



INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & DIGITAL INCLUSION

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

BROADBAND ACCESS

TECHNOLOGY

Public libraries offer free access to computers, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet (Wi-Fi)

AVAILABILITY

Public libraries offer free Internet access for people to meet their economic, learning, health information, and E-government needs

SPEED

Public libraries offer broadband Internet connectivity speeds that are often greater than what is available at work or in the home

SKILLS

Public libraries offer a wide range of free computer and Internet use instruction that depend on broadband access

RESOURCES

Public libraries offer their communities learning, health, employment, and other Internet-enabled resources

63.1%

Libraries help people access and use government programs and services

78.0%

Libraries help people apply for jobs online

62.1%

Libraries report they are the only free provider of public Internet access

97.5%

Libraries offer wireless Internet access (Wi-Fi)

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.

The Digital Inclusion Survey (<http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/>) is managed by the Information Policy and Access Center (ipac.umd.edu) at the University of Maryland and the American Library Association, and is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. 2013 data presented.



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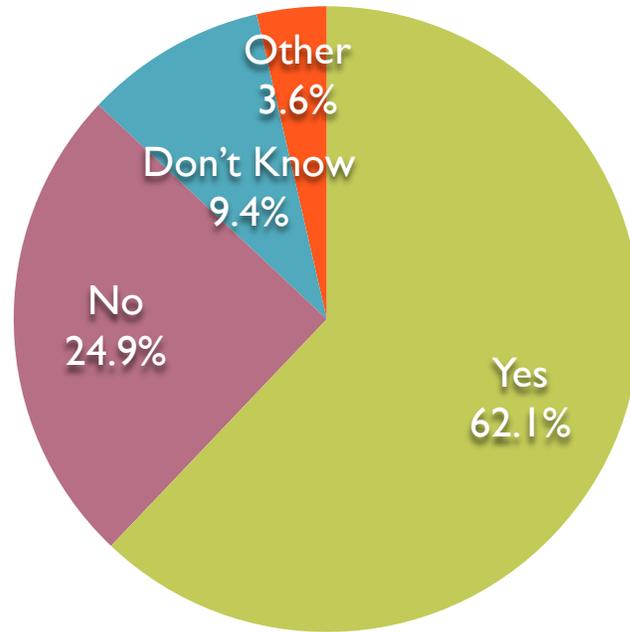


Figure 1. Public Library as Only Provider of Free Public Internet Access Support Services in 2012.¹

Defining Digital Inclusion

The ubiquitous nature of the Internet and accompanying services and technologies now makes equal access to and participation in the online environment a necessity for learning, employment, 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 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 21st century. This presence, 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.

Challenges

A recent report by the National Telecommunications Information Agency (NTIA) found that roughly 69% of households used broadband Internet at home.² The number climbed to 72% - but only if dial-up access was included. More significantly, the report found that the 30% of

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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 workstations.² This near universal provision of Internet access demonstrates the commitment of public libraries to ensuring that communities are digitally inclusive. In fact, in 62.1% of communities in the United States, public libraries are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet (see Figure 1). Leveraging their free access, public libraries offer digital literacy and training (see Figure 2) and serve as key links to engaging with increasingly online government services (see Figure 3). And, as reported in 2010, an estimated 30 million people had used library computers and Internet access to search for employment, with 3.7 million people actually being hired for a position they applied for through library computers.³

Some examples of how public libraries build digitally inclusive communities include (funded in part by the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program administered by the NTIA in the U.S. Department of Commerce):

- [Alaska's Online with Libraries \(OWL\) Project](#). The project sought to "provide all Alaskans with the benefits and opportunities that come hand in hand with high speed Internet. This included areas such as e-government services, distance education opportunities and increased access to professional development." More specifically, the project enhanced Public Computer Centers at 97 libraries, and is provided faster internet connections to many of these mostly rural/remote libraries. The project also established a public videoconferencing network for all of the libraries to provide online training and other purposes.
- [The Arizona Public Access Computers \(AzPAC\) Project](#). Run by the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records division, the project deployed more than 1,000 new computers in 84 libraries across the state. These computers increased access to e-resources and enable the libraries to provide training in digital literacy and technology skills. AzPAC provided Arizona's libraries with the equipment to reach an estimated 450,000 previously underserved citizens, many of whom do not have access to the Internet at home or work. In certain areas of



Figure 2. Public Library Programming Opportunities, by Locale.

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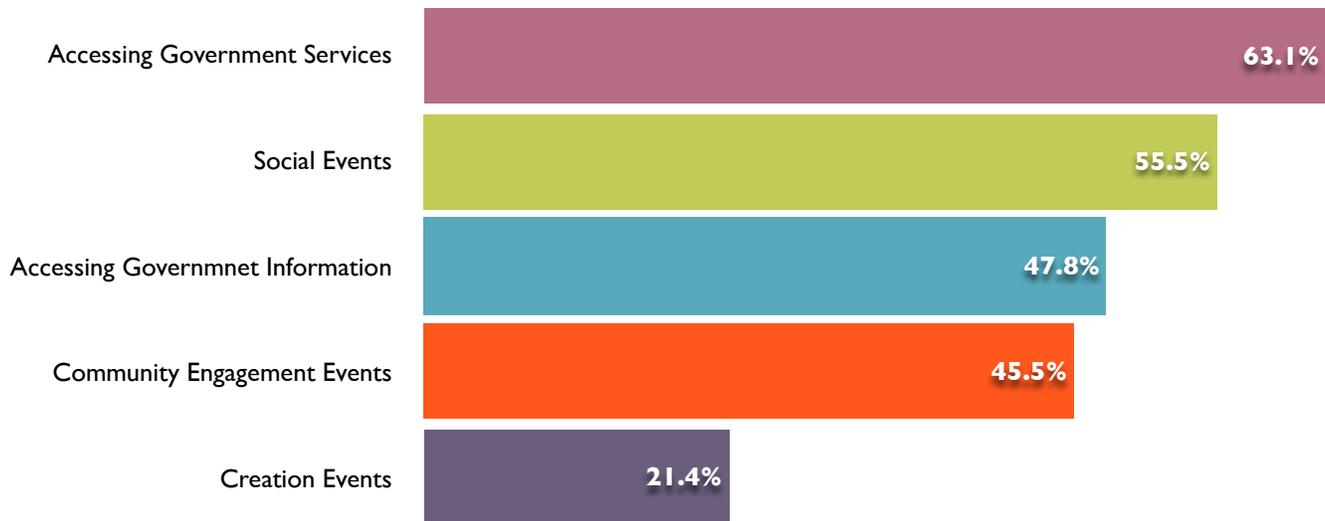


Figure 3. Public Libraries and Civic Engagement Services, by Offerings Overall.

Arizona, such as Yuma County, large populations of seniors rely on public libraries for access to computers and the Internet. In addition, three tribal libraries are participating in the program.

- [Colorado's Bridging the Great Digital Divide Project](#). The project provided computers, training, and public awareness campaigns in 88 Colorado communities. Completed early, the project installed or upgraded 88 public computer centers in Colorado (16% more centers than projected); Purchased over 1,500 desktops, laptops, tablets, and assistive technology machines (26% more computers than projected); increased computer uses by 28%, for a total of over 3.46 million computer uses; and offered training to over 400,000 resident learners including 383,935 individual tutoring sessions and nearly 5,000 formal classes to 31,873 attendees.

These projects demonstrate how public libraries contribute to digital equity through leveraging their public access technology infrastructure in their communities.

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 will continue to serve this vital function that supports individuals and the communities that they serve.

References

¹ 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>.

² 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.

³ Becker, Samantha, Michael D. Crandall, Karen E. Fisher, Rebecca Blakewood, Bo Kinney, and Cadi Russell-Sauvé. (2011). *Opportunity for All: How Library Policies and Practices Impact Public Internet Access* (IMLS-2011-RES-01). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, D.C.

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.