

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Libraries play a critical role in bridging the broadband connectivity gap. This role became even more apparent when the global COVID-19 pandemic forced work, school, and other daily tasks online. As the need for internet connectivity skyrocketed millions of Americans

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Libraries nationwide have kept communities connected during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing outdoor Wi-Fi, hotspot lending, and virtual and in-building resources and technology support. Federal aid has helped libraries to improve and expand these critical services.
- Library staff responded quickly to the unfolding public health crisis, leveraging their knowledge of local connectivity gaps and community needs to partner with community organizations, local governments, and businesses to offer broadband service.
- Investments in library broadband capacity,

INTRODUCTION

America's libraries have long been a cornerstone for equitable access to information and broadband services. The country's nearly 17,000 public libraries offer no-fee internet access, Wi-Fi, and devices, such as computers and tablets. Many offer formal digital skills building classes, informal assistance with digital tasks, as well as hotspots and devices for loan—helping to connect underserved communities, bridge the digital divide, and empower people online. At the start of the COVID-19

Overall, individuals, families, and communities have faced multiple digital challenges throughout the pandemic, many of which were a result of the pre-existing digital divide. These include:

- **Availability**—Is home broadband service available? According to the Federal Communications Commission (25Mbps/3Mbps). In rural areas, that number falls at 18%.⁸
- **Adoption**—If internet service is available, are people taking advantage of it? As of 2021 Pew Research Center, 60% of rural Americans have the internet at home. In suburban ones reported having home broadband.
- **Affordability**—Are broadband service and end-user devices (computers, tablets, etc.) affordable for the household in question? Some research suggests that the majority of households lacking home broadband are in urban and suburban areas, not rural ones—due primarily to affordability and not access issues.⁹

- **Usability**—Do people have adequate digital and technical skills to effectively use the internet and related devices?
- **Adequate bandwidth**—With additional devices and services, is the bandwidth sufficient to support required activities?¹⁰
- **Data caps**—Are there data caps on the household's broadband usage, and, if so, is the allotted data adequate to meet increased connectivity needs? Is additional data affordable?

How Libraries Bridge the Connectivity Gap

Since the 1990s the country's nearly 17,000 public libraries have provided a digital safety net—ensuring that Americans without home internet connections or those who lack the necessary digital skills can get online. School and higher education libraries are also an important source of internet access and assistance for K–12, community college, and university students nationwide. Beyond basic access to digital infrastructure, libraries offer community members the opportunity to leverage these tools to explore their passions—offering coding programs for teens, start-up

BOX 1. Digital disparities have very real impacts for both youth and adults

- **Young people lack adequate access:** According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, 40% of young adults (ages 18–29) lack access to a computer at home, compared to 25% of all adults.¹¹

Research shows that young people are more likely to use public libraries for internet access. A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 30% of young adults use public libraries for internet access, compared to 15% of all adults.¹² This is particularly true for young people in rural areas, where 45% use public libraries for internet access, compared to 20% of all adults.¹³

- **People of color disproportionately face access barriers:** A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of Black young adults lack access to a computer at home, compared to 25% of all young adults.¹⁴

Research shows that people of color are more likely to use public libraries for internet access. A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of Black young adults use public libraries for internet access, compared to 20% of all young adults.¹⁵

- **Veterans lack access in rural areas:** A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of rural veterans lack access to a computer at home, compared to 25% of all rural adults.¹⁶

Research shows that veterans are more likely to use public libraries for internet access. A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of rural veterans use public libraries for internet access, compared to 20% of all rural adults.¹⁶



- **Seniors lack connectivity despite increasing need for online services:** A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of seniors lack access to a computer at home, compared to 25% of all adults.¹⁷

Research shows that seniors are more likely to use public libraries for internet access. A 2019 survey by the American Library Association found that 45% of seniors use public libraries for internet access, compared to 20% of all adults.¹⁷

incubators, makerspaces, and more. As a result, library staff are often deeply knowledgeable about local connectivity needs and digital skills gaps.

Libraries and librarians are also prepared when it comes to disaster response. Following the key role that libraries played in the Hurricane Katrina recovery the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recognized libraries as essential community institutions for post-disaster restoration.¹⁸ Libraries have aided

uncertainties, libraries pivoted to make use of existing resources and relationships. Libraries immediately stepped up to offer safe connectivity options by: providing and/or procuring outdoor (“parking lot”) Wi-Fi; loaning hotspots and other devices such as tablets and laptops; offering virtual, curbside, and in-library support for the tasks that library users need to complete online; and engaging in connectivity-related partnerships with

(See **Box 3** for a summary of the library connectivity approaches). Each of these library roles in the COVID-19 response is further documented below.

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Building on their already existing broadband and Wi-Fi

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Throughout the pandemic library parking lot Wi-Fi has provided a critical baseline connectivity.³² Among the uses, libraries reported that “patrons frequently used Wi-Fi in the parking lot to apply for unemploy-

were closed to the public.”³³ Other uses have included completing school work, accessing telemedicine, and staying connected with friends and family (see **Box 4**).

For instance, the Boca Raton Public Library in Florida, reported that, “due to [the] parking shortage at the local university, we have a high number of adult students on laptops, [using the library Wi-Fi and] participating in online classes and research.” While the library had not

helped meet an emergent need. In sum, the widespread availability of this service at libraries allowed many Americans to complete crucial tasks as the country was forced to adapt to fast changing circumstances.

Libraries also have worked to extend their Wi-Fi signals further beyond library walls. The Twin Lakes Library system in Georgia, for one, used TV White space to expand connectivity. The library also investigated

using AirFiber technology, which provides faster access speeds to expand options for the rural community though it requires line of sight.

households in an area where connectivity gaps exist.³⁶ While, in Canaan, Vermont—a remote part of the state with limited access to broadband—the library used a grant from Microsoft to extend Wi-Fi to a popular park.

recognizing the need for library users to get online beyond library walls. These initiatives—sometimes

jobseekers, or the homeless—allow patrons to check out hotspots for periods of time, ranging from weeks to months (See **Box 5**). Not surprisingly, as the pandemic unfolded, demand for this service rose in many communities. In Texas, for example, just before the pandemic shuttered schools and businesses (early March 2020) 10 Dallas libraries received 900 hotspots for people to borrow. Two weeks later, all of them were checked out.⁴²

library respondents reported offering hotspot check-outs as a service prior to COVID-19 and continued to do

or added this service when the pandemic shut things down.⁴³

class, “Google My Business and Crisis Management,” participants learned how to develop and enhance their virtual storefronts, including how to customize their message, manage reviews, and communicate with past and future customers.⁵⁶ While many libraries work to support small businesses and entrepreneurship under normal circumstances, the game-changing nature of the pandemic meant that new kinds of support were needed. The Schlow Centre Region Library in Pennsylvania, in turn, began offering access to Zoom subscriptions to help people stay connected when they could not gather in the physical space of the library. The library’s Zoom “virtual community rooms” can be reserved for two hours at a time and accommodate up to 300 people.⁵⁷

Additionally, libraries found ways to offer virtual support to people who either have trouble accessing the internet at home or who need help to complete online tasks. Again, as many Americans

ENDNOTES

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