

American Library Association *Libraries Helping America Get Back to Work*

Every day across the country, libraries are meeting the needs of their communities by providing a broad range of services for people of all ages and backgrounds. The library plays an even more important role as Americans face tough economic times. Patrons are visiting their library for more than borrowing free books, movies, CDs and attending free reading programs. Libraries offer their communities access to computers and the Internet, financial literacy skills, assistance with job searches, and resources to help small businesses.

Nationwide, recent statistics show that last year, libraries hosted more than 1.3 billion visits and circulated more than 2 billion items. Studies have shown that in times of economic downturn, libraries become even busier. For example, foot traffic at Montgomery County (Maryland) libraries is up 41% for the third quarter of 2008, compared to the same period last year. Participation in library programs for children and adults jumped 24%, from 75,000 to 93,000 last year at the Sacramento Public Library. Internet use at the Nashville Public Library has grown so much that 9 of every 10 libraries in the county have been forced to institute session time limits on their computers to meet demand.

More people, in more communities, in every state are turning to their local library for access to information and services to help them in today's economy.

Providing Free Public Computer and Internet Access – Every day, libraries across the country are providing free public access to computers and the Internet in some of our most distressed communities. According to a recent report released by the American Library Association entitled, "Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007-2008," 73% of all libraries nationwide report they are the only provider of free Internet access in their communities. In rural areas, the role of the public library is even more critical as 83% of libraries are the only free Internet provider. As a result, many libraries have begun reporting double-digit growth in computer usage in 2008.

- The Buffalo and Erie Country Public Library system has seen a 50% increase in the use of free public computers in the first half of 2008.
- Ohio libraries report that 79% of libraries run short on computers at peak hours of the day.

Educating Main Street on Economic Literacy – For most Americans, the library is the only option they have for financial advice and information to secure their families' futures. Libraries are providing unique services tailored to meet the needs of their communities through this economic crisis. Libraries across the country offer free on-site financial education for adults that include investor education, information on tax preparation, assistance on financial aid applications and access to expensive financial journals and periodicals.

- The Queens Public Library in New York is offering seminars for patrons facing foreclosure.
- The Newton Free Library in Massachusetts offers an inter-generational retirement planning club for women which provides instruction on using financial, investment, and educational resources.
- The Orange County Library System in Florida organized a bilingual educational series on basic investing themes for Hispanic families and created a bilingual "eGuide" on personal finance for users of the library's Web site.

Helping Americans Get Jobs – Libraries serve a unique and important role in providing free access to all types of information and telecommunications services. The demand for such services has increased significantly with growing need for access to digital and online information – including e-government, continuing education and employment opportunities. Many individuals haven't been employed in some time and libraries provide much needed guidance and encouragement to patrons as they search for jobs. Often current job skills are not adequate for the challenges of a 21st century economy.

- More than three-fourths of public libraries offer information technology training for patrons.

- St. Paul, MN (178,000 library card holders) reports a snapshot of one week in October when they got 707 patrons requesting assistance in their job searching.
- Libraries also provide patrons with assessment of current skills, training on resume preparation, techniques for interviewing, assistance with scholarship applications, and so much more.

Serving Small Businesses – For many small businesses, the library provides research resources and specially trained staff they could not otherwise afford. In a growing number of communities, libraries are opening business branches offering specialized collections, providing business-specific training in discerning credible research, studies, grant opportunities as well as assisting with business development initiatives.

- The Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas provides business development classes for business startups, and gives instruction on their many business resources.
- The Lebanon Public Library in Indiana has a separate business collection and provides reference services for patrons interested in starting, growing, and maintaining businesses. They also offer business basics classes, and in partnership with the Boone County Chamber of Commerce, they reach out and support new and established businesses.
- Many public libraries offer the Small Business Resource Center software for new business development and crucial assistance to existing small businesses.

Contributing to Community Economic Development – An investment in libraries is an investment in the community. Study after study has shown there is an economic return when you invest in the library. The community receives benefits from salaries and wages paid to staff, construction costs, employment services and library purchases made.

- In Pennsylvania, a recent study showed that for every dollar invested in the public library, the community receives a return on investment of \$5.50.
- In Florida, a recent study showed that for every dollar invested in the library, the community receives a return on investment of \$6.54.

Libraries provide an impressive array of services that are critical to the communities they serve, but the underlying support needed to maintain and improve these services has been lagging for many U.S. public libraries. Increased foreclosure rates and fewer home sales are pulling down local property-tax revenues, which many library systems depend on to pay for significant portions of their budgets. The National League of Cities released its annual report on local fiscal conditions, finding that a 3.6 percent decline in property tax revenues is likely to affect city budgets until 2010. The report also cited an expected decline in sales tax receipts and income tax revenues.

To make up for budget shortfalls, libraries are forced to cut back on hours or close neighborhood branches.

Libraries need an infusion of funding to continue these vital services in communities across the nation. Policymakers must re-think federal support to public libraries in these tough economic times. Only a small portion of library funding (0.5%) comes from the federal government, yet libraries have important social roles and responsibilities to American society, especially in tough economic times. Additional funding for libraries could help ensure our libraries are able to sustain current activities and even expand critical efforts to help people from every walk of life deal with our current economic situation. In particular, funds could be used to:

- Acquire a national license for databases that would give library patrons access to career certification and licensing practice tests, workforce skills improvement, and small business resources and legal forms.
- Reinstate or supplement evening and weekend hours of operation at libraries to provide greater access to services.
- Expand critical employment activities and services such as résumé development, job bank web searches, and workshops on career information.
- Build and renovate library buildings particularly efforts to make libraries "green."
- Promote financial literacy, housing counseling, and small business development activities.
- Bring broadband to all libraries.