



# Digital Equity and America's Libraries

**B**roadband access, adoption, and use are essential to every aspect of life. Yet one in five (or 24 million) U.S. households lack home internet. Low-income individuals and families, those in rural or tribal areas, people of color, and people with disabilities are disproportionately under connected, a reality exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. America's libraries are essential to addressing these gaps.

Libraries: (1) provide internet access both at and beyond the library (2) spur home adoption by increasing awareness of and confidence in using online resources and services, and (3) support digital learning opportunities that boost K-16 education, workforce skills, entrepreneurship, telehealth, and other areas.

Federal funding helped millions of Americans access the internet during the pandemic. Now initiatives driven by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) promise to expand high-speed

broadband access and digital literacy for unserved and underserved communities. State and federal decision-makers and other public and private entities should look to libraries as critical players and partners as they plan and implement digital equity strategies.

## Takeaways for decision makers

- **Libraries ensure Americans have access to broadband and the digital skills needed to thrive online**—leveraging expert staff, community outreach, and technology infrastructure to boost digital equity, literacy, and inclusion nationwide.
- **Libraries are cost-effective and efficient partners** with a proven track record of stewarding public funding to meet community needs and achieve policy goals. This expertise should be leveraged for current initiatives to close the digital divide.
- **Federal and state policies must further the promise of E-rate modernization**, as well as promote competition and transparency that enables local choice among broadband providers.

## Providing Internet Access and Bridging Gaps

Libraries across the country have a long record of providing no-fee public internet access and increasingly have extended this service beyond library walls. For example, Alamance County (NC) Public Libraries' Mobile Café, a Wi-Fi enabled van, has been stationed where internet access is limited due to geography and affordability. Librarians in K-12 schools and colleges and universities often lead efforts to connect students lacking technology access. "We checked out 143 laptops to students needing devices. This helped some students persist who may not have in this new learning environment," according to the Hawkeye Community College Library in Iowa.

To identify and fill connectivity gaps, libraries often partner with local governments, non-profits, businesses, and other groups. With the City of Shreveport (LA), the Shreve Memorial Library created Universal Digital Access, an initiative designed to provide free, home internet access (including devices) to those most in need using the library's existing fiber and the City's cellular network.

## Cultivating Lifelong Digital Literacy

Libraries also help people navigate the online world and build digital skills. Library professionals provide support through formal classes and programs, via one-on-one appointments, online training, and informal on-demand assistance. Digital Navigators at the Salt Lake City (UT) Public Library, for one, offer assistance with foundational

computer skills and help connect residents to low-cost internet services and devices. The program has become a national model.

Overall, 88.3% of public libraries offer digital literacy training, with a particular focus on foundational skills, including general computer (82%), software (76%) and internet (83%) use. Digital literacy training at libraries extends beyond technical skills to include critical thinking, problem-solving, and a mindset of lifelong learning. Training options, including coding (31%) and robotics (21%) continue to evolve as new technologies emerge.

In Connecticut, Naugatuck Valley Community College and Waterbury Public High School librarians partnered to develop and deliver an information literacy instruction program for high school students to ensure they had the skills needed for college. Libraries empower people to create, collaborate, and learn new digital skills.

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Hawkeye Community College Library in Iowa

## Boosting Home Broadband

As trusted community institutions that people already turn to with their connectivity needs, libraries act as a bridge to facilitate home internet adoption. Digital navigators, hotspot loan programs, promotional activities, and other outreach increase awareness of the benefits of broadband use and subscription.

Almost one-third of public libraries—in communities of all sizes—offer internet hotspots for checkout. Programs range in size, scale, and intent. The Seattle (WA) Public Library loans Wi-Fi hotspots to low-income housing developments and community organizations, while Broward County (FL) Libraries provide mobile

### **L**ibraries steward federal funding to successfully meet community needs.

Boston Public Library, for example, used FCC Emergency Connectivity Funds to offer long-term lending of hotspots and Chromebooks to adults who do not otherwise have access to equipment or services sufficient to meet their learning needs.



hotspots to Veterans and active military members. Santa Rosa (CA) Junior College also offers hotspots students can check out for the semester.

The Indianapolis Public Library (IN) and Oil City Library (PA) have hosted webinars on the Affordable Connectivity Program and how to help low-income households get connected. Research has found a 6% higher ACP enrollment in zip codes with a public library compared to those without.

## Applying Digital Skills to Work and Life

Libraries advance local economic development, resiliency, and wellbeing by helping community members find employment, start businesses, upskill, reskill, and access healthcare. According to the National Skills Coalition, 31% of workers lack adequate digital skills. Participants who complete the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) healthcare course at Queens (NY) Public Library learn how to create resumes and communicate better with peers and supervisors. They are then connected through the library to home care agencies. The University of Alabama at Birmingham's LibLab spaces allow faculty, staff, and students to explore current and emerging digital technologies such as 3D printing, virtual reality, graphic design and more.

For those starting their own businesses, many libraries provide access to and training for specialized software and databases, as well as makerspaces, co-working spaces, business management expertise, and individualized business assistance. The Yakama Nation (WA) Library provides technology with specialty applications and training to low-income, Alaska Native and American Indian populations to conduct business research. Libraries such as Gwinnett County (GA) Public Library, for instance, support formerly incarcerated individuals to start a business through their New Start Entrepreneurship Initiative.

Libraries are partnering to provide access to telehealth, which is especially needed in rural areas. The Pima County (AZ) Public Library, for one, launched

Health Connect at two locations, each of which provides secure and private environments for individuals to connect with doctors and access technology from digital stethoscopes to blood pressure cuffs.

## Getting up to speed

Affordable high-speed broadband is essential to provide modern library services, but it is not available to all libraries. While the FCC established broadband goals of 100 Mbps for smaller libraries and 1 Gbps for larger libraries, a 2020 survey found that roughly 17% of public library locations still lacked the 25Mbps/3Mbps download and upload speeds recommended for consumer households. In addition, the FCC National Broadband Map fails to accurately represent libraries and other anchor institutions, which

undermines access to critical broadband infrastructure funds for underserved locations.

Inadequate broadband capacity impacts the number of devices that can be supported at libraries. Streaming media, virtual classrooms, and telehealth services demand faster

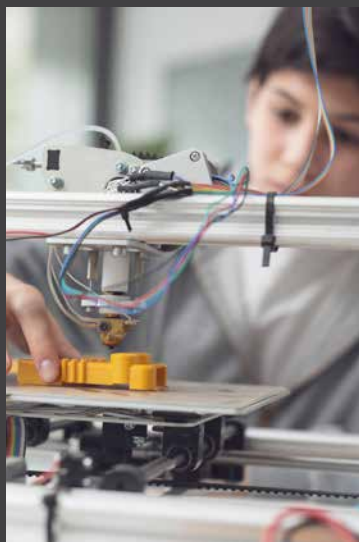
and higher-quality internet speeds. In rural communities where broadband prices are higher, the library may be the only provider of these resources.

The longstanding federal E-rate program provides critical funding for public and tribal libraries to upgrade and sustain broadband connections. The American Library Association (ALA) continues to work with libraries and the FCC to leverage E-rate funding, share best practices to boost broadband capacity, and urge simplification of the application process. Federal, state, and local broadband planning and upgrades must include libraries and other community anchors. ■

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# About America's Libraries



**T**he 123,000 libraries across the United States are a powerful force in addressing public policy priorities. Libraries advance **Education, Employment, Entrepreneurship, Empowerment, and Engagement for Everyone, Everywhere—The E's of Libraries®.**

The American Library Association (ALA) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 145 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government, and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.



**ALA** American Library Association

For further information about this publication, contact:

**Larra Clark** (lclark@alawash.org)  
**Megan Janicki** (mjanicki@alawash.org)

phone: 202.628.8410



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