

MLA Podcast 005 - The Impact of COVID-19 on Caregiving and Children

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SPEAKERS

Emily Hurst, Molly Knapp, Beth Whipple

Emily Hurst 00:10

Hello, and thank you for joining us. Today we're going to be talking with two Health Sciences librarians on the topic of coping and caregiving for children during COVID-19. My name is Emily Hurst and I currently serve as the interim director and associate dean at VCU Libraries Health Sciences Library in Richmond, Virginia. I'm really excited to introduce our next two guests. Let's hear from Molly. Hello.

Molly Knapp 00:35

My name is Molly Knapp, and I work for the network of the National Library of Medicine training office, where I am a training development specialist. Our physical office is located in Salt Lake City at the University of Utah Eccles Health Sciences Library. But my team of five is distributed across the United States. I have worked remotely in Houston, Texas, since taking this position in 2016.

Emily Hurst 01:00

Great, welcome, Molly. And we also have Beth.

Beth Whipple 01:04

Hi, this is Beth Whipple, and I work at the Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis, Indiana. I'm at the Ruth Lilly Medical Library, and I'm the assistant director of research and Translational Sciences. And I lead our small but mighty research team there.

Emily Hurst 01:19

Wonderful, thank you so much for joining us today to talk about this topic that is, I know impacting many of my colleagues, people that I supervise, as well as you two as my friends within MLA and other members of our Medical Library Association. I want to start off by asking you how you are coping with COVID-19 at your library or with your work. We're almost one year in here. So I know it's been quite a while. But are there any changes or any things that really stand out as being impactful at your Health Sciences Library?

Molly Knapp 01:52

Okay, so this is Molly, and I'm at the acceptance stage of COVID on the grief scale. So our office took a very careful and emotionally tuned in approach to work during the last year. Because we're a small team of five, we were encouraged to take time off, sick days, flexible schedules, and we just tried to use forgiveness and grace in general. And I think this worked because we were all used to remote work before the pandemic. We already use teams to communicate, we already went to the meetings and zoom and WebEx regularly. And we had general autonomy for our projects, we didn't have a micromanaging culture. And we knew how to communicate using those tools already. So we had that going for us. Number two, the University of Utah was really solid in offering assistance, free mental health webinars and tools, and our library backed that up by offering their own mental health seminars and opportunities to talk just for Eccles library staff, not just librarians, all staff and all the libraries in Utah really strive to do that. So our workplace culture really recognized that employees needed support and gave voice to that. And the third thing that helped us kind of get through it is half of our office, including our boss, have children under six. So two of my other colleagues, one has grown children, the other one lives very far away from the rest of their extended family. So we all had empathy for where we were at. And that might get lost in larger teams. But that really did help us all get through. And it was a struggle for everybody. And we're just getting through it together. Yeah,

Emily Hurst 03:34

Thank you for sharing that. Molly. It's really great to hear how your team was able to come together around this topic and how you all had so much empathy for each other and the commonalities that you can kind of share and grow together in this experience. It's also really great to hear about libraries that are offering additional resources, including mental health support for their entire staff. Anything that you want to add Beth, from your institution.

Beth Whipple 03:59

Sure, Emily, thanks. So I did, I initially laughed at this question, How am I dealing with COVID? And I said, I think it depends on the day and the week. Honestly, last week was rough for I don't really even know why I think it just was hitting that pandemic wall and just feeling just tired. As far as the library, I think it was already in our work culture to have some working from home, I would say generally for our faculty, not as much for our staff, obviously not on the scale that we're dealing with right now. Back in March, as things were moving really quickly, I was actually on my way to a conference. So my actual last day physically in the office was right before that. Looking back, I had said, you know, see you next week. And you know, I just have to kind of laugh about that now. So my last day in the office was not when I thought it would be the last day and I've been working remotely from my house. I'm in my basement since coming back from that conference. Overall, I would say my library and institution have been pretty great in their support before everything shut down. So I was, my conference but the library sent out a survey to gauge what technical support employees would need to be working from home. And we were able to be proactive and do a little more planning before the institution was shut down and everyone had to leave. There's already a support structure in place called healthy IU, with programs for health and wellness for several years now at the institution. And so I think the university was good at reminding folks about that. And also, I work in the School of Medicine. And the school medicine was sending out reminders about resources for wellness available to everyone. So I don't know that I would

say there are a lot of sort of individual like programs that were provided by the library. But the institution as a whole was, has been good about highlighting those that are currently exist. And I think that our library did a good job in making sure we all know what's available, and also trying to prep people as much as we could. Some of the other things that our library is doing right now is we had already begun streaming classes via zoom. So the switch to only doing zoom consultant teaching was I would say for the most part fairly seamless. Additionally, as we are the largest medical school in the country, we have nine campuses across the state. So we were able to continue our synchronous teaching for medical students. In fact, I just did a session this morning for medical students in South Bend. Our library administration has done a good job in communicating what they know, since we're part of the medical school, sometimes things are different from the rest of the campus. And we are also separate from the health system. So sometimes information coming out for us specifically is different than through some of these other venues. So it was really important for our library administration to do a good job which they have in checking on information and then communicating to us as a library. What of all of this is actually applicable to us. And being very honest, when they weren't sure. And we're waiting to sort of have clarification. So we knew how that affected us.

Emily Hurst 06:54

Great. Thanks, Beth. Is there anything else that you'd like to add about any technology or tools that you have used to stay connected with your groups?

Beth Whipple 07:04

Oh, yeah, thanks, Emily. So at the library, we had started using teams and but we still have Skype for Business as an option. Plus, we've been doing zoom for meetings and some classes. So we'd been using these previously. So that was nice that it wasn't a brand new thing for us. I do miss the face to face meetings, especially for consults with our patrons. But overall, I feel like everyone has adjusted pretty well for this.

Emily Hurst 07:29

Great, thanks, Beth. It's really great to hear about how your team adapted to new technologies and started implementing those. I know Molly also alluded to this as well with her team already working remotely. But COVID-19 has really changed the remote format for work being that schools were also largely closed during most of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has really challenged many of our colleagues who have children. Can you tell us more about the current setup and the situation as it relates to having your children at home and trying to work from home at the same time?

Molly Knapp 08:06

Yeah, my kids were home from March 12 until October 19, 2020. And yes, I remember that exact date: it was they went home for spring break, and then never went back. We sent them back face to face as soon as the school district allowed it. March through October was extraordinarily difficult. We had four people in one room, two with master's degrees. And we still couldn't track the insane virtual elementary schedule for two children and work with half a brain. That was one of the most difficult periods of my life. There's a lot of other things going on. Currently, it's less crowded in the office, we've broken down the remote workstations for the two children, my husband's home part time, and people are still in the same room. But it's, it's working out. And I just tried to be more reflective and not try to do all the things

all at once and just be in touch with how you're feeling so that you don't fly off the handle. Because when you're caregiving for that long in the same space, it's, it's really hard to stay level for that long with no end in sight. And, again, going back to the wellness mindsets, the workplace wellness mindset and like being conscious of what you can handle and what you can't handle is something learned, but that was useful.

Emily Hurst 09:42

Yeah, Molly, can you speak a little bit about like, what kind of support did you get from your school district? Does that vary from place to place as to what kind of information you were given? And I know we'll hear from Beth here momentarily, but at different age levels like that, are you expected to do more with children at a certain age?

Molly Knapp 10:04

Yeah, I know that Beth is going to agree with me here that kindergarten, which both of our children are in this year. Really hard, fifth grade, fourth grade, there's a little more autonomy. And if you're, we're lucky to have the access to the tools and the fluency, the information literacy to assist our children. So that when you're in those higher grades, it's a little easier. But Beth, do you want to take the mic?

Beth Whipple 10:37

So as Molly alluded to, so I do, I have two children also. My oldest is six and is in kindergarten, virtual kindergarten all year, my youngest is three, I am incredibly fortunate and that my in laws live three houses away. And I do very much mean that. To be clear, we moved to this neighborhood first. But it really has been, it's been great to have them close. And it has been a lifesaver for us in this pandemic. So my kids initially were in daycare. We pulled them out in March. And they attended grandma and grandpa daycare for 17 weeks. My in laws made certificates that says they survived grandma grandpa daycare, we sent our kids back to daycare for a month in person around July, until a mother of kids in both of their rooms at daycare tested positive for COVID. And those rooms are shut down for a few days. So then we all went to get tested to make sure we were all negative before they could go back. We realized at that point that if we wanted help with our kids, and to one of the grandparents to be able to see and interact with their grandkids. sending our kids back to daycare wasn't really a great option. Because we'd have to do this every single time that our kids would be home with us for several days, we would get no work done. We couldn't see our grandparents. So this is this is our reality we realized back in July. So my oldest started kindergarten this past fall. She is home with us. And my younger still goes over across the street to grandma and grandpa's. At lunchtime, the kids are home with us get my youngest down for a nap. And we give grandparents a break. So they continue to take care of our kids. And then we send them back over after naps. And my daughter's finished with school in the afternoon. So maybe an hour, hour and a half of undistracted work can get done every day.

Emily Hurst 12:30

Yeah, that and it's great to hear about how you're really trying to think about the schedule, not only for your children, but also for those that are helping out in the situation. The grandmother, the grandfather hear that, knowing that you need a break, they need a break. A lot of planning goes into making this a workable schedule for your family.

Beth Whipple 12:53

I mean, yes, I'll add with that. So our setup normally is again, my youngest goes over. So he's over there most of the day. And for the most part, my daughter is down in the basement with me in the mornings, and my husband is upstairs, and then she's up there with him in the afternoon. And then he is keeping an ear out for her. He's also keeping an eye on someone who's supposed to be napping, but has recently given up napping and may be tromping around their room or coming out with random questions. So I don't know how productive he is during those times. So I do have headphones as I sit next to my daughter, and I could use them. But she's a kindergartner. She's learning to read and write like these are brand new skills for her. She's also having to learn how to navigate a computer. She's having to learn how to log into Canvas, how to get on zoom, how to click on a variety of things, how to submit assignments via Google, all of these things, which, you know, she'd normally wouldn't be doing, she would be getting to talk about numbers and letters. So I need to be able to have to pay attention to what's going on as she's sitting next to me while I'm trying to work. In case instructions are given and she can't write Yeah, so she's not taking down notes or if she has an emotional meltdown. I need to be able to be tuned in enough to be there for her. I don't think this is a bad thing. I'm glad that I can, but it just it means it's constant distracted working for me. I don't see that changing at all this school year. Everyday is constant negotiation between my husband and I about where she is if she's going to be upstairs downstairs. This morning, she was upstairs because I was teaching, which is different. I think she's upstairs right now with my husband who is in a meeting and she's in live session. But I said I need quiet. So that's you know, like it's a constant negotiation every day, every half day, sort of every hour as to who's going to get them across the street after naptime who's in a meeting right then who can step out for a few minutes. I will also add that my child's schedule has changed three times during the school year, meaning my plan for when I have meetings has to change. And often we have little warning, as in, we find out on Friday, that schedule is going to be vastly different on Monday. So even taking a lunch break is she has about 20 minutes for us to feed her, which means we need to sort of be prepping before that. So as soon as she's finished, we can sit her down and start her eating. While we're cajoling my younger son who may or may not be interested in eating right, then that we are on a schedule, we got to make this happen. So it's so that's, that's my current, my current reality.

Emily Hurst 15:37

Wow, thank you for sharing that. I think that is going to resonate with many of our listeners today, just about how delicate the situation is and how you do have to be flexible in your in your management of your work, as well as in your management within your lifestyle. Molly, what else would you like to add?

Molly Knapp 15:58

And I do want to touch on what you said about the constantly changing schedule and having to adjust your schedule. And one of the things that I encountered is renegotiating a meeting, I took Friday, every Friday off from like, July to December 2020. And that was a very special meeting to me that I could not go to a working group. And I when that flipped on January 2021. I had to basically kind of shamefully go in there and be like, this time no longer works for me. Because this is when I have to go pick up my kid from school, can we please move it? And you have to be brave to speak out like that. And that's one of the challenges that that parents caregivers have right now is, um, is negotiating for that for that time for yourself. So yeah, my lunch break is two to 3pm. Central. And if you get me after 3pm Central, you may have a creeper in the background of my zoom call. And yeah, I just wanted to, to say that it's real.

Beth Whipple 17:08

Well, and even yeah, even scheduling this meeting to you know, talk about this, the initial time I'm like, I'm happy to talk about it. But I have a hard cutoff at a certain time, because that's when, the frenetic, we got to get lunch on the table. Now we only have X amount of time, like it's not negotiable. And I will say I have been very, very grateful to where I work, and they understand and support the flexibility. And for the most part, it's if I can get you know, if I can get my stuff done, they understand that there is there's definitely a need to be flexible. And as long as I communicate what's going on. It seems to be working. So I'm very grateful and thankful for that.

Emily Hurst 17:51

Yeah, thank you. I think that's a nice segue into our next topical area, which I know both of you are managing teams, I also manage a team and many of those individuals have children at home. Could you talk a little bit more about how understanding the current work environment is impacting your employee workloads, and what advice you would give to other managers who are supervising employees with children at home.

Molly Knapp 18:15

So there was a really good recent webinar I put on by a la it's a committee on women and working life or something of that nature. And if you Google it, I highly recommend watching it if you're interested in this type of stuff, how employers can support library workers who are caregivers during COVID-19 really, one of the biggest, biggest takeaways that from this, from this panel of speakers is we need to stop micromanaging definitely, definitely managers need to take a step back and give some space for people and, and just have some have empathy for your staff, and to look at the policies that you might have in place because libraries are a bureaucratic organization. We love rules, we love procedure manuals, we love following the policies when we have them and look at those and if you're going back to the book to something that is now extraordinarily dated, because it doesn't reflect telework and different schedules for people. If you need to, you need to take a hard look at that and reevaluate what you're doing. And for folks, another thing that resonated with me from this webinar is for folks that do have to return to libraries that are no longer remote workers. And re looking at your space your library space and making it more inviting. So look at your lighting, your plants, your air filtration, encouraging your employees not to eat at the desk. These type of things, too, are important.

Emily Hurst 20:07

Great, thanks, Molly. I think those are things that any of us that are in managerial situations can start to appreciate and, and try to really work into our everyday style so that it's difficult to say when things will return to normal. But I think this concept of remaining flexible and creating new pathways for careers will be important for us as managers.

Molly Knapp 20:32

It was interesting, it's interesting too when you think about the library workers, and they have responsibilities and then library manage managers, middle management, and deans have a different set of challenges that come with managing a workforce and a public librarian who also presented on this, this series. She, their library, use a caregiver wellness plan for each individual employee in this

public library. And it was a smaller, you know, it probably staff of 25 or something, but, um, as a way to, with respect to privacy, to have a plan for every person in their library, kind of ad. And if they need, like, do you need time? How much time would you need, and then revisiting that, to add that flexibility for all your library staff. So that was, that was one thing that sounded useful a caregiver wellness plan for employees. The other thing that managers need to consider too, is communication. And I know that Beth is going to talk about this too. But one thing that my boss uses in her footer, is just a message. In the footer of her email, she uses a message that I'm saying, you know, I might send emails outside of traditional work hours, but don't feel obligated to respond until it's best for you. Please send me emails whenever you want. But I mean, I could get back to you. So regular office hours. So that's another thing is just clear communication lines and expectations.

Beth Whipple 22:06

Molly, I definitely agree on, I would say clear expectations, but also, where we are right now is maybe adjusting workloads and expectations if you can. I mean, you know, I am incredibly fortunate that I have help to take care of my kids, that I've been stuck in my basement since March, that I don't have to go into work - other of my colleagues, both faculty and staff are going into the library. I am not. And I'm thankful that I have that as an option. That being said, I think it's important to give folks space to not be as productive right now. We've had a stressful year for many reasons, one of the big ones being this pandemic and a huge change to how everyone is functioning. I think it's important to think about priorities and how to prioritize what people's responsibilities are, and being willing to admit that there are some things that just might not get done, or they may get done. But on a much extended timeline. We continue to ask people to do more. And that can be you get to a breaking point where it's okay, well, then what can I give up? And so it could be that maybe the answer is you can't give anything up. But maybe it doesn't need to be done immediately. Our systematic reviews taskforce has looked and especially during this pandemic, if people want us to do a level three, which we get authorship, and we will do the searches for them, write up the methodology, we need at least two to three months, I think is what we have written down in our policy. However, we don't have the bandwidth to take more on right now. And so we've communicated this to folks, we're still willing to meet with them. But we do tell them that either we can take it on right now. Or we can maybe put you in the queue and get you in three or six months, which I know can be hard as librarians when we want to help people because that's what we do. But we also need to, I think not over promise and also be cognizant of the reality in which we live. And we still want to be able to provide good service and not get burned out and come out of this as unscathed as we can. So I don't think it's unreasonable to expect people to be productive. But I think maybe adjusting what is realistic right now. Remembering that everyone's sort of dealing with their own thing. So in someone's best may vary widely, widely from day to day, I can tell you that some days, I'm doing great other days. It's like, I don't even understand what happened. And it's not even over yet. And I just need a break.

Emily Hurst 24:48

Yeah, those are all great. Those are all great recommendations, all great things to consider. Is there anything else you want to add? I think Molly, you've already mentioned the wellness plans, the caregiver wellness plans, I think those are great concepts. Anyway, and obviously being flexible, we've talked to quite a bit about that. And you know, just being able to go to your supervisors and knowing that you need to ask for the time that you need to be successful with your family and for your career. Is

there anything else that you might recommend to any of your colleagues who are out there who have child care, caregiving responsibilities, or just caregiving responsibilities in general.

Molly Knapp 25:30

You have to find a support group. So I have a story, I found a new support group, I befriended a incoming kindergarten parents and the parents, it really a connection was forged, where we have a shared experience, our kids are in the same class. And just having that is a is grounding. You know, I'm having a chat with somebody regularly, doesn't have to be a therapist, and oftentimes, like it can't, because you can afford that. So find, find a support group is really my biggest suggestion and talk, talk it out or journal it out. Don't keep it inside. Be aware of your emotions.

Beth Whipple 26:18

I would add to that I echo that I will say yes, therapy can be expensive, but it can also be really beneficial. So don't just let that scare you. But I agree with Molly having other people who are going through similar or shared experiences can also be really helpful. So first off, I would say, remember to extend to yourself and those around you grace. And I'm, in general, I think that's good, I think especially during a pandemic. So I may be dealing with feeling overwhelmed with kids all up in my space and never getting a break. Your calling may not be dealing with kids stuff. But this pandemic is hard on everyone in different ways. So everyone is having good days, everyone's having bad days. And just keeping that in mind, I think is important. I would say that I pride myself on being able to do many things, not necessarily all the things. But I like to do all the things, I've become slightly better at saying I can't do things or saying no. For example, our research team is down a person. So we had a wonderful colleague take a different job in May. So that was you know, so we're down that position, which then means we've had to pick up some of those things. So one of the things we've done is we've started a pain points document to keep track of all the things we've had to say no to the things that we've had to put off for now. And the opportunities we've had to pass on. So that's helpful for us, I think in looking back and recognizing these are things we want to do, we just don't have the bandwidth. It's also helpful for my supervisor and the director to be able to say, these are the things that we would like to do, but we can't, which is can give hopefully them good reasons for why we need to fill that position. So some other things that I've tried to do. So as much as in my control, I've tried to change one hour meetings to 45 minute meetings. I'm trying to regain my time. And I recognize that some meetings, you know, people show up late or they have to go to other things, or we're just chit chatting. And for some people that's important at times, that's important for me, right now, in this season of my life, I would really let's talk about what we need to talk about. And then let's be done. So I can do my work and sort of again, move my time around as I need to as I can be as productive as I can with what the time that I have. Some of the bibliometric work that I've done has looked at publication trends, specifically looking at gender trends, and in the broad area of bone orthopedic surgery. And not surprisingly, women are underrepresented, you know, trends are showing that going up a little bit. But one of the things that we'd also were thinking about is, look, we don't have this data, but looking at who's submitting right now during the pandemic, who are the reviewers? Because I'm pretty sure that we would see a precipitous drop off when it comes to women and people of color. Like I know, personally, I think I have rejected or declined reviewing three manuscripts because I don't have the time. I would like to, if it's within, you know, within my area of expertise, I don't have the time to take on that additional, essential service to the profession, because I don't have the time.

Emily Hurst 29:34

Yeah, very excellent points. And I definitely see that within my colleagues as well that it's very difficult to try to balance the current environment with the service and the publication output that we were accustomed to previously. With everything in mind, are there any resources that you would recommend for librarians struggling to balance their work with caregiving or childcare rolls.

Molly Knapp 30:01

I highly recommend AAMLA's radical self care series, the African American Medical Library Association series that's ongoing. Also there's something we use in my house called the wheel of emotion. It was developed at school of medicine professor, Dr. Plutchik in 1980. But it's a nice circle, and it has emotions. And you can point to how you're feeling. And that's a good way. That's something that we all use when we're having meltdowns in our household.

Emily Hurst 30:31

How about you, Beth, anything you want to add?

Beth Whipple 30:34

Well, especially since my kids are home so much with me, I reached out to their former preschool teachers to figure out how do we deal with meltdowns. I mean, I would say for all of us, so I think this is applicable for everyone who lives here, there is a website. It's called the National Center for pyramid model innovations. There is a tip sheet on creating a calm down area, which I have shared with multiple people. So you can look at it, this is all free there. There are a lot of great resources. If you go to the website, you can look in the resource library section. And then you can filter by a series of things which, you know, we would all love to be able to do. So again, it's aimed mainly for like preschool age, children and resources to help them process and manage their emotions. But frankly, I think it can help all of us, one of the big things everyone here can do and knows how to do is how to take a deep breath. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who ever does it. But if it helps me keep my cool and from yelling at my child. You know, that's what we do. Sometimes I put myself in timeout and just say, I can't deal with you right now. Because all I'm going to do is yell at you. So I am going to go be by myself for a few minutes, do not come find me. I will come find you when I'm ready.

Emily Hurst 31:59

And just for our listeners, Beth, I've got the URL for that the general URL for the National Center for pyramid model innovations is <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/>. So I'm sure that'll be a quick way for our listeners to get into some of these resources. I think you were specifically speaking about the calm down area tip sheets. But that will hopefully guide some of our listeners.

Beth Whipple 32:25

Think sometimes I feel like that's where my emotions are. And you know what, it's a good place to start or use Molly's wheel of emotion.

Emily Hurst 32:35

Yes, I love the wheel of emotion idea. I need that just for even at the office. So I believe that would be a very handy tool.

Molly Knapp 32:41

It is nice because you just point, you don't even have to say anything. You can take a deep breath, as you point to. That's right. But however you're feeling.

Emily Hurst 32:51

And since this podcast is brought to you by the Medical Library Association, if you don't mind speaking to how the Medical Library Association has provided an outlet for additional support or resources during COVID-19. I think our listeners would love to hear about how the professional organization has provided support as well.

Molly Knapp 33:12

Remote and free learning opportunities. I really, really like that the Medical Library Association is offering the free February membership month. I should also mention that the network of the National Library of Medicine offers free classes that are accredited by the MLA and they can earn you a credential like AHIP or the consumer health information specialization or the brand new data services specialization. And a lot of people might not know this, Emily, but you can earn a CHIS consumer health information specialization completely free through network classes, and will even subsidize your \$55 application fee to MLA up until April 30, 2021. And the network even created a CHIS learning plan in response to COVID. And that's also a nice answer to what are you doing with all your spare time. I'm taking classes, I'm developing professionally.

Beth Whipple 34:14

Thanks, Molly. For that, I wanted to add that I also really liked the ability to watch things live or to register and watch them at one's convenience. Again, that leads to still getting that professional development but with some flexibility built in. Also, the fact that we're still having an annual conference here in May, right is a great way for us to be able to share what we're doing in the middle of this pandemic. And I'm looking I'm really looking forward to sharing what we're doing at my place and learning from all of my colleagues across the country and world.

Emily Hurst 34:47

Thank you and can you tell me what being a member of the Medical Library Association means to you? How do you benefit from being a part of MLA.

Beth Whipple 34:56

It serves as my professional home and I feel supported by MLA and it gives me an opportunity to grow in my profession, and stay connected with my colleagues, which is incredibly important to me.

Molly Knapp 35:10

That's right, Beth. That's absolutely right. Community ideas fellowship. Let's improve health literacy together.

Emily Hurst 35:18

It's been so great speaking with you both today. I am so glad that we were able to find time to do this podcast. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with caregiving for children during COVID-19. I think that this information will be very beneficial to the MLA community as well as to our other colleagues and other types of libraries. I am Emily Hurst and I am MLA. I am Molly Knapp and I am MLA. I am Beth Whipple, and I am MLA.