

Westmoreland Public Libraries and E-books

On March 14th, all the public libraries in the Westmoreland Library Network (WLN™) closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the services that our 100,000 plus patrons have come to appreciate suddenly came to a halt. Although our libraries still have not come back to the point of providing full services, they have kept up with providing some services virtually. For example, online databases and extensive virtual summer programming have been available to all. However, it was E-books that really helped fill the void.

Our libraries have been providing E-books and E-audio to our patrons since 2011. Since that time, the usage has grown extensively every year. In 2019, 131,504 items were downloaded from WLN libraries. During the first month of the shutdown, we saw an increase of about 55% from before the crisis. While in the following months the increase was slightly less, we are still circulating E-books at a much higher level than before. During the time period from March through August of this year, we circulated over 90,000 items. We will probably circulate between 160,000 and 170,000 items for the full year of 2020.

E-books are not for everyone. Our patrons, and library patrons around the country, are increasingly making the transition from the print book, but county-wide locally print book readers are still a big majority. The responsibility of our libraries is to make both formats available as long as there is a sufficient demand. Unfortunately, there are many challenges for our libraries of which most people have no knowledge.

For a variety of reasons, our libraries pay much more for E-books than the public does. Most of the books people want to read are popular books that make the New York Times Best Seller List. About 95% of the titles that make this List every year are published by what is called the Big Five Publishers. These publishers have made it difficult for libraries to financially support the E-book format. As an example, in October John Grisham will have a new book published called "A Time for Mercy." The public will be able to buy it as an E-book for \$14.99. Our libraries will have to pay \$55 for each copy, and they will only own each copy for two years. For the downloadable audio version of this title, we have two choices: pay \$47.50 for one year usage or \$95 to own it forever. We will probably have a hundred reserves by the middle of November. As a comparison, our libraries will buy the print hardcopy for about \$16 and own the book permanently. In the past many people would donate their print copies to a library. Unfortunately, because of technology coding by the publishers, patrons cannot transfer their E-book copies to our libraries. This E-book pricing model does not apply to just our libraries but to all the libraries in the country.

Despite the above financial challenges, our libraries make E-books available free, and like most of the services available, it would not exist without aid from the state of Pennsylvania.

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Guest authored by Cesare Muccari, WCFLS Executive Director

At the moment the number of E-books and downloadable Audio that our libraries own to make available is a little over 15,000, of which a little over 12,500 are E-books and about 2,400 are E-audio. Currently, we have about 8,000 holds.

Making the transition to E-books is easy for some but not for others. If you want to make this transition and need help, there are a few options. You can look at your library's web site for a link to E-books or go to: <https://westmoreland.overdrive.com/> and immediately download available items or place a hold. You can also talk to the library staff, or go to this link for online help: <https://www.wlnonline.org/how-do-i/use-overdrive/>, depending on the device. E-books can be read on a computer, a smartphone, a tablet or a device such as a Kindle or Nook; for Audio, sound capability is necessary.

Even if the COVID-19 crisis continues or gets worse, our libraries will continue to provide E-books, even if they are closed to inside traffic. You may want to make the transition now!

Cesare Muccari

Executive Director

Westmoreland County Federated Library System