the people we serve. I want you to know that your library will be there for you once we've completed this difficult step to protect those around us."

Sheriff Mike Reese said his office has adjusted protocols to protect staff and those in custody.

COVID-19 is believed to spread most often through close and prolonged contact to a sick individual. The virus is most dangerous for older adults and people with underlying chronic health conditions. That's why health officials are focusing efforts to limit the virus in congregate settings such as shelters, long-term care facilities and jails.

Sheriff Reese said that in response to the pandemic, his office has adjusted protocols to protect staff and those in custody, with guidance from former Tri-County Health Officer Dr. Paul Lewis.

"The outbreak of COVID 19 has far-reaching implications for all of us in public safety... including all first responders, corrections professionals and non-sworn staff," he said. "As you could imagine, practicing social distancing in jail facilities is challenging."

They're taking precautions that include:

- Opening an additional dorm at Inverness Jail to create additional capacity and personal space
- Conducting enhanced facility cleaning; already a standard practice during flu season.
- Limiting interactions among staff by holding virtual roll calls and teleworking where possible.
- Suspending in-person visits except for professional and legal visits.
- Reiterating options for phone and video conferencing kiosks, including a free option available for calls placed from jail lobbies.

Multnomah County and other public health agencies are quickly narrowing focus to protect the highest-risk people, in the highest-risk settings. To do that, they must protect hospitals from being overwhelmed by patients sick with COVID-19, said Vines, the health officer.

"Right now we're trying to lower the burden on our healthcare system," she said.

A surge in demand for care could overwhelm a system already operating at near capacity. Vines is working with the region's healthcare professionals trying to have the masks, gloves and gowns in place they need to care for ill individuals without putting themselves or other patients at risk.

"This is a new virus," she said. "We don't have widespread immunity. We don't have a vaccine and we don't have a treatment."

Most people who catch this virus will have only mild illness, but those over age 60 and anyone with a serious health condition is at risk of serious complications.

"But spreading people out means slowing the virus spread, so severe cases come in manageable waves," Vines said. "That is why we support the cancellation of mass gatherings, school closures and other measures that limit the mixing of people."

If we wait until our hospitals are full, it will have been too late, she said.

"Our best chance at having healthcare available to people when they need it is to take these steps now. They work best when they are big and early."

