CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

As this report demonstrates, libraries have moved rapidly into Internet-based services, have in many respects reached capacity both with regard to availability of computers for the public and infrastructure to support them, and rely heavily on local funding to support these services. As we look to improving access in the future, we must acknowledge that significant support is necessary to help librarians maintain and grow services.

The authors of this report offer the following observations and recommendations to improve the environment for libraries and enhance free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities. Many of these recommendations have been made before in earlier Public Libraries and the Internet studies, but there has been little movement in these areas. It is our hope this call to action will help to begin or advance dialog at all levels.

Making Buildings Work for Public Access Computing Services
Libraries struggle to build sufficient infrastructure for providing free access to technology services. Retrofitting old buildings to accommodate new technology is expensive and in some cases may be impossible without major renovations or a new building. It may be easier to upgrade electrical and telecommunications infrastructure in newer library buildings, but the space may not be available to add more computers. One Utah library is addressing this by providing laptop computers to its patrons, but nationally only 7 percent of libraries are purchasing laptops instead of desktop computers. Further, NCES public library data demonstrates the dearth of capital revenue to support even minor renovations. Often fewer than 50 percent of libraries in any state benefit from capital revenue and, of those that do receive funding, a majority receive less than $50,000 to make improvements.

Hiring or “Growing their Own” IT Staff
Dedicated IT staff is essential to supporting library technology, and keeping library staff trained to use the myriad of resources available is critical. The study reports that local funding is the primary source of fiscal support for IT staff and staff training. Sadly, many libraries reported having inadequate or no dedicated IT staff. For many libraries, staffing is small and there are too few to attend off-site IT or Internet training. Another concern anecdotally reported in the focus groups and site visits was the pending retirements of library workers. In two studies conducted by the ALA (2002 and 2004), similar to many professions, retirements will significantly impact libraries in the next 10 years.8

Responding to the Ongoing Demand for Books and Traditional Library Services
More and more people are visiting the library, and they are demanding the traditional services (books, audio, video, etc.), as well as the technology. Household surveys reinforce that people

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read, and they use their local libraries to find and borrow books.\textsuperscript{9} NCES public library data show that annual circulation totals increase between 2 and 3.5 percent each year, translating into more than 45 million additional circulations each year.

Library use is up, as well, increasing an average of 3 percent each year (about 38 million visits). This is not just adult use. In fact, teens also are strong library users. A recent study conducted for ALA of teen use of libraries indicated 78 percent used the public library to borrow books and other materials for personal use, and 67 percent borrowed books and other materials for school assignments in the last year.\textsuperscript{10}

**CALL TO ACTION**

Investments must be made to ensure that basic community services provided by libraries are sustained. Public libraries have moved strategically into providing innovative services while maintaining those services highly valued by their communities. Keeping up with rapidly changing technologies while maintaining existing and sometimes older technologies, and providing longstanding services such as summer reading programs and homework assistance, have stretched libraries’ budgets.

How can community stakeholders, government agencies and other library partners support libraries as they transform their services to better serve communities?

There are five related areas that demand attention from the public library community, national and state library associations, national and state library agencies and organizations, regional library consortia and networks, library and information science schools and funders:

**Funding**

Reliable and sustainable funding is essential for libraries to provide the services patrons so clearly value, and demand.

- Technology and technology-related services have become basic services in public libraries. Yet they are too often funded as “extras” or non-essential services. While libraries get more than half of their technology funding from local taxes, they also rely too heavily on fundraising and grants (10.8 percent). In fact, money raised in this manner nearly equals what comes from state and federal sources.

- Libraries should receive adequate funding so they do not have to compromise their collections. In the decade 1994-2004, more of the responsibility for funding public libraries shifted away from state and federal government to the local level in all but a handful of states. Since 2000, library operating budgets have experienced very little growth. Libraries dealt with this by redistributing expenditures away from collections to staff to cover contractual salary increases and retirement plans (1.5 percent increase), and


to pay for services and technology (only a 0.8 percent increase). Libraries in our smallest communities were most seriously impacted.

**Figure G: Operating Revenue by Source, Fiscal Years 1990-2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiscal Year</th>
<th>Federal (in thousands)</th>
<th>State (in thousands)</th>
<th>Local (in thousands)</th>
<th>Other (in thousands)</th>
<th>Federal Percent of Revenue</th>
<th>State Percent of Revenue</th>
<th>Local Percent of Revenue</th>
<th>Other Percent of Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
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<td>$3,275,507</td>
<td>$384,591</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>$610,451</td>
<td>$3,578,827</td>
<td>$419,393</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>76.8</td>
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<td>$3,927,973</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<td>10</td>
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</table>

All data from NCES *Public Libraries in the United States* annual reports

- There appears to be less federal and state money available to help local libraries pay for hardware, software and technology improvements. This is due, in part, to state libraries and state governments using state and federal (LSTA) funds to pay for database licensing, digital virtual reference and other services, and because federal filtering requirements (CIPA) limit how federal dollars may be applied. This trend has the biggest negative impact in small communities, and state libraries should explore and address this inequity.

**Training and Planning**

The 2007 study clearly indicates the need for public librarians to obtain a range of additional training and knowledge. The most important areas for training include:

- *Management of information technology.* Public librarians need to better understand how to plan for and evaluate information technology and networked services. There is
inadequate knowledge of what constitutes “sufficient and adequate” bandwidth given the library’s existing network services and current and future user demand for these services. As a result, there is inadequate planning of networked services and even less ongoing and formal evaluation to determine the effectiveness and impact of public library information technology deployment and networked services. A particular evaluation need is the ability of libraries to demonstrate the value that library technology adds to the communities that libraries serve.

- **Deployment of information technology.** Given the various issues related to limited physical facilities (as discussed above), librarians need to learn how to better deploy, arrange, maintain, and maximize the space and facilities currently available for public access computing. Because the majority of libraries will not receive significant renovation or new capital expenditure money in the near future, how to best take advantage of existing physical facilities with least cost and effort is essential.

- **Information technology and network finances.** The limited response to questions on the survey related to information technology expenditures and the numerous responses of “don’t know” suggest that there is a critical need for public librarians to maintain better records and better understand the types of information technology expenditures, what exactly is being spent on what types of information technology and networked services, and the costs and impacts of competing forms of hardware, software, and telecommunications.

- **New models for information technology management.** There are a number of innovative approaches for how libraries are re-thinking how information technology and networked services can be organized through new models. Some libraries receive such services directly from the state library, some have developed consortia for sharing information technology costs and maintenance, others outsource information technology management and maintenance and so forth. Librarians need to be aware of new and evolving models and be able to make informed decisions about how they might work best in their particular situation.

- **The ability to communicate the need for and the impact of library services.** The 2007 study confirms findings from previous years that librarians need to do a better job of “telling their story” on the importance and impact of public access computing to their community. This includes a range of advocacy efforts such as partnering with key groups in the community, working the political environment better, and marketing/promoting the impact of public access computing. Qualitative and quantitative data should be used to accomplish these objectives.

**Internet Services**

The study demonstrated that public libraries are expanding and evolving services to meet public demand and needs. Public libraries, for example:

- Offer a range of training programs, including computer skills, Internet searching and database use, e-mail instruction and information literacy;
• Assist students and parents with school assignments;
• Provide education support for adult learners;
• Provide disaster services and support to victims of natural disasters;
• Provide support for a range of e-government services such as application filing, disaster relief application, income tax filing, and many others; and
• Provide employment support through workshops and enabling the public to submit employment applications electronically – a practice increasingly required by employers.

This list of services and resources is not exhaustive, but rather demonstrates the range and breadth of public access services that libraries provide to the communities that they serve. Because many of these services are available to the public remotely through the library’s Web site, the library serves as an Internet provider in both the physical and digital environments.

Public libraries offer these services by and large, however, without any clear mandate from any authoritative agencies. Rather, public libraries offer these services and resources because library staff saw a need in their communities. For example:

• Federal, state, and local governments increasingly mandate the use of e-government approaches for government-citizen interaction and yet provide no place or support for users to actually engage in those services. Thus, those individuals without the knowledge or capacity to engage in e-government head to the public library for both assistance and access to technology.
• During the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005, residents in the Gulf states flocked to their public libraries for assistance in filing disaster relief applications and locating family members – something neither Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) nor state equivalents were equipped or prepared to do.
• Students often use the public library after school hours to research and complete a range of school projects and assignments. These require the libraries to develop collections, license resources, establish tutoring services, etc., to assist students with these efforts. And yet, public libraries are not included in the education system and budgets.

The public library community should engage in discussions with state and local government agencies, including education departments and e-government agencies, to bring public libraries to the table and discuss the role of public libraries in the support of education and government services and resources. For too long public libraries, in their service to their communities, have provided support to educational and government programs out of their own resources, and the strain is beginning to show. The outcome of this discussion should be the identification of specific roles that public libraries can provide, support mechanisms for public libraries to successfully provide these services, staff training requirements, and other public library needs.

Facilities
Anyone who visits public libraries is immediately struck by the diversity in design, functionality, and architecture of the buildings, reflecting the communities they serve. The building design, however, also can be a substantial challenge to public libraries since many libraries are quite old and were never designed for functionality in a networked environment. The increased integration of technology into library service places a range of stresses on buildings – physical space for
workstations and other equipment and specialized furniture, power, server rooms, and cabling, for example. Patron needs also present challenges, particularly the need for power so that they may plug in their laptops or other devices, as well as conducive spaces to work.

The shift from the federal Library Services and Construction Act to the Library Services for Technology Act in the 1990s marked a clear move away from federal support of library construction and renovation projects to technology-based projects and services. Current efforts undertaken by the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) to review state construction support is a good first step in benchmarking library construction and understanding the impact of this change in funding strategy.

Results of this research should be carefully reviewed by national and state library associations and the IMLS to meet the physical facility needs of public libraries as they increasingly operate in the networked environment.

**Information Policy**

Public libraries operate in a complex information policy environment shaped by federal, state and local governments. Government policymakers have not often given adequate policy attention to the role of public libraries in today’s society, the types of laws and regulations that would best support public libraries, and how governments can better partner with public libraries as a means to benefit the population at large.

There is a need to address a number of public policy issues related to public libraries, including:

- What are the responsibilities of federal, state, and local governments in supporting public libraries and the various services public libraries provide?
- What roles and responsibilities should public libraries provide to assist residents to be successful in today’s and tomorrow’s society?
- To what degree are librarians adequately prepared to offer these roles and activities successfully?
- How can federal and state government best support library building and technology infrastructure to meet the increasing load of public access computer and Internet services and resources?
- What are the roles for public libraries as the United States develops a national telecommunications policy? What responsibilities do federal, state, and local governments have to provide adequate bandwidth in support of public library services?
- Are adequate resources available to public libraries to accomplish these roles and activities?
- How successful are public libraries in meeting public access computing, networked services, and e-government roles and responsibilities?

These specific questions can foster national, state and local discussions intended to reevaluate public libraries’ roles in the areas of public access computing, networked services, financial support for public libraries, and e-government.

Taking action will require library organizations and agencies at the state and national levels to understand and address the topics and issues the authors have identified in this section. In
addition, these key organizations and agencies can establish policy discussions with members of Congress and the current Administration regarding these and related federal information policy topics. The ALA Office for Information Technology Policy is well-suited to coordinate this effort. Ultimately, strategically positioning libraries in a national and statewide dialog to extend libraries' impact and effectiveness strengthens the country as a whole.

**Additional Resources**

This study, of course, does not exist in a vacuum. Not only do the Public Libraries and the Internet studies ground this data, but report contributors also pulled on other data sources and were informed by other research done in the library field. Cited sources are listed in footnotes throughout the report, but the authors also would like to draw attention here to several sources that contribute to understanding the value of library services in general and/or the challenges and opportunities afforded by expanded technology resources in our libraries.


Davis, Denise M. *Funding Issues in U.S. Public Libraries, Fiscal Years 2003-2006*. March 2006 [http://www.ala.org/ala/ors/reports/FundingIssuesinUSPLs.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/ors/reports/FundingIssuesinUSPLs.pdf)


MaintainIT Project. [http://maintainitproject.org/](http://maintainitproject.org/)


