New Report:
Libraries Improve Technology Access for Communities Nationwide

Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study, 2007—2008
Report prepared by: American Library Association and Information Use Management and Policy Institute, College of Information, Florida State University, September 2, 2008, www.ala.org/plinternetfunding

KEY STUDY RESULTS & FINDINGS

Libraries Are a Link to Lifelong Education Opportunities
Public libraries are the only community institution that supports the education and learning needs of every person in the community. They are a vital source for early literacy development, homework help, home-school families, distance education and lifelong avocations. The most common purpose for adult online visits to public libraries is to meet educational needs.[1]

- Education and job seeking services are the top two uses of public Internet services that library staff rank as critical to their community.

- More than 83% of U.S. public libraries offer online homework resources for students, serving the educational needs of nearly 41 million school-age children.

- Subscription databases, including practice exams like SAT and GED, full-text newspapers, and World Book encyclopedias, are the most common library Internet service – available in 88 percent of all libraries and 98 percent of urban libraries.

Library Staff Play Critical Roles in Supporting Patron Technology Use and E-Government
As online content and information becomes increasingly critical to both patrons and the business of libraries, library staff time dedicated to helping people get and use online tools is mounting. Library staff reported that, on average, they spend 50 percent or more of their time managing technology and helping patrons learn how to use it effectively.

- In addition to one-on-one assistance offered in all libraries, almost three-quarters of libraries (73.4%) offer information technology training for library patrons.

- 74% of libraries report staff provide as-needed assistance to patrons for understanding and using e-government resources; and more than half of libraries assist patrons in applying for or accessing e-government services.

- Library staffing lags behind increased technology offerings and patron visits. From 2000 to 2005, there was an 86% increase in the number of computers in libraries, an 18.6% in the number of visits to libraries and only a 6% increase in full-time staff.[2]

- Almost 60 percent of libraries reported that staffing issues were their biggest challenge in maintaining computers and Internet access, citing staff training and a lack of dedicated IT support.

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[1] Griffiths, José-Marie and Don King. *Interconnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet.* 2008. Univ. North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Accessed August 27, 2008. http://interconnectionsreport.org/
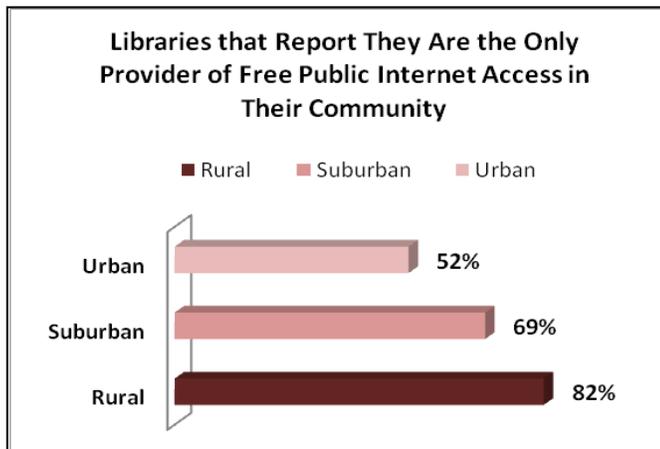
[2] National Center for Education Statistics. Public Libraries in the United States (FY2000-2005).

Millions of Americans Rely on U.S. Public Libraries for Internet Access

Computers and the Internet have become essential tools for individuals working to get an education, find a job, access e-government information and more.

- 99% of public libraries offer free access to computers and the Internet.

- 73% of U.S. public libraries report that they are the only source of free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities.

Libraries that Report They Are the Only Provider of Free Public Internet Access in Their Community

■ Rural ■ Suburban ■ Urban

- Urban: 52%
- Suburban: 69%
- Rural: 82%

Public Access Improves as Demand Grows

Ever-growing patron demand for computer and Internet services stretch libraries' existing Internet bandwidth, computer availability, and building infrastructure to capacity.

- For the first time in six years, libraries reported an increase in the number of computers available to the public – up to 12 computers per branch, compared with 10.7 last year.

- On average, 83% of all public libraries report that there are fewer public Internet computers than patrons who wish to use them some or all of the time, up 5% from last year.

- The number of libraries reporting connection speeds of 769kbps or faster increased 11 percent over the past year. More than half of urban libraries (52%), 42% of suburban libraries and 32% of rural libraries now report connection speeds of 1.5Mbps.

- At the same time, almost 58% of libraries report that their current connection speed is insufficient to meet patron demand some or all of the time, up about 5% from 2006-2007. One-quarter of rural libraries report they are at the maximum connection speed available in their communities.

- Wireless availability has increased to 66% from 18% in 2004. While this helps ease the burden on desktop computers, wireless service often strains already overloaded bandwidth. Roughly three-quarters of all library wireless services share bandwidth with public workstations, dramatically slowing Internet connection speeds during high-demand hours.

Methodology

The study surveyed 6,984 libraries and received 5,488 responses (78.6%). A questionnaire also was sent to the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) that asked for more detailed, anecdotal responses to questions regarding funding, staff training and bandwidth. In addition, anecdotal responses were collected from focus groups and site visits in New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Please visit www.ala.org/plinternetfunding for a full copy of the report.

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