

Statement For the Record

By

The American Library Association

To

The U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

For the Hearing

“E-Government 2.0: Improving Innovation, Collaboration and Access”

December 11, 2007

Librarians working with and for the American public know first-hand, on a daily basis, the importance and impact that government information has on the health and lives of all Americans, on the economic well being of our Nation, and on the preservation of our democracy. Libraries support the *Electronic Government Act of 2002* (“*E-Government Act*”) that has enhanced access to government information; however, since the enactment of the *E-Government Act*, public libraries are often the *only* organizations that can help individuals interact with government agencies and access E-government services.¹ When government moves to save costs by E-Government, they pass the costs to public libraries, yet the library community has seen little collaboration or support from federal agencies for the significant increase in services public libraries provide on their behalf.²

Studies reflect that this increased reliance on public libraries for access to E-Government services has placed new pressures on public library’s technology and personnel infrastructures. Public libraries are concerned that they will not be able to maintain the quality of public Internet access, especially the demands of the Web 2.0 environment.³

Public libraries serve over 97 percent of the total population. There are over 9,000 library systems and over 17,000 libraries including branches. Increasingly government agencies refer individuals specifically to their local public libraries for assistance and access to the Internet for citizen-government interactions. Yet public libraries are not considered members of the E-Government team. Libraries struggle with increasingly smaller budgets and expensive ever-

¹ 73.1 percent respondents to a 2007 large-scale national study of public libraries indicated that their public library is the only provider of free public Internet access in the library’s community. See “Public Libraries and the Internet 2007,” Information Use Management and Policy Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, July 2007.

² The federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) provides only one percent of overall public library operating budgets.

³ John C. Bertot and others, “Public Libraries and the Internet 2007” (Information Use Management and Policy Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, July 2007), 8.

changing technology in order to assist thousands of Americans on a daily basis because the public relies on them.

The American Library Association has supported the *E-Government Act* since it was first introduced, and testified on the benefits of its purpose and goals. The *E-Government Act* was an important step in enhancing public access to government information and harnessing the power of the Internet. One of our stated concerns with the *E-Government Act* was disparities in access to the Internet—the Digital Divide. The availability of government services should not be diminished for those who lack access to the Internet. Since the *E-Government Act*, federal agencies have concentrated their focus on establishing their presence on the Internet, but true public access does not end there. There is still a need to provide public service in order for public access to work.

Libraries have a critical role in E-Government not only as portals to access, but also organizing and categorizing information and providing the necessary tools and expertise to provide community service. Librarians provide the front line reference service that informs the public how to access and evaluate government information through both physical and virtual collections and how to train people in the use of electronic resources. Libraries help the public become information literate.

Libraries have traditionally provided assistance to the public with government information; however, new formats and technologies, an influx of online social services, as well as a misconception that all individuals are information literate, has presented great and new challenges.

Public libraries are providing E-Government services to those without access to a computer and the Internet access as well as those lacking the requisite broadband needed to use today's Internet sites and services. Many of these users may be computer illiterate. Not only do these users require access to the Internet, but they require assistance in navigating the Internet as well as interpreting agency sites of which 56 percent are at a 12th grade reading level, higher than that of the average American's.⁴ Public libraries are not only serving the disadvantaged and elderly, libraries are also assisting individuals that may be information literate, but want one-on-one assistance in maneuvering these complex government agency websites and forms.

A 2006 E-Government survey of public libraries in Florida found that 88.1 percent assist citizens in completing job applications, online training, and unemployment claims; 78.6 percent assist in locating or completing Medicaid registration or prescription drug forms; 67.9 percent assist in contacting immigration and naturalization service; and 86.9 percent assist in locating or completing social service forms.⁵ Libraries in this study also reported that federal agencies had referred citizens to the library for services. Of the libraries surveyed, 78 percent said that

⁴ Darrell M. West, "State and Federal E-Government in the United States 2007" (Taubman Center for Public Policy, August 2007), 3.

⁵ Charles E. McClure and others, "E-Government and Public Libraries: Current Status, Meeting Report, Findings, and Next Steps" (Information Use Management and Policy Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, January 2007).

completing social service forms was one of the two most time intensive services. For many of these forms, librarians have become unintended experts.

The study also found that 86 percent of the libraries provided public access computing used to access emergency relief services and benefits such as FEMA during times of disaster. Emergency services included communicated with family and friends; completing FEMA forms (only available online); searching for news about cities and towns; and searching for news about the condition of homes and offices. The role of libraries in emergency preparedness and response has not been fully recognized, and little has been done to assist public libraries.

A 2007 national study of public libraries and the Internet, reveals how E-Government, while reducing burdens on the government, is stressing public libraries' ability to provide Internet computing services.⁶ According to the survey, public libraries have reached a plateau along two key infrastructure measures: Internet workstations and bandwidth.

The average number of public access Internet workstations at public libraries has not increased significantly since 2002. Libraries are stuck in a continual cycle of upgrades, enhancements, and replacements that connectivity and public access computers require. For example, 52.3 percent of public library branches indicate their connections speeds are inadequate, and 85 percent report having an insufficient number of workstations to meet the public demand some or all of the time. Rural public libraries have the fewest open hours, fewest public access workstations, little broadband, and are less likely to offer public access Internet workstations.

This information reflects that libraries will not be able to maintain the quality of public access now and into the future: “. . . [the] public library access infrastructure is increasingly unable to keep up with the demands of Web 2.0 environment – an environment that requires increasingly sophisticated workstations, substantial bandwidth, and a range of resources that libraries are beginning to indicate that they may not be able to support.”⁷

The Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) report on section 213 of the *E-Government Act* examines pre-existing outlets for government information and recognizes that public libraries have played a long-time significant role in the dissemination of government information. The OMB report assumes that public libraries can take on the significant increase of serving the public's E-Government needs, without addressing the impact on the libraries infrastructure and systems that were not planned around the delivery of E-Government.⁸ The OMB's report also discusses the Federal Depository Library Program that plays key role in the dissemination of the records of the government, but fails to observe that, in general, the public does not visit federal depository libraries, as they do public libraries, for access to the Internet and government programs and services.

⁶ John C. Bertot and others, “Public Libraries and the Internet 2007.”

⁷ Ibid., 8.

⁸ Office of Management and Budget, “Section 213 of the E-Government Act Report to Congress: Organizations Complementing Federal Agency Information Dissemination Programs,” April 2005.

The federal government provides only very limited direct technology support to public libraries; yet public libraries provide services that directly support numerous federal programs and services. The greatest challenges reported by public librarians include limited space, the cost of computers and technology, and staffing. The study also reflects that libraries are also concerned with privacy and liability, and librarians believe that better communications between public libraries and the federal government would help.⁹

The library community has identified some steps towards creating a partnership between public libraries and the government in order to improve E-Government delivery to citizens.

- Recognition by the federal government of the various E-Government roles, services, and activities being provided by public libraries.
- Information policy that supports the public library's role in E-government service provision, integrating the role of libraries and volunteer agencies into E-government process.
- Education and training by which public libraries can be more knowledgeable of E-government services and resources and education of government officials on impact of referrals and putting government services online
- Funding for public access stations. Only a small amount of funding to public libraries comes from federal and state government, approximately five to seven percent. E-rate discounts, though a federal program, are provided by telephone customers. Local communities provide 85 to 90 percent of public library funding.
- Better coordination between local, state, and federal governments and public libraries. While doing this, librarians also have the opportunity to report what is working well and what needs to be improved.
- The library community needs to better understanding and document the nature, extent, and cost for public libraries to successfully provide access to and use of E-government.

The OMB's report on Section 213 of the *E-Government Act* states "Citizens' benefit from the collaboration between Federal agencies and these programs [including libraries]."¹⁰ Section 213 of the *E-Government Act* calls for the Administrator, working with federal agencies, to assist public libraries in providing computer and Internet access to the public, including the contribution of funds, equipment, and training. Yet the library community has seen little collaboration or support from federal agencies for the significant increase in services public libraries provide on their behalf.

Public libraries are part of the larger government fabric that deliver a range of E-Government services. Government information policy should recognize this and support the public library's role in E-government. Libraries need support to maintain and develop the technological infrastructure necessary to meet user needs, financial support, and education to better provide E-Government services. The library community is eager to work with the federal government in order to make E-Government as successful as possible.

⁹ 64 percent were concerned with issues regarding confidentiality and 48 percent concerned with issues regarding liability.

¹⁰ Office of Management and Budget, "Section 213 of the E-Government Act Report to Congress," 20.