



U.S. Public Libraries & E-Government Services

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 the E-Government Act of 2002 and other state, local and federal government initiatives, 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.

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

At the same time, millions of Americans lack home Internet access, creating an opportunity gap in connecting to a wide range of government information and services. 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.

"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 librarian.

Public Libraries Serve as Technology Hubs

Our nation's 16,604 public library locations serve more than 97% 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 357 million each year.

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

- Two-thirds of public libraries report being the *only* provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities;
- Public libraries offer an average of 14 public access computers per building;
- Nearly all public libraries (99%) offer public access to the Internet;
- Most public libraries (82%) offer wireless (Wi-Fi) access; and
- Most public libraries offer formal or informal technology training. Formal classes include general computer skills, online Web searching, software use, job seeking, and social networking.

Together, these services provide a full suite of community support for connecting people to critical online information and services.

E-Government Role Expands

Library patrons report using these technology resources 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. Sixty-three percent of libraries report providing access to government information is one of the most critical Internet services they provide.

"The irony of the government requiring people to do everything online is that it most affects the people who don't have the resources to go online." – Indiana library director.

As many government agencies eliminate print forms and even close satellite offices, U.S. public libraries are on the front lines of connecting people with essential government resources. Continuing a three-year trend, libraries report an increased range of e-government services for patrons. In 2010, almost 79% of libraries report they provide assistance to patrons applying for or accessing e-government services, up 23% from just one year ago.

One in five public libraries is partnering with other agencies to provide e-government services, up from 13% one year ago.

Libraries Challenged to Keep up with Demand

At the same time demand for critical services has climbed, many state and local libraries are facing funding and infrastructure challenges. Close to half of state libraries reported cuts in state funding for public libraries between FY2009 and FY2010, and 13 states reported they were aware of public library closures in their states the past 12 months.

"Libraries have been shifting resources to accommodate the ever-growing demand for online services, but governments have generally not recognized or funded this expansion of service." – Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities (SSRC, 2010)

Nearly one-quarter of urban libraries and 14.5% of all libraries (up from 4.5% last year) report operating hours have decreased since the previous fiscal year. Nationally, this translates to lost hours at more than 2,400 public library branches.

Despite ongoing improvements in their technology infrastructure, libraries report patron demand often exceeds their resources. Seven out of 10 public libraries report they do not have enough computers to meet demand some part of the day, and 45% say the Internet speed is insufficient to meet needs some or all the time.

Looking to the Future

Libraries around the country are implementing various strategies to best serve their community with E-government services. There is a growing need for governments and public libraries to collaborate to best meet the needs of their communities. By working together, government agencies will attain more successful E-government, libraries will be better able to meet patron needs, patrons will resolve their E-government needs, and communities will have more successful E-government strategies in place.

For more information

This brief report presents selected findings from the *Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study*, available online at www.ala.org/plinternetfunding. The study is conducted by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Center for Library & Information Innovation (University of Maryland).