

Community Leadership through Public Library E-Government Services

By Amelia Gibson, Charles R. McClure, John Carlo Bertot, Jessica McGilvray, and Jordon Andrade

E-Government, or the use of the Internet as a means to deliver government services,¹ promises to improve the efficiency of government services by providing a faster alternative to paper-based and face-to-face interaction. At the same time, it presents a range of challenges for patrons who need assistance with new technology. Because many patrons do not have computers and Internet access at home, they access E-Government services at the library. A recent report issued by the Pew Internet & American Life Project and the University of Illinois suggests that E-Government is quickly becoming the default for government interaction as more users demand Internet-based options.²

Public libraries and librarians are increasingly called upon to help users access a range of E-Government services and resources, including disaster relief and social services. In addition to providing technical assistance at computer terminals, librarians are asked to assist with computer and Internet skills training, agency referrals, program information, and assistance with agency applications. Now, government agencies have begun to refer people to public libraries to receive both access to and assistance with online services.

One of the more successful implementations of E-Government in the state of Florida to date has been the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) ACCESS program. This program, which replaced DCF's face-to-face operations with a new Internet-based system, effectively shifted the responsibilities of DCF's public service offices to a network of Community Partners that agreed to provide Internet access and, in some cases, assistance with applications and service management.³

Government referrals also occur on the federal level. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) often sends people to public libraries to make online appointments for face-to-face USCIS consultations.

The technology infrastructure and presence of librarians as service personnel make libraries a likely source for the delivery of E-Government services. What is not sufficiently acknowledged is that the use of libraries for the delivery of E-Government comes at a cost. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of E-Government initiatives like ACCESS, librarians need to understand a range of issues related to these initiatives, not the least of which is the cost of delivering such services.

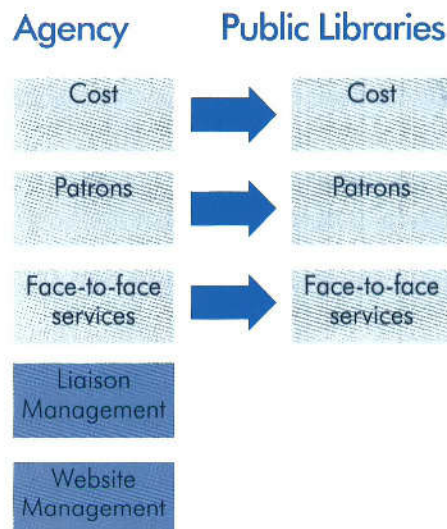
Key Issues

Burden Shifting

Funding cuts at the state and county levels have forced agency administrators to find cheaper and more efficient ways to do business, increasing burdens on public libraries. For example, the ACCESS program has allowed DCF to save approximately \$83 million annually and to operate at approximately sixty percent of its previous staffing level,⁴ but has increased demand for Internet-connected computers and services at public libraries. Whether libraries elect to become Community Partners or not, DCF customers who would have previously visited DCF offices have begun to use public libraries as a place to access information about DCF and as a place to log into ACCESS. According to DCF, the ACCESS program is the manifestation of a new, "responsive...cost effective" business model.⁵

Although one of the goals of ACCESS was to save money on the state level, its implementation has a profound impact on locally

Figure 1 shows the burden shift created by a typical government agency. City and county-funded libraries adopt a good part of the financial burden offloaded by federal, state, and local agencies when they implement online social services programs. Increased demand for library E-Government Internet services has not been accompanied by an increase in resources allotted to public libraries.





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training and for learning how to use these government programs. Additionally, “lost opportunity costs” represent limitations on library staff that keep them from providing other types of community services.

Confidentiality and Liability

Assisting patrons with E-Government transactions often requires librarians to handle sensitive personal information that librarians have traditionally avoided. Many librarians express reservations about departing from the customary role of information provider to provide what they see as social services. In some instances, users need advice on how to complete forms and how best to answer specific questions. This gives librarians the difficult choice between denying patrons assistance they need and putting themselves and their libraries at risk of negative consequences, should a privacy or liability issue arise.

Organizing for E-Government Services

Planning is necessary for libraries to take a proactive role in E-Government. Librarians should become as knowledgeable about frequently requested E-Government sources as they are about other types of resources. Identifying the most frequently requested E-Government services makes it possible to ensure that library resources are allocated wisely. Seeking training from local and state agencies can also increase librarians' ability to serve the needs of patrons who need assistance with agency Web sites.

Strategies for Community Leadership

Public libraries can assume an important community leadership position by working with local and state government agencies in the provision of E-Government services. As agents of “first refuge and last resort,” public libraries have a unique perspective on the

provision of E-Government. Public librarians are on the front line of E-Government delivery and are able to improve upon state and local implementation of E-Government initiatives. Moreover, public libraries are also in a position to understand E-Government services' cost at the point of delivery.

Although the delivery of E-Government services presents a number of challenges to public libraries, the current state of E-Government services in public libraries offers libraries an opportunity to develop strategies that affect the way in which E-Government services are delivered now and in the future. There are a number of practical strategies that public librarians can utilize that could improve the role they play in providing E-Government services.

- **Become involved.** Talk to local and state government officials regarding E-Government services provided by the library. Develop a relationship with local agency representatives to assist the library in being able to better plan for, understand, and provide these E-Government services.
- **Request Training.** If the library has committed to providing E-Government services, training on E-Government applications would help the library's staff to be more prepared to assist patrons with problems. Requesting agency training is a proactive way to take a leadership role in E-Government.
- **Collaborate.** Collaboration among libraries can be a good way to share resources and solutions that might not be cost effective for a single library. Collaboration can also help prevent duplication of efforts among libraries in a system or within a geographic area.
- **Calculate the costs.** What does provi-

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funded library services. As shown in Figure 1, city and county-funded libraries adopt a good part of the financial burden offloaded by federal, state, and local agencies when they implement online social services programs. Increased demand for library E-Government Internet services has not been accompanied by an increase in resources allotted to public libraries.

Costs to Libraries

Cost savings are a powerful incentive for agencies to move services online. What is not usually considered, however, is the cost to the public libraries that provide public access to E-Government services. Minimally, costs would include staff time to provide user assistance, computing and telecommunications, space to provide workstations and other information related to the E-Government services and programs, and staff time for

Selected Readings and Web sites

- Information Institute E-Government Web site:
<http://www.libraryegov.org/>
- Pasco County E-Gov Links:
<http://pascolibraries.org/files/pdf/egovlinks.pdf>
- Pasco County De.licio.us Page:
<http://del.icio.us/PCLSLibrarian>
- ALA statement to the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs:
<http://www.ala.org/ala/washoff/woissues/governmentinfo/egovernment/ALAEGovernmentStatem.pdf>

sion of E-Government services actually cost a library? Keeping track of E-Government transactions and costs can help libraries assess the impact they are making on E-Government, and the effect of providing E-Government services on the library.

- **Let the Community Know.** If the library is providing a range of E-Government services, be sure to let users and community officials know that the library has taken a leadership role in this area. In the process, let them know how important these services are to the community and the benefits resulting from the services.
- **Develop a Policy.** Determining ahead of time what type and level of service the library will provide gives staff a guideline for making decisions about helping patrons with E-Government. Policies can address the liability, privacy, and accessibility issues.

By playing an active role in the process that brings E-Government to public libraries, these libraries can assume a leadership role in E-Government.

Determining E-Government Service Levels

Each library should assess the needs of its population, its available resources, and staff-

ing to determine what level of E-Government services is most appropriate, or whether E-Government services are a viable option at all. This allows libraries to take a more proactive leadership role in their communities. The following framework for determining service levels might be useful:⁶

1. **Access Only:** If the library determines that it does not have sufficient resources, it may elect to limit E-Government services to providing Internet access only. This level of service would basically offer the same service to patrons with E-Government queries as to any other patron.
2. **Resource Provision:** Providing special lists of E-Government resources improves access to patrons who do not know where to find popular services, but it involves a bit of research. This approach would probably require some data on the most used resources in the community and agency contact information. There are a number of ways to provide resources to patrons, including adding E-Government resources to the library's Web site and providing paper brochures listing some of the more popular E-Government services.
3. **Personalized Assistance:** Many librarians are already providing this type of personalized assistance with online



agency forms and applications. Staff time and liability are major considerations for providing assistance. Policies about what type of help, how much help, and who may help should be made clear to library staff, so that everyone remains on the same page.

These are three possible E-Government service levels, but these can be modified or expanded, depending on the interest and resources available at the library and in the community.



“By taking a leadership role in E-Government, libraries and librarians can proactively manage E-Government issues in a way that serves their communities and serves the best interest of the library.”

- Understanding the range of E-Government services that public libraries provide;
- Working with the State Library of Florida and other state agencies to improve the overall provision of E-Government services and resources;
- Improving the communication about the delivery of E-Government services between libraries and state and local governments;
- Identifying specific measures and statistics that can be used to assess the extent and impact of providing E-Government services from libraries; and
- Offering practical guidelines and suggestions to assist public libraries in the provision of E-Government services.

In addition to developing these initiatives, the Information Institute (<http://www.libraryegov.org/index.html>) will be working with the Pasco County Public Library System on E-Government issues and evaluation over the next year.

Providing E-Government Services Leadership

Regardless of the level of E-Government service a library chooses to provide, forethought and planning can ensure that the library is not helpless in the face of E-Government. By creating policies, libraries can dictate the level of E-Government service provided to patrons and take the lead in E-Government decision-making. Collaboration with other libraries in the community can increase the pool of available resources. By taking a leadership role in E-Government, libraries and librarians can proactively manage E-Government issues in a way that serves their communities and

serves the best interest of the library.

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Notes

- 1 Charles M. McClure, Jessica A. McGilvray, Kristin K. Barton, and John C. Bertot, “E-Government and Public Libraries: Current Status, Meeting Report, Findings, and Next Steps,” Tallahassee, Florida: Information Use Management and Policy Institute, 2007, http://www.iifsu.edu/announcements/e-gov2006/egov_report.pdf (accessed December 18, 2007).
- 2 L. Estabrook, E. Witt, and L. R. Ranie, “How People Use the Internet, Libraries, and Government Agencies When They Need Help,” Pew Research Center, 2007, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/677/in-search-of-solutions> (accessed January 6, 2008).
- 3 Florida Department of Children and Families, “Community Access Partnership Network,” Florida Department of Children and Families, http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/ess/docs/brochure_partner.pdf (accessed December 18, 2007).
- 4 State of Florida, “ACCESS Florida Honored as Innovations in American Government Award Winner,” <http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/ashaward.shtml> (accessed December 18, 2007).
- 5 Florida Department of Children and Families, ACCESS Florida & Community Partnerships: Information for Local Partners, Tallahassee: Department of Children and Families, 2007. Available as a Power Point.
- 6 Florida Department of Children and Families, “Community Access Partnership Network,” Florida Department of Children and Families, http://www.dcf.state.fl.us/ess/docs/brochure_partner.pdf (accessed December 18, 2007).

Information Institute Activities

The Information Institute at Florida State University has undertaken a number of initiatives to better understand and describe E-Government services and public libraries in Florida. Of special interest are:

- Developing collaboration and resource sharing models for E-Government services among public libraries;
- Describing and understanding specific costs that public libraries incur in the provision of E-Government services;



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