

Montana Shared Catalog Partners Sheltering Recommendations

To further the Montana State Library resolution toward fair and equitable access* and the Partners Resource Sharing Group mission “to facilitate collaboration and cooperation between member libraries to improve and expand access to and delivery of library materials,” the membership completed a six-month study of holds sheltering on new materials. The summary and recommendations below are presented by the Montana Shared Catalog System Administrators based on data collection in the months preceding the study and during its execution from December 15, 2020 to June 15, 2021.

Methods

The study was divided into two sections. In Phase 1, which lasted from December 15 to March 14, all libraries were to shelter new items; in Phase 2, which lasted from March 15 to June 15, libraries could choose to shelter new items or not.

There were various configuration and cataloging functions involved in the study. Items were considered new for the purposes of sheltering if they had been published within the previous six months, and for 60 days from their Item Date Created. Libraries could also choose to shelter by allowing no holds at all or allowing local holds and there were also 14 day and 28 day checkout options. Specific item types and increased usage of Item Categories were necessary for the study for both configuration and statistical purposes. An automated process to move items out of the sheltered Item Types after 60 days was available upon request.

Results

Over the course of the study, the Partners Resource Sharing Group observed a decline in average hold wait time. As shown in Table 1, wait time moved from 24 days in the months immediately preceding the study to 12 days during Phase 2. The Phase 2 wait time was also an improvement over the pre-March 2020 average of 18 days.

Table 1

Partners Average Hold Fill Time

	Pre-March 2020	Fall 2020	Phase 1	Phase 2
Average Days from Hold Creation to Available for Pickup	18	24	13	12

With the decrease in wait time, the group saw an increase in new item checkouts with a growing percentage of total new checkouts originating from the station library’s local collection as demonstrated in Table 2. While the total number of new checkouts did not reach the pre-March 2020 levels, the checkouts exhibited an upward trend approaching levels seen before COVID-19 closures. Notably, 94% of Phase 2 new-item checkouts were sourced from local collections, with only 77% in Fall 2019. Both

before and during the study, the average number of new items checked out per unique borrower held steady at approximately 3 items.

Table 2

Partners New Item Checkouts

	Local New Checkouts	Total New Checkouts	Total Unique Borrowers	New Items per Borrower	Local Percent of Total New Checkouts
Fall 2019	16,325	21,105	7,015	3	77%
Fall 2020	11,293	14,089	4,208	3	80%
Phase 1	13,866	15,648	4,628	3	89%
Phase 2	18,049	19,275	5,834	3	94%

As local checkouts increased, overall holds placed and filled grew across the partnership. In the available historical data predating this study, filled holds peaked at 29,269 in January 2020. Figure 1 shows that monthly holds filled during the study surpassed prior numbers, peaking at 32,483 in March 2021. The mean number of filled holds across Phase 1 and 2 was 28,399. Similarly, historical peak hold creation occurred in January 2020 at 34,212 but was nearly matched in January 2021 at 34,209. The monthly hold creation mean was 29,253.

Figure 1

Partners Total Holds Created and Filled



The number of unique borrowers that created holds follows a similar trajectory as the total holds created and filled. Figure 2 demonstrates that the number of borrowers placing holds approached pre-study numbers towards the final months of data collection.

Figure 2

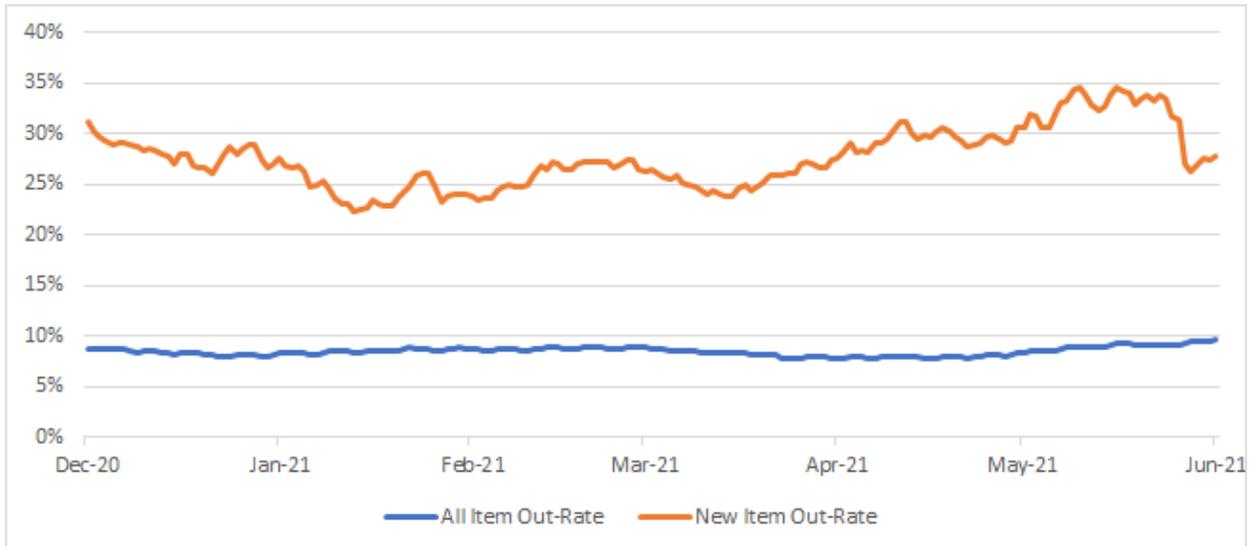
Partners Total Unique Borrowers that Created Holds



As seen in Figure 3, the overall out-rates remained fairly static across the project, with the rate for all items varying less than one percentage point and averaging at 8.5%. When isolated from the all item out-rate, the new item out-rate demonstrated greater variability, with a minimum of 22.24% and a maximum of 34.55%.

Figure 3

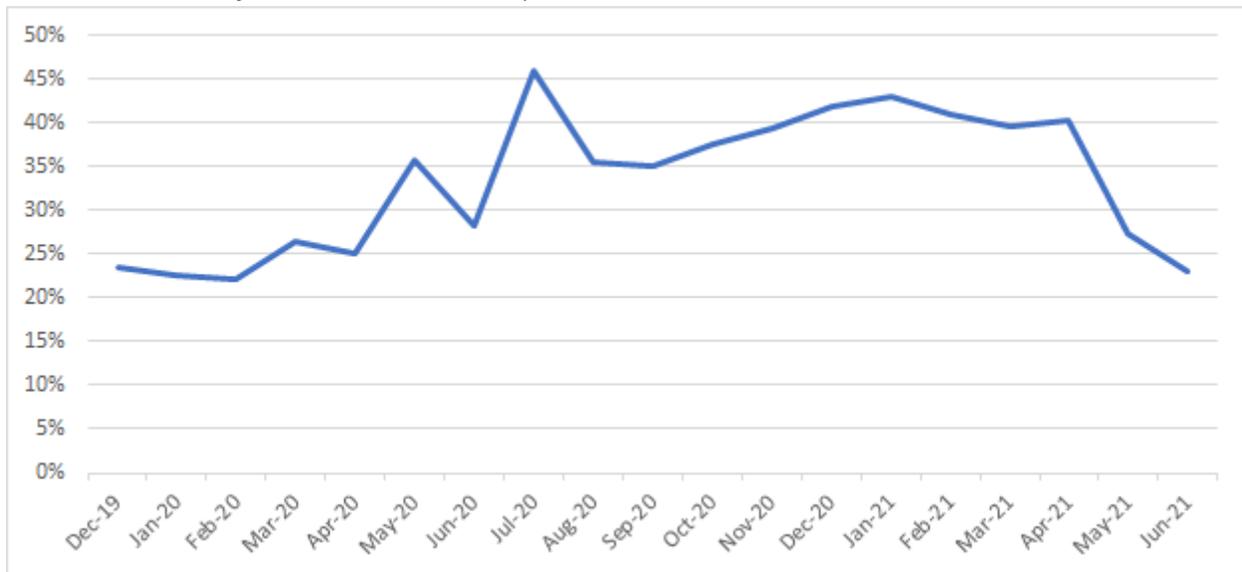
Partners Out-Rate



The ratio of holds to total checkouts increased the first month before decreasing as displayed in Figure 4. Over the course of the project, the maximum percent of checkouts attributed to holds was 43% in January 2021, and the minimum was 23% in June 2021. In comparison, 23% of library checkouts in December 2019 and January 2020 were initiated via holds.

Figure 4

Partners Percent of Checkouts Initiated by Holds



In addition to the numerical data, the Montana Shared Catalog collected digital and print surveys to gauge participant satisfaction with the change. There were just over 700 responses to the survey, the vast majority were through the online version available via Enterprise. The majority of respondents that stated that placing holds was their preferred method of getting items felt the sheltering had a negative impact on their library experience. The majority of respondents who preferred browsing the shelves felt the sheltering had a positive impact on their library experience.

Limitations

Scheduled database-maintenance tasks purged holds resolved before November 2019 from the Symphony SaaS server. Similarly, the system does not retain a log of past out-rates. Without historical data that spans multiple calendar years, it is difficult to assess if changes observed through this study can be partially accounted for by typical fluctuations in library activity across seasons or the changes introduced by creating browsing collections.

Moreover, the impact of COVID-19 on library and courier operations cannot be dismissed. While we generally saw improvements in hold fulfillment over the course of the study, libraries also increased services as Montana lifted quarantine restrictions.

While hold wait times diminished over the course of the study, it is not clear that this change was solely influenced by sheltering. Due to COVID-19 precautions, some libraries participated in curbside services either as a supplement to, or full replacement of, traditional in-building browsing and circulation. Since curbside service primarily relied on placement of holds, that service (or lack of service where it was not offered) affected hold numbers.

Because some patrons, typically at smaller libraries, were not able to place holds on items right away in the catalog due to sheltering, decreased hold times may not accurately reflect actual wait times. Further, some patrons may not have been able to place holds on sheltered items at all. As reflected in the surveys, patrons experiencing a rejected hold message in Enterprise either had to check back later or abandon their attempt to place a hold. These real-life wait times would not be calculated by the library software.

No survey methodology to ensure an equal number of responses from browsers and hold placers or representative numbers of browsers compared to hold placers was included in the survey deployment, so no judgment can be made about the more popular way to use the library or to prioritize one library use type above the other. Of the responses collected, most preferred placing holds so most responses to the survey were negative. Many of the comments that were included indicated that not being able to place the hold was more problematic than that holds might take longer to be filled. The browsing respondents were explicit in their approval of having more variety and quantity of new items on the shelves.

Recommendations

Based on all of the above and taking into account the limitations imposed by the current software system, Montana Shared Catalog System Administrators recommend that the Partner Resource Sharing Group decide to implement one of the following broad options:

- No sheltering – all sheltering is removed, including GRABNGO.
- Optional sheltering – libraries can decide to shelter or not; but with a maximum of half of the total number of copies per library for any title.

It is unfortunate that our software does not currently allow holds to be placed with a delay before fulfillment to address what seemed to be the biggest complaint in the survey responses, so these two options offer the best chance to alleviate that as much as possible by always having a holdable copy available. Additionally, details for the sheltering options can be refined further after discussion. For instance, the group could add a requirement that at least one unsheltered copy on a record must exist before any sheltered copies are allowed, or the collaborative could develop a method to identify "dusty" sheltered items that can be moved back to holdable status early.

Other changes might be made to ease confusion and frustration of patrons, such as adjusting the way the sheltered item types are displayed in Enterprise to make them more clear.

Areas for Further Study

While this project focused on the impact of sheltering on efficiently and equitably distributing materials across Montana, other potential solutions warrant further study. For example, access to high demand items is impacted by both the courier and disparities in collection development budgets. An expanded courier, collaborative collection development, and leased rotating collections could impact the availability of reading materials in Montana communities of all sizes and locations.

*The [Fair Library Access Resolution](#) was adopted by the Montana State Library Commission on 6/12/2019.