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Job-Seeking In New Jersey Libraries

Many New Jersey families and businesses have faced unprecedented economic challenges this past year. Long-established businesses, both large and small, have closed their doors as their revenue streams were squeezed by a lack of available credit and reduced consumer spending. With high unemployment, furloughs and pay cuts, many families eliminated vacations and reduced discretionary spending. This report shows that those families and businesses turned to their libraries to make up for some of those cuts and to shave expenditures. In response to their customers' needs, our libraries acted immediately to implement new programs, increase services and provide compassionate assistance, reaffirming their place as a valuable resource in the community – for adults, teens, children, seniors, businesses and organizations.

Norma E. Blake
New Jersey State Librarian

Job Seekers Go Online

In the first decade of the 21st Century, classified job ads have gone the way of the mimeograph – nearly obsolete. Almost three-quarters of job seekers now use the Internet to seek employment, partly because this is the only way to apply for many job opportunities. There are close to 4 million vacancies listed online and less than 44 percent of the top 100 U.S. retailers accept in-store paper applications anymore. With jobless rates up across the country, the need for access to computers and the Internet is more critical than ever. One essential community institution is positioned to meet this growing need – your local public library.

The Opportunities

NJ Public Libraries Are Community Technology Hubs:

- In New Jersey, libraries offer the only free access to computers and the Internet in over 77 percent of their communities.
- New Jersey ranks well above most other states in free wireless access, with 85 percent of public libraries offering this service.
- The average number of computers in New Jersey public libraries is 13 per library building.

Library staff report that library computers and Internet access are used daily by their residents to search for employment, prepare resumes and file for unemployment benefits.

Library Staff Provide Needed Assistance:

- New Jersey library staff report that many of those seeking assistance are first-time computer users. At the library, they learn how to use a mouse, how to open an email account and how to do an online job search. Sherry Albert of Long Branch, NJ, said, “I was unemployed after 22 years on the same job and computer illiterate. My librarian put me at ease and showed me the basic skills program, and then helped me set up an email account. I've gotten two jobs since then and I am connected to friends and family from around the country. Thank you Library of Long Branch.”
- Many library staff report they are scheduling one-hour sessions with patrons to orient them to the broad range of skills needed to do research, find jobs or apply for government assistance.

- New Jersey librarians report that applying for jobs and government assistance are among the most staff-intensive patron Internet needs, and they see Internet services as critical to the role of their library.

Demand for E-Government Services Grows:

Job losses have meant steep climbs in unemployment claims in New Jersey.

- New Jersey public library staff report that library computers are increasingly being used to access e-government resources, including filing for unemployment benefits, and health and housing assistance.
- Over 83 percent of New Jersey library staff report that they assist customers with understanding and using e-government services.
- NJ libraries have partnered with the NJ Department of Labor and Workforce Development to offer workshops for library staff on assisting residents with unemployment claims.

Online Collections Expand:

Public library staff, with the financial assistance of the NJ State Library through federal and state funding, are building rich collections of electronic materials online – including databases, e-books and downloadable audio books – many of which are available 24/7.

The Challenges

Demand, however, can overwhelm library resources. Factors limiting the library staff's ability to provide full assistance to our job-seeking customers include:

- Sufficient computers are available to fill demand only 19 percent of the time.
- Forty-five percent of NJ public libraries have greater than 1.5 Mbps connectivity, 27 percent have 1.5 Mbps speed and 20 percent are at less than 1.5 Mbps.
- NJ public library staff have stated that their connection speed is adequate less than half the time they are open (43 percent).
- The most common reasons NJ libraries are unable to expand computer access are space (74 percent) and cost (66 percent).
- Increasingly, New Jersey libraries limit the time patrons can use computers in order to accommodate the most number of patrons possible. Trends in the application process combined with greater information and heavy multimedia use on potential employers' sites—recruitment videos, podcasts, flash animation—also put a strain on available bandwidth.

Conclusion

Libraries are part of the solution when a community is struggling economically. From free access to books and online resources to library business centers that help support entrepreneurship and retraining, libraries support lifelong learning.

A 2008 Harris Poll found that the number of adults with public library cards has reached an historic high at 68 percent. Seventy-six percent of Americans visited their local public library in the past year, compared with 65.7 percent two years ago. Online visits to libraries are up even more substantially – with 41 percent of library card holders visiting their library Web sites in the past year, compared with 23.6 percent in 2006. Even those with computers at home turn to libraries because libraries offer faster connections, a community of users and guidance not found on home computers.

With adequate public support and funding, public libraries are uniquely positioned to play a central role in local economic development efforts by providing physical meeting and training space, information professionals, and free access to computers, office software, specialized databases and the Internet.

Call to Action

Let your elected officials know that you value the assistance your public library provides to job seekers by going to www.ilovenjlibraries.org and sending an email in support of stable funding for public libraries, including the inclusion of public libraries in funding provided by the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

Acknowledgements

The data in this report was taken from the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, which is the largest and longest running study of its kind. Additional information is available online at www.ala.org/plinternetfunding.

For more information on New Jersey libraries' recovery initiatives visit:

Get Help (gethelp.njlibraries.org)

Virtual Career Center (getjobs.njlibraries.org)

New Jersey State Library Recovery site (recovery.njlibraries.org)

or njslrecovery.pbworks.com.

To read what customers in New Jersey are saying about the services their public libraries provide go to <http://snapshot.njlibraries.org>.

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