

# PUBLIC LIBRARIES & DIGITAL INCLUSION

## BROADBAND ACCESS

### TECHNOLOGY

Public libraries offer free access to computers, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet

### EXPERTISE

Public librarians offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet-enabled services and resources

### SKILLS

Public libraries offer a wide range of free technology instruction, including courses on employment and health resources

### E-GOVERNMENT

Public libraries help people complete immigration, citizenship, social service, emergency benefit, and other online forms

### EMPLOYMENT

Public libraries help people create résumés, search for jobs, and apply for jobs online

As builders of digitally inclusive communities, public libraries are essential community links to the Internet, technology, and information.

**97.8%**

Libraries offer wireless Internet access (WiFi)

**59.4%**

Libraries help people identify health insurance resources

**73.1%**

Libraries help people apply for jobs

**89.9%**

Libraries offer training in general Internet use

The public access technology, resources, and services provided by public libraries are essential for those who do not have high-speed Internet or computer access in their homes and for those who lack the technology and digital literacy skills to use the Internet-enabled services that can help them find jobs, interact with their government, achieve their learning goals, and create healthy communities.

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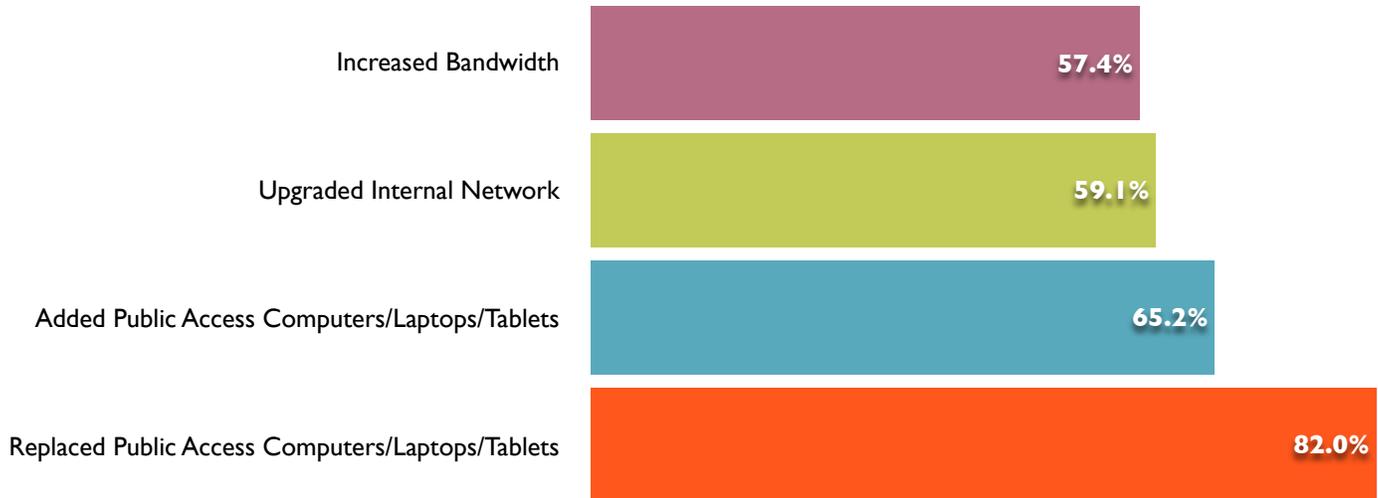


Figure 1. Public Library Technology Infrastructure Upgrades made by Libraries Reporting Upgrades in the last 24 months.

## Defining Digital Inclusion

The ubiquitous nature of the Internet and accompanying new technologies now makes equal access to and participation in the online environment a necessity for learning, employment, and economic and civic engagement.

Digital inclusion consists of policies, programs, and actions developed to close the digital divide, promote digital literacy, and ensure digital equity and readiness. It marries high-speed Internet access and digital literacy in ways that reach various audiences, many of whom parallel those mentioned within the digital-divide debate. One way to look at digital inclusion is as an overarching approach to ensure that all members of a community are “digitally ready” - able to access, use, and understand digital technologies and content without cost, social, accessibility, or other barriers.

Public libraries support digital inclusion in four essential ways:

- By providing free access to public access technologies (hardware, software, high-speed Internet connectivity) in their communities.
- By providing access to a range of digital content to their communities.
- By providing digital literacy services that help people navigate, understand, evaluate, and create digital content using a range of information and communications technologies.

- By providing programs and services around key community need areas such as health and wellness, learning, employment and workforce development, and civic engagement.

As community-based digital hubs, public libraries are critical community assets that facilitate the development and sustainability of digitally inclusive communities.

## Community Anchors

With over 17,000 library buildings and bookmobiles (some of which serve as mobile Internet access points) in communities, public libraries are essential anchors that help build digitally inclusive communities that can thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This presence, service, and technology infrastructure allows libraries to offer their communities a range of new technologies, digital literacy training, learning, health, employment, and E-government services on which millions of people rely. These are services that communities need from their public libraries. Indeed, 34.0% of Hispanics and 28% of Blacks 16 or older indicated that public libraries help people find jobs and pursue training “a lot.”<sup>1</sup>

Overall, U.S. public libraries have an average of 18.8 public access computers available onsite. In addition, despite budget constraints, libraries have made a commitment to improving their technology infrastructure to better serve the community, with 65.7% of U.S. public libraries reporting upgrades in

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the last 24 months (see Figure 1). Yet only 21.3% of libraries made major renovations in the last five years. Data collected through the 2014 Digital Inclusion survey shows a direct relationship between library renovations, and the rates at which libraries can provide technology training offerings to the community (Figure 2). Digital literacy services, like training in general computer, software, and Internet use, are offered somewhat more frequently in libraries that have been renovated in the past five years, but the gap is more obvious with programs that offer the community greater familiarity with new technologies that require new hardware, increased bandwidth, and upgraded internal networks.

## Challenges

A 2012 report by the National Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) found that roughly 69% of households used broadband Internet at home.<sup>2</sup> The number climbed to 72% - but only if dial-up access was included. More significantly, the report found that the 30% of households that did not use the Internet at home indicated: a lack of need or interest to use the Internet; cost; inadequate computing technologies; and lack of availability as the reasons for not accessing broadband services.

In a context in which success in economic, social, education, health, civic engagement, and other areas increasingly relies on access to digital content and high-speed Internet access - via a range of mobile and other devices - there is a need to have community

anchors such as public libraries help build, sustain, and promote digital inclusion.

## Public Libraries and Digital Inclusion

All public libraries now offer free public access to Internet-enabled computers.<sup>3</sup> This near universal provision of Internet access demonstrates the commitment of public libraries to ensuring that communities are digitally inclusive. In fact, in 2012 public libraries reported that they were the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet in 62.1% of communities in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Leveraging their free access, U.S. public libraries offer a wide range of technology resources, including:<sup>5</sup>

- Scanner(s) - 62.5%
- Laptop(s) - 41.6%
- Tablet(s) - 20.7%
- Color printer(s) - 77.9%
- Wireless printing - 39.4%
- Early learning technology(ies) - 44.8%
- Digital media production lab(s) - 5.4%

The technology resources, along with digital literacy training (Figure 2), serve as key links to engaging with increasingly online employment, health, and government, services (see Figure 3).

The 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey data shows that libraries that have the necessary financial support to make renovations and upgrades to their network capacity and general use space are able to offer vital

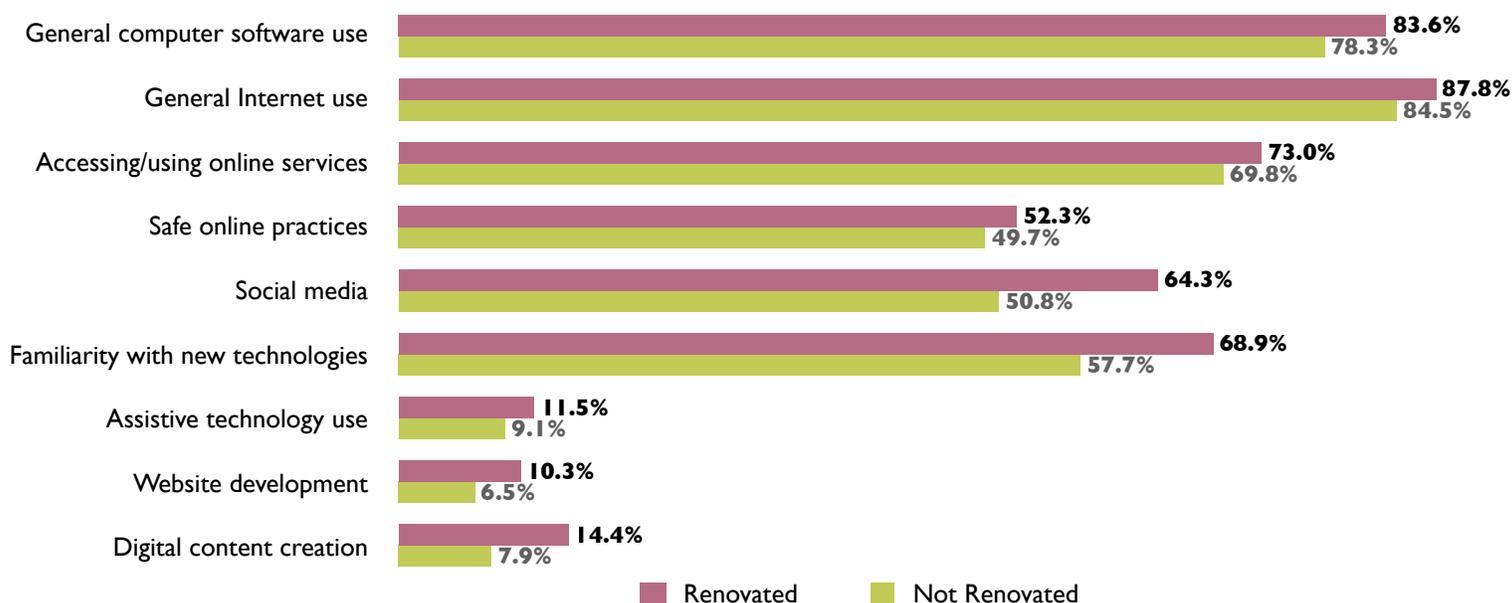


Figure 2. Public Library Technology Training Offerings Overall for Libraries Renovated and Not Renovated in the Last Five years.

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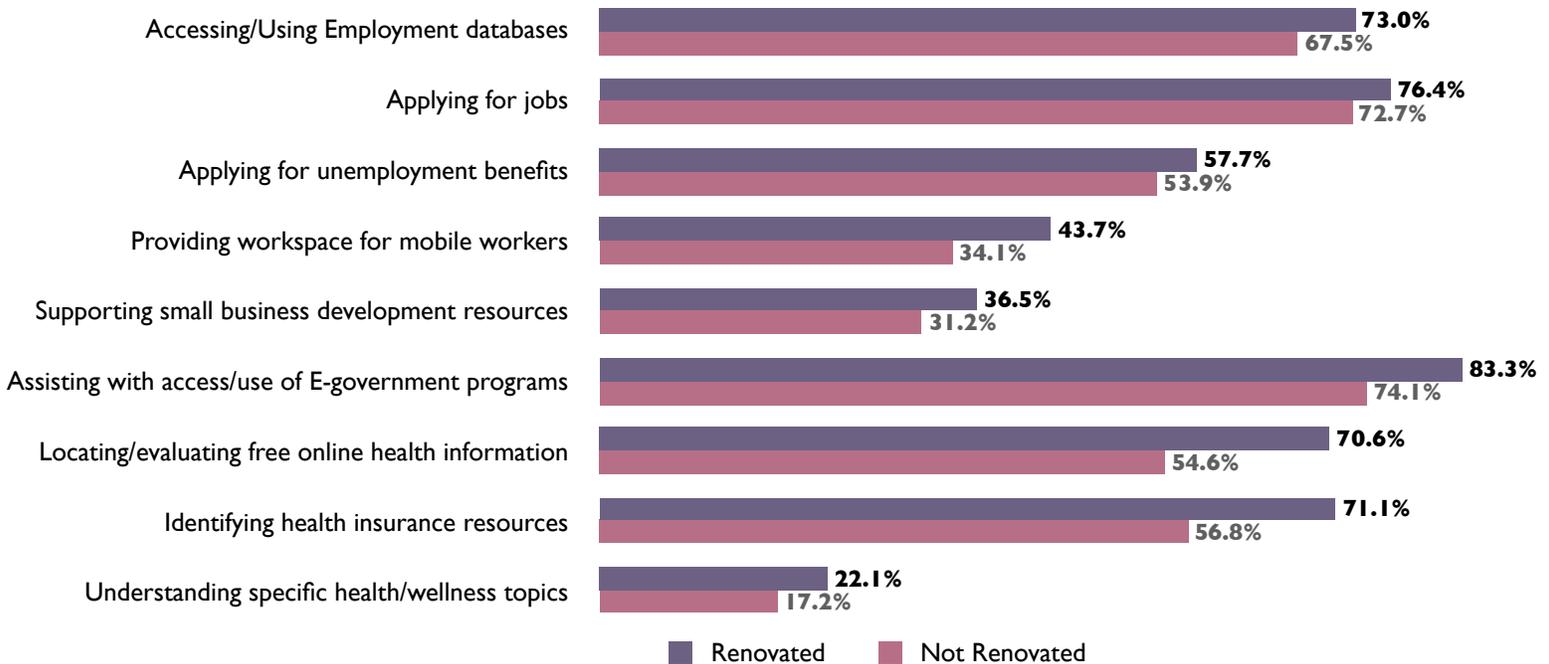


Figure 3. Public Library Program Offerings Overall for Libraries Renovated and Not Renovated in the Last Five Years.

Internet-enabled programming at higher rates than those that were not able to perform renovations in the last five years. For example, there is a 14.3% point gap between renovated and non-renovated libraries when it comes to identifying health insurance resources, and a nearly 10% point gap when it comes to providing workspace for mobile workers (Figure 3). Therefore, the more funding and support a public library receives from its community, the better that library can serve as a tool to foster greater digital inclusion across that community.

## Conclusion

Providing community access to the Internet to build digitally inclusive communities is now strongly engrained both in library customers and community expectations for public libraries, and in the values of public librarianship. Public libraries, especially those that receive adequate financial support that allow for necessary renovations, will continue to serve this vital function that supports individuals and the communities that they serve.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Horrigan, J. (2015). "Libraries at the Crossroads. Pew Research Center. Available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/2015/Libraries>.

<sup>2</sup> National Telecommunications and Information Agency. (2012). *Exploring the Digital Nation: America's Emerging Online Experience*. Washington, DC: NTIA. Available at: [http://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/exploring\\_the\\_digital\\_nation\\_-\\_americas\\_emerging\\_online\\_experience.pdf](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/exploring_the_digital_nation_-_americas_emerging_online_experience.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Bertot, J.C., McDermott, A., Lincoln, R., Real, B., & Peterson, K. (2012). *2011-2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey: Survey Findings and Results*. Information Policy & Access Center: University of Maryland. Available: <http://www.plinternetsurvey.org>.

<sup>4</sup> Bertot, et al. (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Bertot, J.C., Real, B., Lee, J., McDermott, A.J., & Jaeger, P.T. (2015). *2014 Digital Inclusion Survey: Survey Findings and Results*. College Park, MD: Information Policy & Access Center, University of Maryland College Park. Available at <http://ipac.umd.edu/>.

## Additional Reading:

Institute of Museum and Library Services, University of Washington Technology & Social Change Group, International City/County Management Association. (2011). [Proposed Framework for Digitally Inclusive Communities: Final Report](#). Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services.