

U.S. PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND



E-GOVERNMENT SERVICES

“I still recall the first time we helped a patron file for unemployment benefits. We had to start by teaching him how to use a mouse. He told us he had tried for two days to reach the local unemployment office by phone, gave up and went to the office... they told him to go to the local library and file online.” – Tennessee library

As Government Goes Online, Libraries Feel Impact

Libraries in the United States always have had an important role in ensuring free and open access to the world's knowledge, including information documenting the work of our democracy and resources for connecting with government agencies at all levels. In the wake of a number of state, local, and federal government initiatives, policies and laws (including the E-Government Act of 2002), the roles of public libraries as an online access point, a place for assistance learning to navigate computer and Internet resources and a trusted source of information have become more vital in communities nationwide.

U.S. public libraries are on the front lines of connecting people with essential government resources in the wake of both natural and economic disaster. As unemployment has climbed in 2008 and 2009, public library staff members have noted increased use of library computers for filing unemployment applications, as well as for writing resumes and online job searches. Several state libraries have partnered with state workforce agencies to train librarians to meet growing demand for assistance in completing government forms, locating economic assistance programs and creating online pathfinders to government and non-profit services.

As of June 2008, Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) had 783,000 Food Stamp households and 1.8 million Medicaid recipients. Ninety percent of DCF benefits applications are submitted via the Web.

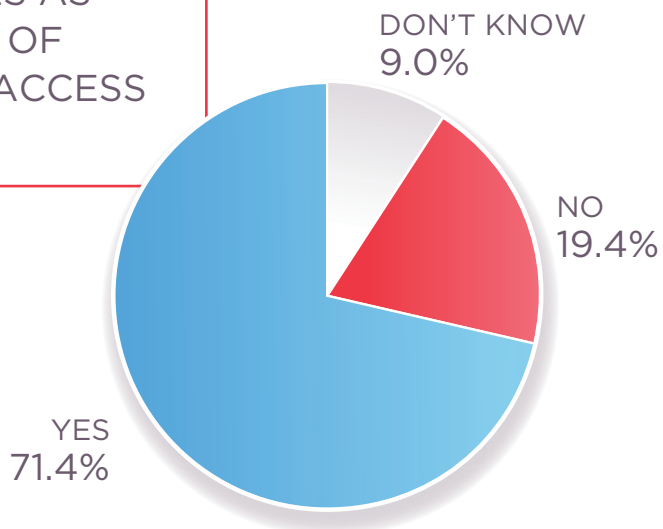
During Hurricane Katrina and other hurricanes that impacted the Gulf States between 2004 and 2006, libraries served as information centers regarding health, recovery, and other critical information. Displaced families and first responders used library computers and wired and wireless Internet access to access federal (FEMA) and state recovery assistance programs online.

The 2008 Digital States Survey found that more than 80 percent of states provide online transactions for business and individual tax filing and payment, unemployment insurance applications and professional license renewals.¹ Government services, resources, and information are becoming more digital, and in some cases, digital only.

In 2008, 64 percent of eligible Utah drivers renew drivers' licenses online, versus 31 percent by mail and 4 percent at a Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) office.

At the same time, millions of Americans lack home computer and Internet access. 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.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AS
ONLY PROVIDER OF
FREE INTERNET ACCESS
IN COMMUNITY



Source:
Public Library Funding &
Technology Access Study
2008-2009

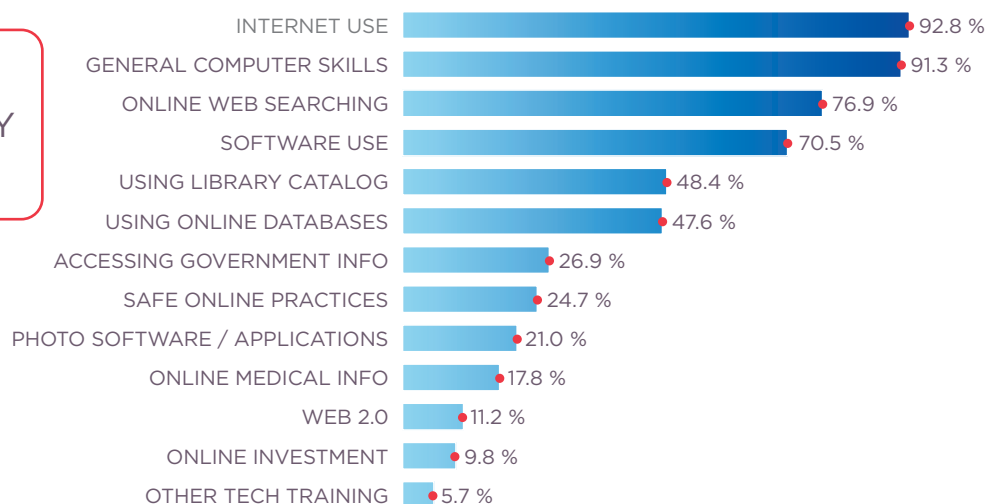
Public Libraries Serve as Technology Hubs

Our nation's 16,592 public library locations serve more than 97 percent of Americans in communities large and small. Over the past decade, libraries have reported increased visits – now reaching almost 1.4 billion annually – and use of public computers has climbed to over 330 million each year.

Public libraries provide substantial public computer and Internet services. In particular:

- A majority of public libraries (71.4 percent) report being the only provider of free public access to the Internet in their communities;
- Public libraries offer an average of 11 public access computers per building;
- Nearly all public libraries (98.7 percent) offer public access to the Internet;
- Many public libraries (76.4 percent) offer wireless (Wi-fi) access; and
- Public libraries offer a number of training classes and/or as-needed assistance on a range of topics, particularly Internet use (92.8 percent), general computer skills (91.3 percent), online Web searching (76.9 percent), and software use (70.5 percent).ⁱⁱ

LIBRARY TECHNOLOGY TRAINING



Source:
Public Library Funding &
Technology Access Study
2008-2009

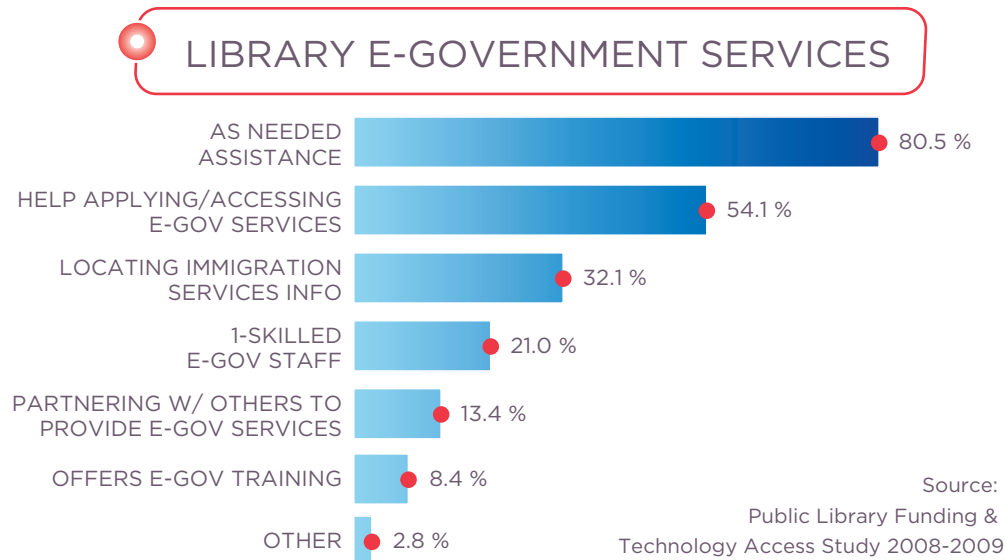
Together, these services provide a full suite of critical community support. At the same time, however, public libraries are challenged to meet growing patron needs. Most significantly:

- Nearly 60 percent (59.6 percent) of public libraries report that their Internet connection speeds are inadequate to meet patron needs some or all of the time;
- A vast majority of public libraries (81.2 percent) report that they do not have enough computers to meet patron demand some or all of the time; and
- Over 90 percent (94.1 percent) of public libraries impose time limits on the use of their public access workstations, and most have time limits of 60 minutes or less.ⁱⁱⁱ

Taken together, these data suggest that public libraries offer substantial technology services to the communities they serve – but with constraints.

Public Libraries as Providers of E-government

Public libraries are part of the larger government fabric that deliver a range of essential E-government services. Library patrons report using public workstations to perform a variety of E-government tasks, such as filling out forms for disability and Social Security, completing Medicare Part D online forms (prescription drug benefit program), making appointments with immigration officials, filing court petitions, taking driver's tests, and paying fines online.^{iv} Sixty-one percent of libraries report providing access to government information is one of the most critical Internet services they provide.



Communities rely on public libraries to provide no-fee access to these crucial services. Patrons not only count on public libraries to provide computers and Internet access, they also trust librarians to help them use E-government Web sites, locate appropriate information and resources, and complete applications and other forms. This is particularly the case for individuals who do not own or have home access to computers or the Internet.^v

In response to these community needs, public libraries respond to patrons' requests in a range of proactive and critical ways:

- Providing as-needed assistance with accessing government Web sites, navigating government Web sites, completing forms, or otherwise being able to access or use government services. Eighty percent of libraries report providing as-needed assistance with E-government services, and another 54.1 percent report providing help with applying for and/or accessing E-government services;
- Receiving basic computer and Internet instruction so as to be able to access E-government services and resources;
- Securing e-mail accounts, or otherwise meeting basic requirements for using E-government services;^{vi}
- Applying for disaster recovery assistance;^{vii}
- Applying for unemployment assistance and other social service benefits;^{viii} and
- Serving as a liaison between government agencies (local, state, and federal) and patrons in need of help.^{ix}

These services enable public libraries to provide essential service responses and fill community needs as more government services and resources are available – increasingly only – online. The roles public libraries play are particularly important for the 43 percent of Americans who do not have high-speed Internet access at home – and for low-income Americans for whom broadband adoption has stalled.^x

“ People come in every day to apply for unemployment. They could also go to the unemployment office, but the lines are long there, and there is no one to help them navigate. The library’s hours also are more conducive since they can look for work all day, then come to the library at night. ”
– Indiana library.

Challenges Moving Forward

Public libraries around the country have jumped feet first into the world of E-government services. A willingness to provide a service, however, does not mean that the libraries are able to do so as well as they might wish. Nor do these services come without important issues such as privacy and liability concerns regarding the types and nature of support libraries can or should provide users regarding health, financial, employment, and other sensitive information.

Libraries find that their involvement in government services is both increasing and changing in nature. Rather than simply serve as a provider of government information and forms (i.e., distribution center for government tax forms), public libraries are being asked to help patrons solve problems with their understanding of government agency programs. Though trained as specialists for a wide range of information resources, librarians more and more help patrons understand and use government services at the federal, state, and local levels and provide other support services without additional resources.

This reliance on public libraries in turn leads to greater needs within the library. These needs include, but are not limited to:

Financial Need.

All levels of government have begun to use the Internet with greater frequency – particularly federal and state governments. This increased reliance on the Internet for provision of government information and services requires time-consuming support – but 90 percent of library budgets come from local government funding and non-tax revenue. This is a growing concern as local governments are finding it harder to support the libraries in their communities at past levels due to the current economic environment. Increased funding for libraries could be used in many ways: to increase the bandwidth of the library; allow for more staff to be hired; allow for more computers to be purchased; and increase training for the library staff to better serve their community in E-government services.

“ Money is needed for public libraries...to keep them open, to keep resources available to those who have no other place to turn. We can’t expand bandwidth or add more computers if we can’t keep our doors open. ” – Florida library

User Needs.

Providing E-government services is often a multi-layered process. Not every patron comes into the library with technology ability. Before a librarian can begin to locate the needed government information, s/he must often first teach basic computer skills.

Libraries respond to this need in different ways. Many offer computer classes to the public that educate in basic computer and Internet use, as well as specific software and specialized online resources. Library staff members consistently report these classes continue to be well-attended and valued. Other libraries, often lacking dedicated computer labs and/or adequate staff to teach these classes, instead provide one-on-one assistance as needed or by appointment.

Other libraries have begun to create checklists for popular government forms.^{xi} These checklists allow the patron to know what information is needed for successful E-government interaction, and the librarian is then able to provide any additional help before the patron begins filling out the form – for example, helping the patron sign up for a free email account, have appropriate documentation ready, or other requirements.

Another way some libraries have responded to the increased need for E-government computer usage is to dedicate a computer for E-government use or allow their catalog computers to be used to access any .gov Web site.

Staff Resources.

In terms of staff, there are two key issues: adequate staff levels and staff expertise. Library staff often are drawn in many different directions on any given day, as they are responsible not only for providing traditional reference service, but also are called upon to provide in-depth support to job seekers, first-time computer users and those navigating complex government Web sites. Depending on the computer knowledge of the patron, a librarian could be asked to spend hours with one single patron. Given staffing levels in libraries, this is not always possible.

“ I’ve noticed that many of our customers coming to the library are seeking basic computer skills training ... they are happy when they discover we have this kind of help available, however, we do not have enough staff time to do as much training as is needed. ”

- Maryland library

In addition, public library staff members benefit greatly from training themselves – in such areas as government services, forms and Web pages (all of which frequently change). In 2008 and 2009, several state libraries teamed with other state agencies to cost-effectively train librarians to assist newly unemployed residents. In North Carolina, which had the fourth highest unemployment rate in the country, the State Library teamed with the Employment Security Commission and the Department of Commerce to train librarians across the state to help patrons connect with employers, to create an online job search toolkit and expand job-related collections. Each workshop included a panel of representatives from local workforce organizations, including JobLink, Workforce Development Office and representatives from local community colleges.

A member of the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development staff stated she has never been so overwhelmed in her 20 years working with career centers in the state. The agency collaborated with the Tennessee State Library & Archives to train librarians to assist with the demand for assistance filling out unemployment forms and assisting with job-related issues.

Staff also would benefit from notification that a new service is going to be introduced, services and/or programs are changing, or any additional significant changes. This notification would allow the librarians’ time to learn about the service and be prepared for patron questions, issues, and needs.

“ Often times you don’t know something has become an E-government service until it begins to happen over and over. This was the case with the SafeLink phones. Libraries were totally unaware of this service (which provides free cell phones and airtime to income-eligible customers in select states and areas) until we were bombarded with customers who needed to know how to apply. ”

- Florida library

Usability of Government Web sites.

There is no consistency of service, design, or Web site usability across E-government services and resources. Each branch of government, and the different agencies within each branch, provides E-government services and resources differently. This creates a range of challenges for patrons who need to access multiple services, but also for librarians helping patrons meet their E-government needs.

“ There are approximately 24,000 U.S. government Web sites now online (but no one knows the exact number). Many agencies focus more on technology and Web site infrastructure than improving content and service delivery. ” - *Putting Citizens First: Transforming Online Government* (white paper by Federal Web Managers Council)

There is a need to improve the usability of government Web sites – government service designers need to understand not just user limitations, but also the limitations of public access venues like the public library. If a patron is filling out a government form that is unable to be saved, that patron will lose his/her work when the allotted computer time expires. Equally problematic, some government forms will time out if a person takes too long adding information to the page. For someone who is new to computers, or has language or other issues, it is unreasonable to assume that they will be able to complete the page in the time allotted.

“ We recently helped someone complete forms with the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service). I will tell you that it is very complicated for someone who speaks English let alone someone who doesn't. ” - *New York library*

Conclusion

Libraries around the country are implementing various strategies to best serve their community with E-government services. This is particularly true as communities face a number of challenges in the current economic climate. There is a growing need for governments and public libraries to collaborate in the provision of E-government to best meet the needs of their service communities. By working together, government agencies will attain more successful E-government, libraries will be able to meet patron needs more effectively, patrons will resolve their E-government needs, and communities will have more successful E-government strategies in place.

Contributors

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ALA Office for Research & Statistics, 800-545-2433



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