Libraries Connect Communities

COVID-19, Internet Access, and Libraries

In 2020 the global COVID-19 pandemic forced work, school, and other daily tasks online, exposing and exacerbating already existing digital divides. Millions of Americans lack home broadband service—most notably in rural and remote areas, while for others the cost of a home internet connection is too great for a limited budget to bear. The country's nearly 17,000 public libraries—long a key institution in ensuring access to and meaningful use of high-speed broadband—have stepped up across the nation to keep communities connected during this turbulent time.

Providing Wi-Fi During the Crisis and Beyond

Libraries quickly mobilized to maintain or expand outdoor access to their Wi-Fi networks as the pandemic began, keeping the millions of Americans who rely on library networks connected even as library buildings closed to the public. Some **93% of libraries surveyed currently allow outdoor access to their Wi-Fi networks**, while 44% have located Wi-Fi access points to further improve access outside the building.

- In **Florida** the St. Lucie County Library installed exterior access points with quarter-mile range as part of the Park n' Surf Project.

- And, in **Colorado**, the Buena Vista Public Library partnered with the town to expand its public Wi-Fi service to a local park.

Libraries also are leading the charge to bring Wi-Fi to under-connected community locations as part of their pandemic response.

- Through its WiFi-On-Wheels initiative, the Orange County Public Libraries in **California** are bringing internet connectivity to low-broadband neighborhoods via trailers that are parked at pre-designated locations each week to provide broadband for up to 150 users within a 300-yard radius. Library outreach staff answer questions and provide access to books for children and job seekers in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

A family works on school projects using Wi-Fi provided by the Pottsboro (TX) Library in partnership with the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center.

TAKEAWAYS
for decision makers

Libraries across the nation keep communities connected by providing public Wi-Fi, hotspot lending, virtual and in-library digital resources, and technology support.

Library staff are deeply knowledgeable of local connectivity needs and work with community organizations, local governments, and businesses to provide Wi-Fi at libraries and beyond library grounds.

Libraries are cost-effective and efficient partners that should be included in initiatives to close the digital divide.

Pottsboro (TX) Library Wi-Fi is available to the community at the Lynch and Teel Tackle & Grill.

- In **South Carolina** Richland Library placed Wi-Fi hotspots in all the Columbia Housing Authority Areas while Union Library partnered with the Union Detention Center to expand Wi-Fi reach.

- In rural Pottsboro, **Texas**, the public library obtained a mobile hotspot trailer from the Information Technology Disaster Resource Center and installed it where free public Wi-Fi access was lacking. The library also led an initiative to get local businesses to open their Wi-Fi networks to the public.

- And, in **West Virginia**, 255 libraries joined a statewide effort to establish and map over 1,000 free wireless internet access points as part of the Kids Connect initiative.

High Demand for Hotspots

Before the pandemic, some 21% of libraries surveyed reported offering hotspot checkouts as a service. Since then, many libraries have added or expanded this service to meet increased demand. In **Utah** about half of libraries offered hotspots for loan in November 2020, up from 15% six months earlier. This rapid expansion was supported by CARES Act funding which helped bring hotspot lending to 30 library systems.

This popular offering allows community members to get online at home, to pursue their GED, complete job searches, connect with family, research medical concerns, start businesses, and more. For example:

- In **Arizona** the Prescott Valley Public Library has created Stay Connected Tech Kits for community members to check out that contain laptops, mice, and internet hotspots—recognizing that people who do not have home broadband may not own computing devices.

- The Ottawa Tribe of **Oklahoma** Library has increased its capabilities during the pandemic to loan laptops, tablets, and hotspots to tribal members.

- In **Washington**, the Seattle Public Library dedicates one-third of its hotspots to those most impacted by the digital divide and partners with local organizations to lend them to people with disabilities, refugees, low-income workers, and people experiencing homelessness. Library staff also provide digital support services.

"Seventy-three percent of local government leaders say libraries play an important or highly important role in providing access to high-speed broadband."

—International City/County Management Association Survey, 2016

"We have a tremendous need in our community for hotspots—we have on average about 50 holds. They are the most requested item that the library has in our collection."

—Garland County Library, Arkansas

LIBRARIES are keeping communities connected during the pandemic by:

Providing Wi-Fi 24-7 outside of library buildings and in library parking lots

Bringing connectivity to neighborhoods-in-need with Wi-Fi–enabled library vehicles and hotspots

Loaning hotspots and other devices such as tablets and laptops to students, teachers, parents, job seekers, veterans, and others for home use

Offering virtual and in-library support for the tasks that library users need to complete online

Partnering with local government, non-profits, businesses, and other groups to identify and fill connectivity gaps

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For more information, please contact Marijke Visser at **mvisser@alawash.org**