



# DIGITAL SKILLS BUILDING AT LIBRARIES

## Empowering Communities Across New Mexico and the Nation

As technology further shifts the economic landscape, libraries prepare American jobseekers to enter the workforce, reskill to meet evolving requirements, and succeed as business owners.

Public libraries in New Mexico and nearly 17,000 strong across the country: (1) help people secure employment through job search, resume writing, and interview training, (2) provide internet access and digital skills programs that encourage use of emerging technologies and empower entrepreneurship, (3) collaborate with other community stakeholders to identify workforce challenges and build vibrant local economies.

With many communities hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and facing economic challenges, libraries are a critical part of the economic safety net, now more than ever.

### Building digital skills

In the small, mostly rural town of Belen, New Mexico, 23% of adults do not have a high school diploma, 32% of households are below the poverty line, and nearly one third lack home internet access. In light of these circumstances, the Belen Public Library provides critical resources to bridge the digital divide. This includes offering 48 public

computers with internet access, as well as programs on basic digital skills, job resources, and career information. The library’s Computer Learning Lab helps people gain the confidence and skills necessary to make digital resources work for them, de-mystifying computer use in a supportive environment and helping participants move from uncertainty to confidence. The

### TAKEAWAYS for local, state and national public officials, and potential partners



- Libraries in New Mexico and nationally support jobseekers, entrepreneurs, and local businesses.
- Libraries are well-placed to offer digital skills training and economic empowerment programs to all Americans, including those with few alternatives or resources.
- Libraries are cost-effective and efficient partners that should be included in the development and implementation of workforce and economic development initiatives.

library provides digital skills support for elderly, disabled, and economically struggling community members, as well as individuals lacking formal education and those learning English as a second language.

For example, Belen Public Library staff noticed that one man brought his laptop to the library 2–3 days a week to use the public Wi-Fi network. He was looking for a job that would pay his bills until he reached retirement but was thwarted in his search by limited computer and Internet skills. He was frustrated because he knew the computer was a path to a job, but he didn't know enough to make effective use of it. The library's computer coach helped him to refine his searches on job sites, referred him to the job placement services and training available through Goodwill, and directed him to online resume templates and other aids. Libraries offer this type of practical aid on a daily basis, assisting library visitors, and by extension, the community.

### Outreach to the community

Libraries work hard to ensure that their programs are welcoming and accessible. To build community awareness of digital skills training and other opportunities provided by the library, the Belen Public Library hosted an Open House. Local residents, ranging from age 16 to 75, learned about online resources and the hands-on assistance available at the library to improve computer skills, workforce skills, and support personal and professional development. By the end

of the event, the library had obtained the contact information for 56 patrons who were interested in attending some aspect of the library's ongoing computer workshops. The library staff have previously observed that in the community people are often shy about new opportunities, or assume opportunities are not meant for them unless they receive a direct personal invitation. Thus, the library followed up with each participant by phone or email to forge personal connections and encourage people to attend workshops that might be of special interest to them. Ultimately, the Belen Public Library aims to construct "customized learning ladders" for its workshop participants, moving individuals from basic computer skills to more advanced use of quality online resources and ultimately to better job skills and career opportunities.

### Providing opportunity for youth

In addition to adult programming, libraries provide opportunities for youth to explore career paths and gain concrete job skills. The Belen Public Library's Girls Who Code program introduces young women to an exciting, well-paid possible future career in coding, while opening up a pathway to a variety of STEM-related opportunities. The library has also offered a weekly program for teens designed to increase their financial literacy and career readiness. By

combining guest speakers with online resources and engaging activities, the library works to raise awareness of personal budgeting, basic workplace skills, and the potential for careers in technology. Addressing the needs of another group of youth, Belen Public Library has also provided a Computer Basics class for special needs students from the BEST program, which teaches life and job skills to young adults ages 18–22. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library has revised its Girls Who Code program to run on a hybrid model of outdoor face-to-face and online meetings, while the youth financial literacy and BEST programs are currently being redesigned to be offered virtually. ■

**"Our strategy is to build long-term, customized relationships with our community members."**

—Belen Public Library

**"Our approach to workforce and economic development is to meet people where they are and support them, through training, access to resources, and programs."**

—Belen Public Library

### ACROSS the United States



**98%** of public libraries provide wireless internet access (WiFi), a vital resource for job seekers

**90%** of libraries offer digital skills training

**73%** of libraries help people apply for jobs

SOURCE: [digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/DigitalInclusionBrief2015.pdf](https://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/sites/default/files/DigitalInclusionBrief2015.pdf)

# ALA American Library Association

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