

PUBLIC LIBRARY FUNDING & TECHNOLOGY ACCESS STUDY 2009–2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Libraries are the most frequent sites of broadband access outside the home. As employers and government agencies automate services online, public libraries play an even more important role in ensuring access to the Internet, as well as training and support in using these resources.”

—John B. Horrigan, Ph.D.,
Federal Communications Commission

76% of public libraries report patron use of library computers increased in 2009.

Virtually every U.S. public library provides public access to computers and the Internet, and two-thirds of libraries report that they are the *only* free public connection point in their communities for these services, according to the 2009-2010 *Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study*. In the grip of one of the most severe recessions since the Great Depression, more Americans are turning to their libraries not only for free access to books, CDs and DVDs, but also for a lifeline to technology training and online resources for employment, continuing education and e-government.

The 2009-2010 Study, conducted by the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Research & Statistics and the Center for Library and Information Innovation at the University of Maryland, builds on and continues the largest study of Internet connectivity in public libraries begun in 1994. Study findings provide a “state of the library” report on the technology resources brokered by our libraries and the funding that enables free public access to these resources:

- Libraries report a greater number of Internet computers available to the public — 14.2 on average per library branch (up from 11 one year ago).
- The vast majority (82 percent) of libraries provide Wi-Fi access.
- Close to one-quarter of all libraries improved Internet connection speeds last year, often aided by E-Rate discounts.
- Public computer and Wi-Fi use increased last year for more than 70 percent of all libraries.
- Eighty-eight percent of libraries provide free access to job databases and other job opportunity resources.
- One in five libraries (21 per-

cent) is partnering with other agencies to provide e-government services.

Clearly, public libraries continue to

play a significant role in providing public access computing resources and services to their communities — a role that increases in importance as the nation addresses difficult economic times.

In fundamental ways, libraries continue to do what they always have done — connect people to the information they want and need to succeed. Libraries have actively adapted to their new role as the “one-stop shop” in the digital world by serving as job and career centers and satellite offices for e-government services while continuing to support learners at all stages of their life.

However, a snowballing of funding cuts at the city, county and state levels endanger community use of the public library when it is most in demand. Just under 15 percent of libraries (up from 4.5 percent last year) report that they decreased their operating hours in the past year — literally locking away many of the technology investments made by taxpayers, private foundations and individual donors. Thirteen state libraries report that they are aware of public library closures due to budgetary reasons within their states in the previous 12 months. This is a meaningful indicator of an upward trend. Based on news reports from Boston to Los Angeles since the fall 2009 surveys were administered, further reductions in library hours and closures in more locations seem likely.

Few institutions are charged with serving people of all ages and backgrounds in ways that stretch from early childhood education to public

programs to social networking to homework help. With more than 16,600 locations throughout the country, libraries provide and complement a range of social services, as well as encourage a love of reading and discovery that is the foundation of the public library.

Libraries Aid Job Seekers

Perhaps the most critical of these social services during the past 18 months has been libraries’ expanding support for job and career services. At a minimum, patrons need access to workstations and an Internet connection to apply for jobs, but this also requires basic computer skills, both information technology and Internet literacy to successfully navigate and use online information, and access to educational resources to meet employment requirements.

“Beginning computer skills are especially important for dislocated workers,” said Brian Clark, operations director for the Nashville Career Advance Center. “Having computer skills won’t necessarily get a person the job, but it means the door won’t be slammed in their face [before they can start the application process].”

This theme was repeated time and again during interviews conducted with public library directors and staff in Tennessee and Arizona this winter.

67% of public libraries are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities.

From establishing the first e-mail account to continuing education, residents are turning to their public libraries to begin or continue building the digital literacy skills needed to find work, file for unemployment and take advantage of an increasing number of online-only opportunities.

Forty percent of library computer users (an estimated 30 million peo-



York County (S.C.) Public Library.

E-Government Support Grows

Another vital service area is ensuring access to government information and services — from tax forms to unemployment benefits to Medicare information. Jumping 27 percent from last year, 88 percent of libraries report this is either important or the most important Internet service they offer to the library community.

Libraries find that their involvement in government services is both increasing and changing in nature. Rather than simply serving as a distributor of government information and forms, public libraries are solving patrons' problems with understanding government agency programs. Continuing a trend noted in 2007, more libraries report they support a range of e-government services:

- Eighty-nine percent offer as-needed assistance to patrons for understanding how to access and use e-government websites.
- Seventy-nine percent provide assistance to patrons applying for and accessing e-government services, up 23 percent from last year.

67% of libraries report staff members helped patrons in completing online job applications in the past year

- Two-thirds of public libraries provide assistance to patrons completing government forms.
- One in five libraries partners with other local, state or federal agencies to provide e-government services, up from 13.4 percent just one year ago.

Increasingly government agencies refer individuals specifically to their local public libraries for assistance and access to the Internet for citizen-government interactions, but often fail to provide support to libraries in meeting this service need.

"To get any kind of government form now you have to go online. There's a real segment of society

ple) used library resources to help address career and employment needs in the last 12 months.¹

"More people are asking about computer classes, so they can learn skills for the new jobs they were searching for at the library. We have a lot of people that have been laid off, or their business closed after 20 years, and they haven't had computer experience over the past 20 years," said one suburban Arizona library director.

Nearly 90 percent of all public libraries offer formal or informal technology training to library patrons — encompassing classes, one-on-one scheduled appointments, online tutorials and point-of-use assistance. Classes range from basic computer and Internet skills to software use to social networking skills. The number of libraries that report offering classes in online job-seeking and career-related information grew 15 percent nationwide.

Libraries also purchase and provide free access to specialized jobs and career databases and software that would otherwise be cost-pro-

hibitive for most individuals:

- Eighty-eight percent provide access to job databases and other job opportunity resources.
- Seventy-five percent provide access to civil service examination materials, a figure that increases to 86 percent in urban libraries.
- Sixty-nine percent of reporting libraries provide software and other resources to assist patrons in creating résumés and employment material, a figure that increases to 81 percent in urban libraries.

Beyond the provision of free access, two-thirds of libraries report that their staffs help patrons complete job applications. Libraries also collaborate with outside agencies or individuals to help patrons complete online job applications, and develop business plans and other materials to start businesses.

Libraries also purchase and provide free access to specialized jobs and career databases and software that would otherwise be cost-pro-

FIGURE A-1: BUDGET IMPACTS FOR ONE PENNSYLVANIA LIBRARY

that I think is kind of getting lost in all the technology. Libraries are providing that service for those people. And we're really about the only place they can get computer access," a rural Tennessee library director said. A March 2010 Federal Communications Commission-funded study echoed this concern. "The shift to online [government] services represents a huge challenge for many social service recipients, and it disproportionately affects people at the low end of the socio-economic ladder. Those who require social service support the most are consistently the least likely to be able to afford either a working computer or home access and the most likely to need help accomplishing tasks online."²

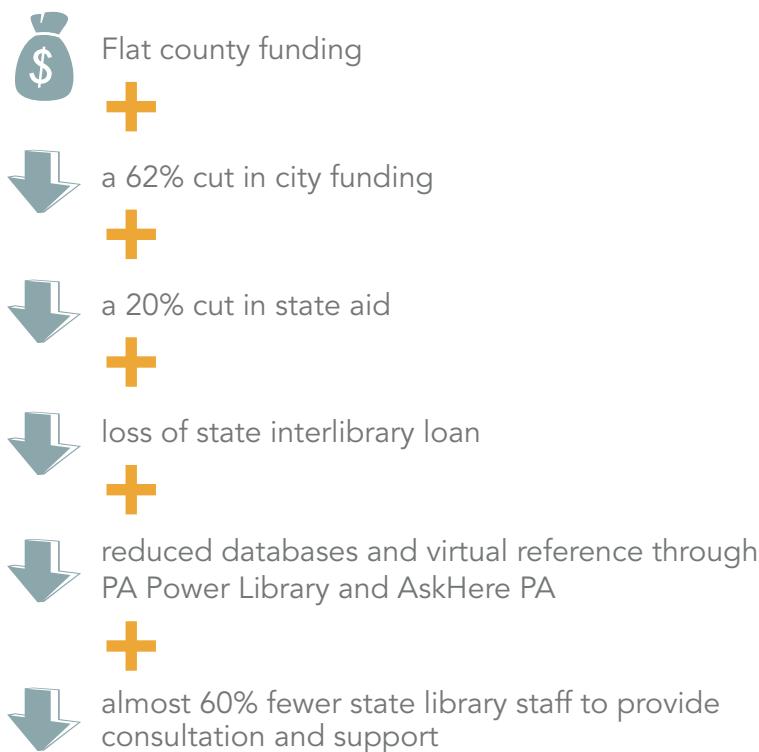
Funding Tightens

The economic downturn that began in December 2007 has had an impact on public institutions, among them libraries. Flat funding has been a decade-long obstacle — perhaps a chronic problem — for many libraries.³ The continued erosion of local and state tax bases in nearly every community, resulting in large part from high rates of unemployment (reduced income tax), the troubled housing market (decreased property tax) and declines in sales tax receipts, has seriously affected 45 states and the District of Columbia.⁴

More libraries reported declines in fiscal years 2009 and 2010, and anticipate continued reductions in FY2011:

- A majority (56.4 percent) of public libraries report flat or decreased operating budgets in FY2010, up from just over 40 percent in FY2009.

- Nearly 27 percent overall anticipated requests for further reductions in the current operating budget (FY2010), with more urban libraries (54.6 percent) anticipating operating budget decreases than suburban (41.6 percent) and rural libraries (26.5 percent).



- Staff salary/benefits expenditures dropped 43.3 percent in FY2010 from FY2009, and collection expenditures fell 47.5 percent.

- More urban libraries (54.6 percent) anticipate operating budget decreases during the current fiscal year, followed by suburban (41.6 percent) and rural libraries (26.5 percent).

Although fewer libraries report detail for technology-related expenditures, very modest improvements were evident in FY2010 from FY2009. One way that libraries are protecting these services is by leveraging connectivity discount programs — more urban libraries (66.9 percent this year compared with 54.9 percent last year) reporting applying for E-rate discounts in FY2010 than in FY2009.

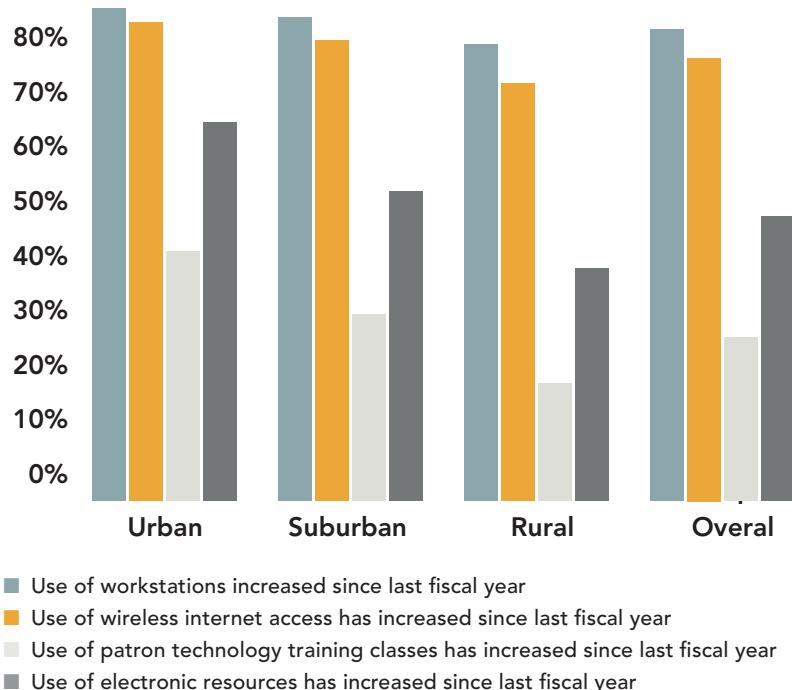
Another funding complexity affecting public libraries are reductions in state support. In a November 2009 survey of Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) 24 states reported cuts in state funding for public libraries between FY2009 and

FY2010. Of these, nearly half indicated the cuts were greater than 11 percent — almost four times the number that reported this was the case in the previous fiscal year — and 11 states reported level funding between FY2009 and FY2010. Only three states (North Dakota, New Mexico and Texas) reported an increase in funding in the November 2009 survey.

For many states, FY2010 budget cuts come in addition to the state funding cuts made between FY2008 and FY2009. Georgia, for instance, has experienced state funding reductions greater than 7 percent each year for the past three fiscal years.

Combined with declining funding to public libraries are reductions to state library budgets — nearly three-quarters of state libraries report decreased budgets that directly impact their ability to support public libraries. Impacts include lost staff to provide consultation and continuing education; reduced state expenditures for collections, subscriptions,

FIGURE A-2: INCREASED USE OF TECHNOLOGY RESOURCES ACROSS METROPOLITAN STATUS



databases, and new or replacement equipment; and the elimination of reciprocal borrowing.

Together, these data provide evidence of a cumulative reduction in support for many local libraries as they face lost revenue at the local and state levels. These reductions are exacerbated by significant reductions in the state library infrastructure that provides support for everything from summer reading programs to shared electronic resources, to program development and continuing education (Figure A-1). These losses also threaten to trigger cuts in federal support due to a 34 percent required match to the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) federal allotment.⁵

Urban Libraries Under Pressure

While libraries of all sizes are responding to increased public de-

mand in a more financially constrained economic environment, in 2009 urban public libraries reported patron technology use is up dramatically in all areas, demand frequently outpaces library resources, and budget reductions cut deeper than those experienced by their suburban and rural counterparts. Six percent of U.S. public libraries serve almost 60 percent of the population and make up nearly 60 percent of total library expenditures, [exaggerating the public impact](#) of these recession-induced pressures on urban libraries.

With traditionally larger expenditures, buildings and staff, urban libraries, on average, are able to offer more robust technology resources and services than their rural and many suburban counterparts. For example:

- Urban libraries average 25.4 public Internet computers (com-

pared with 14.2 nationally).

- Close to 88 percent of urban libraries provide free Wi-Fi access.

- One-third of urban libraries increased their Internet connection speeds last year, and 37 percent offer connection speeds greater than 10 Mbps.

- Fifty-nine percent offer formal technology classes, as well as informal technology support and online training material.

- More than 90 percent of urban libraries offer licensed databases (98%), homework help (94 percent) and audio content (91 percent).

- Just under 32 percent have at least one staff member with significant knowledge of e-government services.

- Thirty-three percent collaborate with outside agencies to help patrons complete online job applications.

At the same time, however, they struggle to meet the demand for these services:

- Nearly one-quarter (24.5 percent, up from 7.4 percent last year) of urban libraries report having reduced their operating hours over the past 12 months, about 10 percent higher than the national average for all libraries.

- 40 percent report there are consistently fewer public Internet computers than patrons who wish to use them throughout a typical day. Another 47 percent report this is an intermittent issue at different times of the day.

- More than half (52.2) report that connection speed is inadequate some or all the time. More now have wireless and desktops on the same connection without bandwidth management techniques (41.6 percent, compared with 31.5 percent last year).

More than 66 percent of urban libraries report decreased operating budgets since last year, with most reporting substantial decreases greater

than 6 percent (30.4 percent, compared with 7.4 percent last year). Another 11 percent report flat operating budgets. The net effect of these reductions is a sizeable drop in urban library operating budgets overall, with few able to keep pace with inflation. Urban libraries reported a cumulative decline of more than \$5.2 million in operating expenditures in FY2010 from FY2009, driven largely by declines in donations/local fundraising and private foundation grants.

Nashville Public Library has seen cuts in its operating budget almost every year since FY2004, with a resulting decline of 17 percent in hours of service between FY2004 and FY2009. "Since adding the new Main library and the five Area libraries, we have more square footage and fewer staff. To accomplish this and still offer good customer service, we have had to think creatively and use technology very heavily. We could no longer function without things like self-check and self-service holds," said a library staff person.

Unfortunately, the trend does not appear to be improving as libraries plan for FY2011; 43.2 percent of urban libraries anticipated *additional* cuts before the end of FY2010. Seventy-four percent of urban libraries anticipate flat or decreased operating budgets in FY2011. Considering that public libraries responded to the national survey between September and November 2009, news reports since then allude to further cuts. Boston, Indianapolis, New York City and Phoenix are just a few of the cities facing not just reduced operating hours, but library branch/outlet closures.

What's Next?

While libraries report budget reductions in FY2010 and anticipate little improvement in FY2011, funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is anticipated to improve technology access at some public libraries. Two-thirds of state

librarians responding to the Fall 2009 COSLA survey report having applied for ARRA funding, with 100 percent seeking funds through the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). Administered by the National Telecommunications Information Administration, BTOP provides grants to fund broadband infrastructure, public computer centers and sustainable broadband adoption projects. Together with the Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP), \$7.2 billion was appropriated to expand broadband access to unserved and underserved communities, including community anchor

Communities around the country can benefit from improved library technology resources only if library doors are open, and there is adequate staff to manage and support public access.

institutions like libraries.

In interviews this winter, for instance, Arizona public libraries were hopeful BTOP funds would help replace outdated and add new computers. The state application was granted in the spring, and, as a result, an estimated 1,000 desktop and laptop computers will be added at 84 libraries across the state.

The National Broadband Plan and its underlying research specifically referenced the roles public libraries are playing in their communities as Internet access points, digital literacy labs and sites for e-government deployment. Indeed, the plan recommends that the public library community should request that Congress provide additional support for digital literacy and improved computing and connectivity.

However, communities around the

country can benefit from these opportunities only if library doors are open, and there is adequate staff to manage and support public access. A majority of libraries further report that availability of space (75 percent) and availability of electrical, cabling or other physical infrastructure (54 percent) are important factors limiting their ability to add public computers — even if funds were available to purchase them.

Conclusion

Data from the 2009-2010 Study describe a mixed landscape and paradoxical environment. Libraries have expanded technology resources, particularly around workforce development and e-government, to meet rising demand, but many are hampered by outmoded buildings and funding reductions that threaten every aspect of service, including available staff and hours open. Public libraries need sustained support for their services to ensure that the safety net they provide to millions in the United States remains in place. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Becker, Samantha, et. al. (2010) *Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries*. (IMLS-2010-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, D.C. Page 6.
2. Dailey, Dharma, et. al (2010). *Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities*. Social Science Research Council report. <http://www.ssrc.org/features/view/broadband-adoption-in-low-income-communities/>
3. American Library Association. *Funding Issues in U.S. Public Libraries, Fiscal Years 2003-2006*. March 2006. <http://www.ala.org/ala/research/librarystats/public/fundingissuesinpls.pdf>
4. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "An Update on State Budget Cuts: At Least 45 States Have Imposed Cuts That Hurt Vulnerable Residents and the Economy." Last accessed May 28, 2010. <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1214>
5. Manjarrez, C., L. Langa, K. Miller. (2009). *A Catalyst for Change: LSTA Grants to States Program Activities and the Transformation of Library Services to the Public*. (IMLS-2009-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, D.C. Page 7.