

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & E-GOVERNMENT

E-GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

TECHNOLOGY

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

SKILLS

Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer and Internet use instruction

EXPERTISE

Public libraries offer expertise that helps people understand and interact with government and government services

INFORMATION

Public libraries help people find and use government information

ASSISTANCE

Public libraries help people understand and use government Websites and services

FORMS

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

Public libraries provide an essential link between government and citizens. As government information, services, and resources become digital – in many cases, digital only – public libraries serve as critical community gateways to electronic government (E-government).

97.5%

Libraries help people complete online government forms

63.1%

Libraries help people access and use government programs and services

47.8%

Libraries help people access government information resources

74.1%

Libraries offer community, civic engagement and E-government services

The E-government roles public libraries play are particularly important for those who do not have high-speed Internet or computer access in the home, lack the technology skills that E-government requires, or have difficulty understanding and using E-government services.

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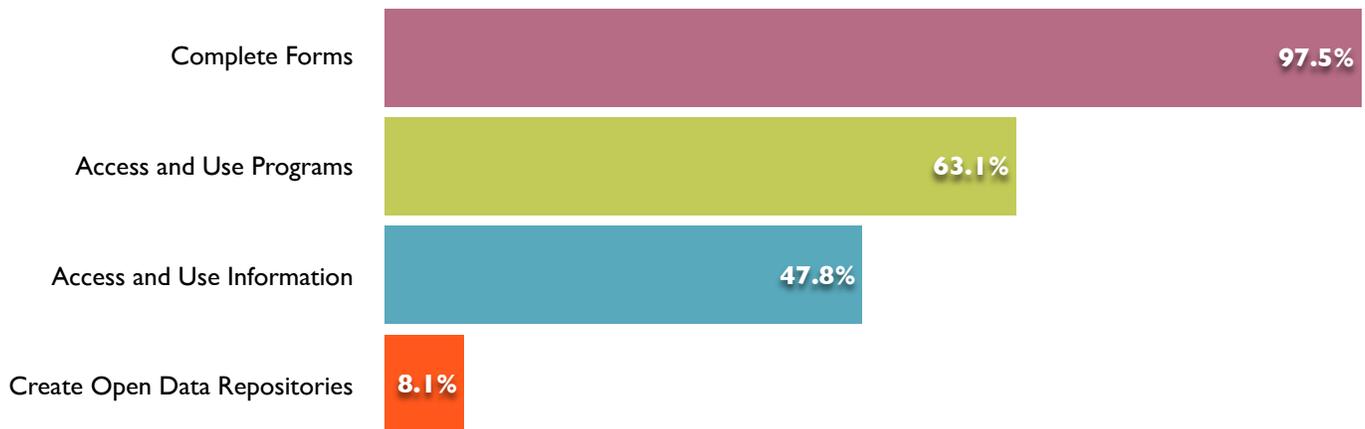


Figure 1. Public Library E-government Services.

E-government Services

Public libraries are a vital link between government and people. Libraries serve as community access points to tax information, citizenship and immigration services and resources, social services, health and health insurance information, emergency and disaster response, and more. As government information, services, and resources increasingly move to digital formats, public libraries are a bridge to E-government for their communities.¹

Public Libraries and E-government Services

Many people, especially those who do not own or have access to digital and Internet technologies,² not only count on public libraries to provide access to technology and the Internet, they also rely on librarians to help them use E-government websites, locate information and resources, and complete applications and other forms – particularly as state and local government agencies reduce public service staff.

Public libraries fill an essential community E-government need by:³

- Serving as a critical liaison between government agencies and patrons in need of help;
- Providing basic computer and Internet instruction and access to E-government services;

- Being open evenings and weekends, when most government agency offices are unavailable;
- Securing e-mail accounts and meeting basic needs for using E-government services;⁴
- Providing assistance with accessing and navigating government websites, completing forms, or otherwise being able to access or use government services (see Figure 1);
- Providing assistance in applying for disaster recovery;⁵ and
- Providing assistance in applying for unemployment and other social service benefits.⁶

Public libraries provide essential service responses and fill community needs as more government services and resources are available only online. The roles public libraries play are particularly important for the 31% of American households (the percentage jumps to 42% for rural households) that do not have broadband Internet access at home.⁷

Partnerships

Public libraries around the country have responded to the needs of their communities without hesitation by providing E-government services. Over 70% of the time, the librarians themselves provide these services. However, in some cases, public libraries rely on volunteers and partner organizations to provide E-government services to

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patrons (see Figure 2). Partnership data collected by the Digital Inclusion Survey indicates that non-profit organizations are the preferred partner for E-government, community, and civic engagement programs. Non-profit organizations partnered with public libraries to: complete online government forms (e.g., social services, immigration, tax) (66.2% of reported partnerships); host community engagement events (e.g., candidate forums, community conversations) (39.7%); and access and use government programs and services (e.g., Medicare, Social Security) (40.9%). Government agencies were also reported as partners for E-government programs and services at approximately the same rates. The reported partner organizations vary greatly, but some examples include: Alaska Common Ground; League of Women Voters; NAACP; library consortiums and library friends groups; and a number of local politicians or political parties/groups.

Key Issues and Challenges

At the same time that more government interactions are being converted to online services and there is more demand for libraries to serve as key links between government services and communities, library budgets are being cut, service hours reduced, and staff let go.⁸

Moreover, public libraries are being asked to help patrons solve a range of E-government challenges that go well beyond simply finding government information. In short, people expect public librarians to be experts in government in general and E-government services in particular.

This reliance on public libraries in turn leads to greater needs within the library. These needs include, but are not limited to:

- **Financial.** At a time of increased need and service demands, public libraries find their budgets cut and staff being reduced. In addition, E-government services require substantial public access technology and broadband availability. Increased funding for libraries is needed to increase the bandwidth of the library; allow for more staff to be hired; allow for more computers to be purchased; and provide training for the library staff to better serve their community in E-government services.
- **Capacity.** Many libraries must place time limits on their computers to allow as many people as possible access to them, and this creates challenges for successful E-government interactions. There is a need to consider the limitations and create new service models for E-government activities in libraries.
- **Users.** Not all E-government users are proficient in computing technologies, and many do not have a basic understanding of government or government services. Facilitating successful E-government interactions places time and training demands on library staff.
- **Staff.** Adequate staff levels, staff expertise, and staff training to promote better integration with government agencies are three critical issues that need to be addressed so that public libraries can better meet community E-government needs.

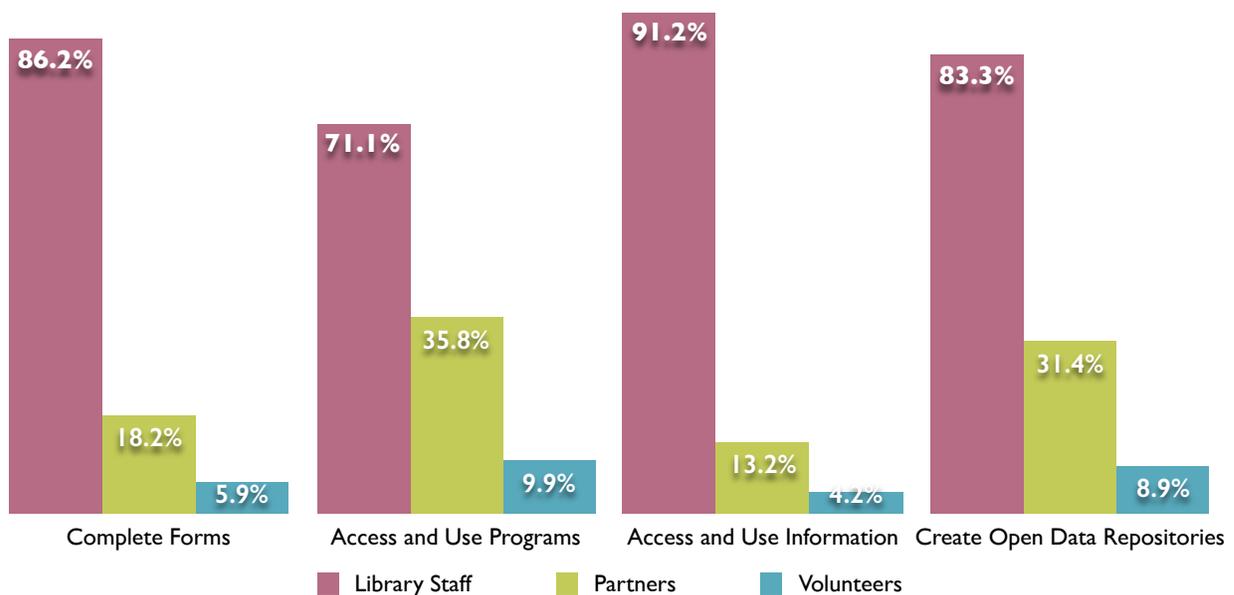


Figure 2. Organizations Conducting E-government Programs and Services in Public Libraries

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- **Infrastructure:** E-government is a technology intensive undertaking that requires public access workstations, WiFi (if patrons happen to have their own technology), broadband, printing facilities, and work areas. In short, providing E-government in libraries puts stress on the physical plant in key areas of workspace, electric power, and more. Increasingly, public library buildings are inadequate to meet these demands, and require redesign to better meet the demands of E-government services.

Though the above are the primary challenges public libraries face in providing E-government services to their communities, additional challenges exist with regard to usability, consistency, and design of government websites and services. E-government services vary greatly in terms of service, design, and website usability. At the same time, governments are increasing their use of social media technologies such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, introducing a myriad of ways for patrons to interact with government agencies and services.

This creates many challenges not only for people who need to access and use multiple services, but also for librarians responsible for helping people meet their E-government needs. It is not the case that people always interact directly with government through their own devices. There is a need to consider the multiple access points of E-government services, their usability, and the challenges people might face when using technology-mediated government services.

Conclusion

Libraries across the country are meeting their community E-government needs, but they cannot do so alone. It is not the case that patrons interact directly with government solely through their own technology. Through collaboration, governments and public libraries can better meet essential community E-government needs. By working together, government agencies will offer more successful E-government services, libraries will be able to meet the needs of people more effectively, people will resolve their E-government needs, and communities will have more successful E-government strategies in place.

References

- ¹ E-government refers to the use of technology, predominantly the Internet, as a means to deliver government services to citizens, businesses, and other entities.
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- ⁴ Bertot, J.C., Jaeger, P.T., Langa, L.A., & McClure, C.R. Drafted: I Want You to Deliver E-government. *Library Journal*, 131(13): 34-39. Available at: <http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/ljinprint/currentissue/866746-403/story.csp>
- ⁵ Jaeger, P.T., Langa, L.A., McClure, C. R., & Bertot, J. C. (2007). The 2004 and 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes: Evolving roles and lessons learned for public libraries in disaster preparedness and community services. *Public Library Quarterly*, 25(3/4), 199-214.
- ⁶ Gibson, A.N., Bertot, J.C., & McClure, C.R. Emerging role of public librarians as E-government providers. Proceedings of the 42nd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.
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- ⁸ American Library Association. (2012). Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2009-2010. Available at <http://www.ala.org/plinternetfunding>.