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RATHER THAN BEING MADE OBSOLETE by new technologies, it appears that libraries are playing an increasingly important role in making sure communities get the information they need. Their importance was highlighted by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy: There are 9,198 public libraries in the United States, with over 16,500 outlets. Americans *use* them. Visits to public libraries totaled 1.4 billion in 2005. The circulation of materials topped two billion items.¹ Over three-quarters of all Americans used public libraries in the year leading up to a September 2009 survey.² A March 2010 survey conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) with funding from the University of Washington Information School and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation found that nearly half of all visitors use the Internet services at the library.³

The IMLS survey also found that the three most common uses of library computers were to get information on education (42 percent), employment (40 percent), and health (37 percent).⁴ One-third of those surveyed used library computers to learn about politics, news, and their community.⁵ Many people turn to libraries for Internet access when their home service has been disrupted as well as during an emergency. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, public libraries were among the last remaining places where people living in the Gulf region could search online for housing and FEMA aid.⁶

Today an Internet connection is often needed to complete school assignments, apply for jobs or college, and secure government services. According to the IMLS study, public libraries have become “extensions of the nation’s education system. Librarians have begun serving as informal job coaches, college counselors, test monitors, and technology trainers.”⁷

For less affluent populations, libraries have become especially important for the computer and Internet access they provide. Forty-four percent of people living in households below the federal poverty line used public library computers and Internet access, the IMLS survey found. Sixty-one percent of low-income young adults (ages 14 to 24) used them for educational purposes.⁸ Many went to the library simply to learn how to use a computer:

“At a time when access to technology and the Internet is becoming a necessary resource for full participation in society, public libraries provide an especially vital service to households in need. The study found that low income households, the elderly and English learners, were among the groups most likely to make use of computer training opportunities at local libraries. For these households, public libraries may provide the only low-cost entry point into an increasingly Internet-dependent world.”⁹

About 35 percent of libraries offer formal technology classes and 53 percent offer informal assistance for patrons using library computers. In high-poverty areas, 97 percent of libraries offer classes in basic computer competencies, including mouse, keyboard, and general software use skills.¹⁰

The IMLS study found that adult learners most often use library computers and internet access to apply to vocational programs—to earn a professional license or certificates or a two-year degree. For instance, the study found that:

“Chloe, a 50-year-old high school graduate from Baltimore, was one such user. Currently homeless, Chloe had been frustrated in her ability to find work because she lacked an email address—she explained, ‘See, the jobs I used to get, you didn’t need an email account for.’ During her first visit to the library computer center, a librarian helped her set up an email account which she immediately began to use to send out job applications. Chloe eventually decided to pursue formal vocational education and

44% of those in poverty used public library computers and Internet access.

used the library's computers to find a nursing program: 'I looked it up last November for nursing on the Internet here, they told me everything, gave me the phone number; I called down there and started the school in November.'¹¹

In Chicago, the public library system's CyberNavigators program supplements staff librarians with young adult, part-time staffers who provide assistance with everything from basic computer instruction to advanced computer troubleshooting. CyberNavigators help people apply for unemployment insurance, write resumes, and set up new email accounts.¹² They also teach classes aimed at computer novices: Internet Basics, Mouse Skills, and Introduction to Email.¹³ Begun as an experimental summer project, the CyberNavigators program is now a year-round effort funded through the Chicago Public Library Foundation by a grant from Bank of America.¹⁴ "I haven't given up. I can't," a 69-year-old legal secretary said in a 2010 article about the program. "I have goals. I'm constantly doing searches on these job sites."¹⁵ A principal at a low-income high school in Oakland, California, reported that most of his students use the Internet connection at the public library. "We work with largely disadvantaged and at-risk youth, and they don't have computers at home, so they come here to the library. They get support here. The librarians help them attain the online and print materials they need."¹⁶

Yet libraries are struggling to keep up with demand for Internet-based information services. Many visitors complain about the lines at the terminals and limits on how much time an individual can spend on the computer. More than 81 percent of libraries report that they have insufficient workstation availability some or all of the time, leading 94 percent to impose time limits on use of the workstations.¹⁷

The workstation shortage is particularly acute in high-poverty areas, which experienced the greatest decline in the number of workstations, falling from 27.2 per library in 2007/08 to 22 per library in 2008/09. In low-poverty areas, the number of workstations did not change much, falling from 11 per library to 10.4 per library in the same time period.¹⁸

About 60 percent of libraries consider their current connection speeds insufficient during at least part of the day.¹⁹ For almost another quarter, higher speeds are just not affordable.²⁰

In an effort to help expand library patrons' access to the Internet, the 1996 Telecommunications Reform Act included a provision that created the current "E-rate" program.²¹ The program allocates approximately \$2.25 billion a year to provide schools and libraries with discounts²² on their purchases of Internet access, including internal connections.²³ To qualify, libraries must be eligible for assistance from a state library administrative agency under the Library Services and Technology Act, be nonprofit, and have budgets separate and independent of any school.²⁴

More than 50 percent of U.S. libraries received E-rate discounts in the funding year 2008/09.²⁵ Over the last 10 years, libraries have received on average about \$70 million per year.²⁶ The E-rate program seems to have helped enhance libraries' Internet access. During 2008/9, more than 44 percent of libraries reported connection speeds greater than 1.5 Mbps (compared with 25.7 percent in 2007/8), including about 64 percent of those in high-poverty locations.²⁷

The American Library Association says that public demand for library Internet access is growing and is likely to surge with the advent of high-definition video streaming, the increasing prevalence of online job training and use of the Internet to submit employment applications, consumers' growing need for e-government services, and rising numbers of computer terminals and wireless laptop computer users.²⁸

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