![iPAC - Information Policy & Access Center]

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

COMMUNITY 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

SKILLS
Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer and Internet use instruction, including classes on using employment 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

With 100% of public libraries offering public access to the Internet, public libraries are a vital community link to the Internet, technology, and information. Public libraries are also essential providers of E-government, employment, and educational services and resources.

98.0%
Libraries offer some form of technology training

53.3%
Libraries offer work space(s) for mobile workers

95.6%
Libraries offer online employment resources

97.5%
Libraries offer wireless Internet access (Wi-Fi)

The technology access, 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, or achieve their educational goals.

DIGITAL INCLUSION SURVEY

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Figure 1. Public Library Technology Training Offerings by Topic.

Community Access

With over 17,000 library buildings and bookmobiles (some of which serve as mobile Internet access points) in communities, public libraries are essential community institutions that deliver Internet-enabled services and resources their communities need to thrive in the 21st century. This service and technology infrastructure allows libraries to offer their communities a range of public access technologies, digital literacy training, learning, health, employment, and E-government services on which millions of people rely.

Public Libraries and Community Access

For most of their existence as a social institution, public libraries in the United States have filled many important community roles, ranging from guaranteeing access to reading materials that present diverse viewpoints to hosting community events, and from providing assistance for job seekers to introducing children to reading.

The advent of the World Wide Web created a vital new role for libraries – community access point for computers and the Internet.[1] As the Internet became more widely used in the 1990s, public libraries embraced the role of providing access to and training for using the Internet and related technologies.[2] 98% of public libraries offer either formal or informal technology training, including

covering topics that include essential digital literacy skills (see Figure 1). Libraries have also found new ways to support their communities through the Internet, including guaranteeing access to E-government and providing support in emergency situations.[3]

As reported in 2012, 100% of public libraries now offer free public access to Internet-enabled workstations. As of 2013, 97.5% offer wireless Internet access (WiFi).[4] This universal provision of Internet access demonstrates the commitment of public libraries to ensuring that communities have access. To that end, libraries across the country are providing a number of community access services:
- 100% of libraries provide access to databases;
- 96.5% to online homework assistance;
- 95.6% to online employment resources;
- 89.5% to e-books; and
- 91.5% to digital reference.

Public libraries are also increasingly providing users the opportunity to generate their own content and collaborate:
- 53.3% offer work space(s) for mobile workers;
- 22.2% offer free video conferencing services;
- 3.8% offer audio/visual editing commons; and
- 2.9% offer development technologies (e.g. make/creator spaces); and

To meet these needs, public library branches average 19.8 workstations for public use.

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Key Issues and Challenges

In spite of these increases, 35.9% of libraries still report daily wait time for workstations. Furthermore, 66.1% of overall public libraries report a desire to increase broadband connectivity (see Figure 2). Demand for increased community access via public libraries is a result of several factors:[5]

- More government, education, and employment activities being made available online;
- More people applying for jobs online; and
- More people seeking free sources of entertainment online.

To manage the scope of access demands, many public libraries have established time limits for access to workstations.

In meeting all of these community access needs, public libraries face some serious challenges. A number of factors affect the ability of libraries to increase broadband connectivity, with cost the most cited reason (58.8%), with entities other than the library deciding on broadband speeds (30.5%) and the lack of faster broadband options (30.6%) also playing a significant role in insufficient library broadband speeds (see Figure 3).

For some libraries, budget cutbacks during the economic slow down that began in 2008 have negatively affected library hours, resources, and services. Libraries also face numerous long-term challenges in terms of maintaining and updating workstations and improving community Internet access. Over half (57.7%) of public libraries report fair or poor availability of public engagement space. Further, public libraries report fair or poor availability of group work spaces (58.7%), electrical outlets (52.6%), and cabling (51.2%). Despite the challenges, 66.5% of public libraries reported that they were able to make improvements to public access infrastructure in 2012/2013, and those improvements led to decreased wait times (53.9%), more training programs aimed at increasing digital literacy (42.3%), and more community partnerships (27.9%). This proves that when libraries are allocated adequate resources, their communities benefit.

Conclusion

Providing community access to the Internet is now strongly engrained both in library patron and community expectations for public libraries and in the values of public librarianship. In spite of the challenges they currently face, public libraries will continue to serve this vital function that supports their individual patrons and communities.
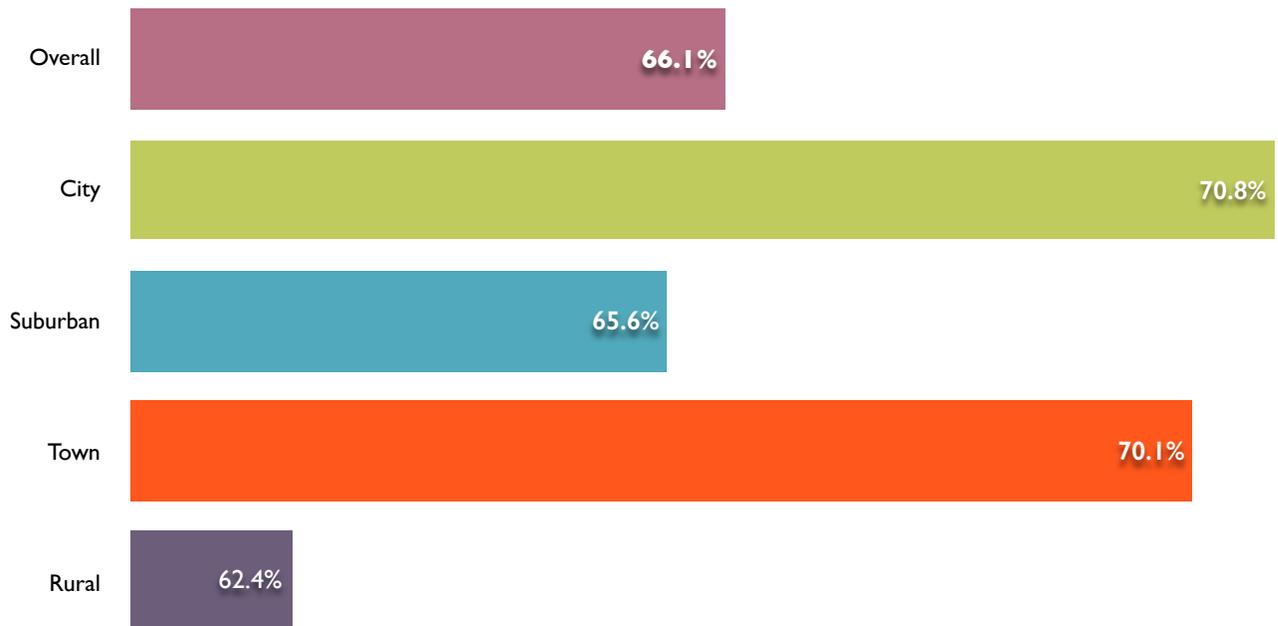

Figure 2. Public Libraries' Reporting a Desire to Increase Broadband Connectivity.
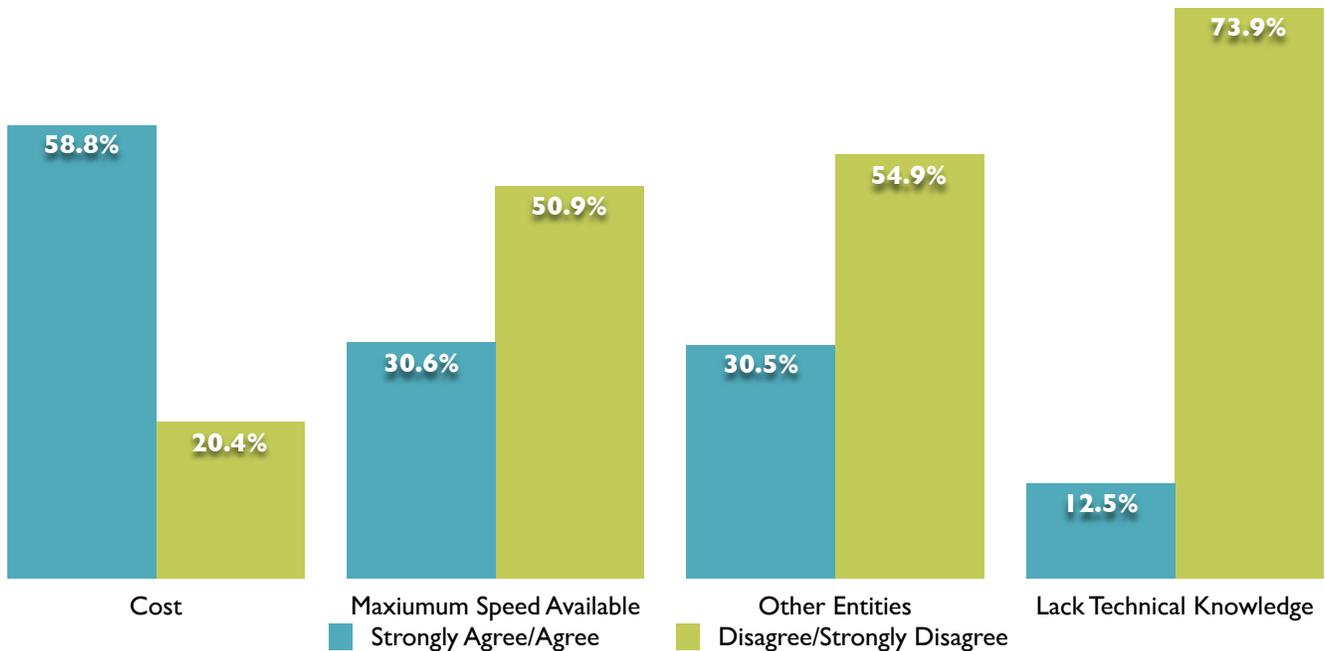
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Figure 3. Factors that Affect the Ability of Public Libraries to Increase Broadband Speed.

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