“The digital age is creating an information and communications renaissance. But it is not serving all Americans and their local communities equally. It is not yet serving democracy fully. How we react, individually and collectively, to this democratic shortfall will affect the quality of our lives and the very nature of our communities.”

—Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in the Digital Age, Knight Commission
The 2010-2011 Study, conducted by the American Library Association (ALA) Office for Research & Statistics and the Information Policy & Access Center at the University of Maryland, builds on the largest study of Internet connectivity in public libraries that began in 1994. Study findings provide an annual “state of the library” report on the technology resources brokered by our libraries and the funding that enables free public access to these resources.

As U.S. public libraries emerge from the aftermath of the Great Recession, they continue to provide vital public access to computers and the Internet, so critical to millions of people negatively affected by the economic downturn. Libraries serve as “first responders” for the increasing numbers of people in need of technology training and online resources for employment, continuing education and access to online government services. With free access to high-speed Internet and expert assistance to aid those working with technology resources, libraries serve as a “toll-free” bridge over the digital divide.

Despite very real economic strain, there is some positive news to report from the library front:

- Today, virtually all public libraries (99.3 percent) provide public access to computers and the Internet.
- Libraries report a greater number of Internet computers available to the public – 16 on average per outlet (up from 14.2 one year ago).
- Over 87 percent of libraries provide formal or informal technology training.
- Almost 86 percent of public libraries provide Wi-Fi access.
- Over two-thirds (67.2 percent) of libraries offer access to e-books, up 12 percent from two years ago.

However, there are also disturbing reports about libraries unable to meet an ever-growing demand for services. While some libraries reported stable funding this year, the cumulative effect of budget cuts at the local, county and state levels over the past three years are severely straining the resources of libraries nationwide:

- Seventeen state libraries (compared with 13 last year) reported that they are aware of public library closures in their states in the past 12 months.
- Overall, 16 percent of local libraries reported decreased operating hours in the past year, up from 14.5 percent last year, and 4.5 percent just two years ago.
- Over 76 percent of libraries (up from 73.5 percent last year) reported an insufficient number of public computers to meet demand some or all of the time.
- Nearly 45 percent of libraries reported that their Internet connection speeds are insufficient some or all of the time.

Reports of proposed or scheduled library closures continue to emerge from many states, including Colorado, Florida, Michigan, New Jersey and Texas. Further, public libraries are struggling with reductions in hours that are hindering public access to vital technology resources. In three states, the percentage of libraries reporting reduced open hours was much greater than the national average of 15.9 percent: Ohio (49.9 percent), California (44.5 percent) and Georgia (31.5 percent). As a result, millions of people are locked out of the essential library services upon which they depend — from access to social services to literacy resources and training to meet the demands of the 21st century global marketplace. For the third year, the greatest impact (Figure A-1) was experienced by those living in urban communities; nearly one-third (31.7 percent) of urban libraries reported reductions in hours in FY2011.

**Cumulative, Ongoing Funding Cuts**

The effects of the ongoing erosion of local and state tax revenues affect all public institutions at local and county levels. County libraries struggle, along with other services, as county government is forced to scale back. In a February 2011 survey of county governments, more than half of the counties surveyed now have fewer

“People want to be connected or share items but they still have no Internet resources at home, and overall I’m seeing a general expectation of faster, better, and more, more, more.”
county workers in FY2011 than in FY2010, and 47 percent have delayed purchases and repairs.¹

In some cases, libraries appear to be bearing the brunt of the budget cuts made in their communities. In November 2010, U.S. mayors reported that cuts in hours, staff or services at local libraries were second only to those in maintenance and services at parks and gardens.² Anecdotal reports from municipal and county libraries confirm that local cuts have affected the replacement and/or upgrade of public access technology; maintenance of technology and services is a challenge, with reduced staffing levels at both the library and other local government departments.

For the third consecutive year, an increasing number of libraries reported fiscal decreases, and anticipate continued reductions in FY2012:

- Nearly 60 percent of public libraries reported flat or decreased operating budgets in FY2011, up from 56.4 percent in FY2010 and 40 percent in FY2009.
- Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of libraries anticipate flat or decreased operating budgets in FY2012.
- More urban libraries (55 percent) reported operating decreases during the current fiscal year, followed by suburban (36.2 percent) and rural (26.9 percent) libraries.

State support for public libraries also continues to erode, affecting not only expenditures for collections and equipment, but the number of state-level staff available to provide consultation and technical assistance to public libraries. In a November 2010 survey of Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) (http://www.cosla.org), 19 states reported cuts in state funding for public libraries over the past 12 months. Of these, over half indicated that the cuts were greater than 10 percent. During the past four years, more than half of these states have reported a cumulative 10 percent budget decrease.

However, all of the budget news is not bleak. After a wide swath of dramatic expenditure decreases last year, libraries finally reported signs of leveling off. Staff salary/benefits expenditures, which had dropped over 43 percent last year, only decreased 5.7 percent in the current fiscal year. Collections expenditures, which fell 47.5 percent last year, slowed to a 7.8 percent decrease.

While budget cuts and reductions in expenditures reported in this year’s survey are less dramatic than last year, the cumulative effect requires continuous budget rebalancing and tough choices regarding services. The choice is no whether the libraries will or will not make service cuts, but where they will make the cuts. In interviews with the California libraries selected for this Study, this is the greatest challenge to maintaining access and quality of service. Specifically, library directors pointed to the difficult choice between maintaining library hours with reduced staff and services, versus opting for reduced open hours with higher staffing levels in order to support greater access to resources. Additional pressures exist for the nearly two-thirds (64.5 percent) of libraries

One Oklahoma library director reports a major retail outlet no longer provides employees with a printed W-2; it is up to the employee to access it online...so the library's computers and printers have been in high demand.
that report they are the only provider of free public computer and Internet access in their communities.

**Libraries Persevere, Increase Services**

Regardless of fluctuating budget levels, libraries are still striving to fulfill the needs of their communities, serve people of all ages and backgrounds, and provide technology services that range from basic computer skills to homework help, from career advice and assistance in applying for social services. Use of technology resources to support these services remains high. Data from this year’s Study shows:

- A majority (70 percent) of libraries reported increased use of public access workstations.
- Three-quarters (75 percent) of libraries reported increased use of Wi-Fi.
- Almost half (49.8 percent) of libraries reported an increase in the use of electronic resources.

To meet patrons’ needs, libraries plan to add computers and make other enhancements:

- Twenty-three percent of libraries anticipate adding public computers or laptops in the coming year.
- Nearly 6 percent of libraries plan to add wireless access within the next year.
- About 13 percent of libraries plan to increase bandwidth in the coming year.

Regardless of the planned increases in bandwidth, wireless availability, and the number of public access computers, libraries consistently reported that their public access technology is insufficient to meet current levels of use. Survey results and anecdotal reports highlighted the following challenges to resource sufficiency:

- Libraries reported that the three most important factors influencing the addition of computers are cost (78.7 percent), space (77.2 percent) and availability of electrical outlets, cabling or other infrastructure (54.4 percent).
- Almost 80 percent of libraries report that their wireless access is shared with existing public access workstation connections. This shared connectivity puts additional drain on the limited available broadband during the periods of heavy use that libraries are experiencing more often, especially given the increased number of mobile devices tapping into library wireless systems.
- Cost, rather than availability of higher-speed connections, constrains libraries. Almost 30 percent of libraries reported that while they have an interest in increasing bandwidth, they cannot currently afford to do so.

**Job-seeking Services Remain Highly Rated**

For the second consecutive year, libraries reported that services for job-seekers rate as the most important public Internet service provided to the community. Ongoing high unemployment continues to drive people to the library to access job resources.

A national study\(^3\) reported that in 2009, 4.4 million economically impacted Americans used the library for essential job-related activities, such as seeking assistance in preparing a resume and for finding general job information. In response, libraries continue to increase their job-seeking services:

- A large majority provide access to job databases and other online job resources (90.9 percent, up from 88.2 percent in last year).
- Over three-quarters (77 percent) provide access to civil service exam materials, a figure that increases to 90.1 percent in urban libraries.
- Over 74 percent of libraries offer software and other resources to help patrons create resumes and employment materials. In this category, suburban libraries reported an increase of almost 10 percent over last year (78.4 and 68.7, respectively).
- Nearly 72 percent of libraries help patrons complete online job applications, an increase of 5 percent over last year’s data.

An increasing number of libraries (88.5 percent, compared to 82.4 percent last year) reported that it is very important or most important for the library to provide access to government information and ser-

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**FIGURE A-2: PUBLIC INTERNET ACCESS COMPUTER USE AND SUFFICIENCY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient use of public access computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient number of public access computers to meet demand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient Internet connection speeds to meet demand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figures represent percentage of reporting libraries.
of a national survey released in 20104 that reported that 26 million people used public library computers to get government or legal information or to access government services. Of these, 58 percent downloaded a government form, such as Social Security paperwork, tax forms and Medicare enrollment documents. Nearly half submitted a government form using a library computer. In this year’s Study:

- A majority of libraries (89.7 percent) provided assistance for understanding how to access and use e-government websites.
- A majority of libraries (80.7 percent) provided assistance for applying to or accessing e-government services.
- Nearly 68 percent indicated that staff provided assistance in completing government forms.
- One-quarter of all libraries partnered with government agencies, non-profit organizations, and others to provide e-government services.

Next year’s Study is expected to reflect two recent changes in how tax materials are accessed when libraries are asked to report on e-government services. In January 2011, the Internal Revenue Service announced that it would no longer mail out tax forms and directed people to community access points, such as the library. Another foreshadow of change was reported by an Oklahoma library director: a major employer in the area is no longer providing employees with a printed W-2 document; it is up to the employee to access it online and print a copy. This library director indicated that only a small percentage of the residents have Internet access at home, so the library’s computers and print-ers have been in high demand.

### Federal Stimulus Projects Anticipated to Improve Internet Access

In a time of flat and decreased budgets, funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) is anticipated to improve technology access at some libraries. In 2009, the ARRA appropriated $7.2 billion to expand broadband access to unserved and underserved communities, including community anchor institutions like libraries. The funds were awarded in two rounds in 2010.

In the 2010 COSLA survey, state libraries reported on activities to acquire ARRA Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) or Broadband Initiatives Program (BIP) funding. Thirty-six states reported that they had applied for funding; of those that applied, 27 states reported that they were successful in securing funding.

For the first time in survey history, public libraries were asked to report whether they had applied directly for, or were included in applications submitted by another entity, for either BTOP or BIP. Forty-five percent of libraries reported applying for ARRA funding; the highest percentage of applications were from urban libraries (56.9 percent), followed by rural (45.7 percent) and suburban (41.5 percent) libraries. The survey did not measure which libraries received this funding.

### Conclusion

Data from the 2010-2011 Study present libraries grappling with a “new normal” of flat or decreased funding, paired with increased demand for public library technology resources. The result is a mix of the grim austerity, reflected in decreased operating hours and closed library outlets, in contrast with the robust delivery of technology resources that support workforce development, e-government services, and skills training for the competitive global marketplace.

“Libraries have been and are continuing to transform themselves to be responsive to the needs of the populations they serve,” said ALA President Roberta Stevens, “… Libraries are busy because they are central to the lives of millions of families, students, older adults, entrepreneurs and those who require assistance in weathering the economic challenges of the past few years.”

If public libraries are to continue to provide critical, transformational service, local, state and federal funding must be restored and enhanced.

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**ENDNOTES**


