

NEWS

For Immediate Release
September 15, 2009

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ALA releases new findings from public library technology study

Job-seeking, e-government services up; bandwidth sufficiency, funding decline

(CHICAGO) “Libraries Connect Communities 3: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2008-2009,” a new report released today by the American Library Association (ALA), captures and outlines many of the technology opportunities and challenges faced by U.S. public libraries in the wake of the economic recession.

The study finds that more than 71 percent of all libraries (and 79 percent of rural libraries) report they are the only source of free access to computers and the Internet in their communities. Sixty-six percent of public libraries rank job-seeking services among the most crucial online services they offer – up from 44 percent two years ago. Eighty percent of libraries report helping patrons connect with government information and services – including unemployment forms, Food Stamps and tax information – online.

“For anyone without a computer, you’re really out of luck without the library,” said Elsie Werdin, who spent almost two weeks trying to get the information she needed to enroll herself and her husband in a Medicare plan that would cover her husband’s expensive medications. With assistance from the Pasco County Library System (Fla.) e-government librarian, she was able to complete an online Medicare enrollment form in less than 30 minutes. The Pasco library provided e-government services to more than 9,100 people from October 2008 to March 31, 2009, up 177 percent over the same period one year ago.

“Libraries are part of the solution for Americans struggling to regain their footing in uncertain economic times. Most jobs, and many government services, require that people fill out online applications at a time when many people lack home Internet access and the necessary online search, software or even basic keyboard skills,” said ALA President Camila Alire. “Investing in our libraries is key to ensuring every person has access to vital online information and resources.”

While libraries across the country have reported significant spikes in patron usage over the past 12-18 months, many are struggling to maintain hours and staffing levels to meet demand as funding cuts at the state and local level loom large. Forty-four percent of states reported declines in state funding for public libraries in FY2009 – in some cases as much as 25 or 30 percent. Fourteen percent of libraries reported FY2009 declines in fall 2008, before many of the most serious financial impacts from the recession affected public libraries. About 38 percent of libraries reported budget increases at or above the rate of inflation.

Many of the capacity concerns raised in previous years of the study continue unabated. Despite a nearly 20 percent increase in the percent of libraries reporting Internet connection speeds greater than 1.5Mbps (44.5 percent up from 25.7 percent in 2007-2008), more libraries report connection speeds are insufficient to meet patron demand at some point in the day. "At one time, we would have said a T1 (1.5 Mbps) was just the world, but it just changes too fast. We went from a T1 to two T1s to three T1s to now 15 megabits of fiber," said Beverly Martin, director of the Johnson County Public Library (Ind.), one of the libraries that participated in focus groups in Indiana and Wisconsin.

Additionally:

- One in five libraries still report Internet connection speeds less than 1.5 Mbps (T1), and the disparity between urban and rural libraries is pronounced. About one-third of rural libraries have connection speeds less than 1.5 Mbps, compared with 7.1 percent of urban libraries, and 16 percent of suburban public libraries;
- Rural libraries also have seen no growth in access speeds greater than 10 Mbps over the past three years. Urban libraries, however, are more likely to report insufficient capacity to meet heavy patron demand; and
- Libraries identify cost (23 percent) and lack of availability (26 percent) as the key issues impacting their ability to improve public access Internet connectivity.

“The public library community needs new models for deploying and managing public access technology – especially around broadband. Increasing broadband at the front door may not always provide significant increases at the workstation,” said Charles McClure, co-principal investigator for the study and director of Florida State University’s Information Institute. “Strategies may include expanding the role of consortia and increasing community and government partnerships to leverage economies of scale and meet community needs in concert.”

Hardware availability also is a concern. For the first time in this multi-year survey, libraries reported a decline in new (less than one year old) public access computers, and 61 percent of libraries have no plans to add computers in the coming year. More than 81 percent of public libraries report there are not enough public Internet computers to meet patron demand some or all of the time.

The Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study is conducted by the ALA; the Center for Library & Information Innovation at the University of Maryland (UMCP); and the Information Institute at Florida State University (FSU). The study, funded by the ALA and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, offers the most current national data available on technology access and funding in U.S. public libraries. To view the final report, please visit www.ala.org/plinternetfunding.

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The **American Library Association** is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with more than 65,000 members. Its mission is to promote the highest quality library and information services and public access to information. www.ala.org

The mission of the **Center for Library & Information Innovation** at the University of Maryland (UMCP) is to develop, promote, and support innovative library and information services, practices, librarianship, and information professions through action research that focuses on the technology, information, policy, societal, and cultural contributions of libraries and information organizations (e.g., government agencies, health care organizations, educational institutions) to the communities and individuals that they serve. www.liicenter.org

The Information Use Management and Policy Institute at Florida State University conducts research that focuses on the information user, and the interaction of the user with information products, services, policies, technologies, and organizations. Of special interest is the planning and evaluation of networked and other information services. The Institute also conducts information policy research on current issues at Federal and state levels related to public access, privacy, records management, and use of information in electronic forms as well as other topics. www.ii.fsu.edu

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