iPAC
INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

COMMUNITY ACCESS

TECHNOLOGY
Public libraries offer free access to technology, broadband Internet, and wireless Internet

EXPERTISE
Public librarians offer expertise that helps people understand technology and Internet-enabled services and resources

SKILLS
Public libraries offer a wide range of free technology instruction, including courses on employment and health resources

E-GOVERNMENT
Public libraries help people complete immigration, citizenship, social service, emergency benefit, and other online forms

EMPLOYMENT
Public libraries help people create résumés, search for jobs, and apply for jobs online

With 100% of public libraries offering public access to the Internet, public libraries are a vital community link to the Internet, technology, content, and government.[1] Public libraries are also essential providers of learning, employment, and health services and resources.

89.9%
Libraries offer technology training in general Internet use

36.1%
Libraries provide work space for mobile workers

62.3%
Libraries offer online employment resources

97.8%
Libraries offer wireless Internet access (WiFi)

The technology access, resources, and services provided by public libraries are essential for those who wish to learn new technologies, do not have high-speed Internet or technology access in their homes, lack the technology and digital skills to use the Internet-enabled services that can help them find jobs, interact with their government, or achieve their learning goals.

DIGITAL INCLUSION SURVEY

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

Figure 1. Public Library Technology Training Offerings by Topic.

Community Access

With over 17,000 library buildings and bookmobiles (some of which serve as mobile Internet access points) in communities, public libraries are essential community institutions that deliver Internet-enabled services and resources their communities need to thrive. This service and technology infrastructure allows libraries to offer their communities a range of public access technologies, technology training, learning, health, employment, and E-government services on which millions of people rely.

Public Libraries and Community Access

For most of their existence as a social institution, public libraries in the United States have filled many important community roles, ranging from guaranteeing access to reading materials that present diverse viewpoints to hosting community events, and from providing assistance for job seekers to introducing children to reading.

The rise of the digital age created a vital new role for libraries – community access point for computers and the Internet.[2] As the Internet became more widely used in the 1990s, public libraries embraced the role of providing access to and instruction for learning to use the Internet and current and emerging technologies.[3] Most U.S. public libraries offer either formal or informal technology instruction, including covering topics that include essential digital readiness skills (see Figure 1). Libraries also support their communities by guaranteeing access to E-government and providing support in emergency situations.[4]

As reported in 2012, 100% of public libraries now offer free public access to Internet-enabled workstations. As of 2014, 97.8% offer wireless Internet access (WiFi).[5] This universal provision of Internet access demonstrates the commitment of public libraries to ensuring that communities have access. To that end, libraries across the country are providing a number of community access services such as:

- 95.3% to online homework assistance;
- 90.3% to e-books;
- 76.8% to online health resources; and
- 62.3% to online employment resources.

Public libraries are also increasingly providing users the opportunity to generate their own content and collaborate:

- 36.1% offer work space(s) for mobile workers;
- 11.6% offer free video conferencing services;
- 2.6% offer 3-D printing; and
- 3.0% offer development technologies (e.g. maker/creator spaces).

To meet these needs, public libraries offer an average 18.8 computers for public use.

Further, recent Pew research indicates the significance of potential library closure on various populations, with 78% of Hispanics, 72% of women, 70% of parents of minors, and 70% of those 50 or older indicating that closure of the public library would have a major impact on their community.[6]

iPAC
INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

Key Issues and Challenges

Demand for community access via public libraries is a result of several factors:[7]
- More government, education, and employment activities being made available online;
- More digital content creation, sharing, and use; and
- More technology skills needed to be digitally ready.

As public libraries continue to be a central community hub for innovation, learning, and engagement, they face numerous long-term challenges. Nearly one-third (30.7%) of public libraries report daily wait time for workstations. Furthermore, 39.6% of libraries report that budget constraints prevent them from increasing the locations Internet bandwidth, and that is just one of the factors that negatively affect a libraries ability to increase Internet speeds (see Figure 2).

In addition, nearly half (49.3%) of public libraries report fair or poor availability of public meeting rooms. Further, a majority of public libraries report fair or poor availability of work/office space for business users (79.1%) and "maker spaces" for design and creative projects (87.6%) while nearly half (45.2%) report inadequate building infrastructure (electrical outlets, network capacity, etc.).

Only 21.3% of U.S. public library report renovations - like enhanced or added meeting rooms or general use space, or enhanced or added work/ office space for business users - in the last five years.

The 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey data shows that libraries that have the necessary financial support to make renovations and upgrades to their network capacity and general use space are able to offer vital community access programming at higher rates than those that were not able to perform renovations in the last five years (Figure 3). For example, there is a 14.3% point gap between renovated and non-renovated libraries when it comes to identifying health insurance resources, and a nearly 10% point gap when it comes to providing workspace for mobile workers (Figure 3). Support for public libraries to update their buildings and infrastructure enables libraries to better serve as a tool to foster greater community access, digital inclusion, and digital readiness.

Conclusion

Providing community access to the Internet is now strongly engrained both in library patron and community expectations for public libraries and in the values of public librarianship. In spite of the challenges they currently face, public libraries will continue to serve this vital function that supports individuals and communities.

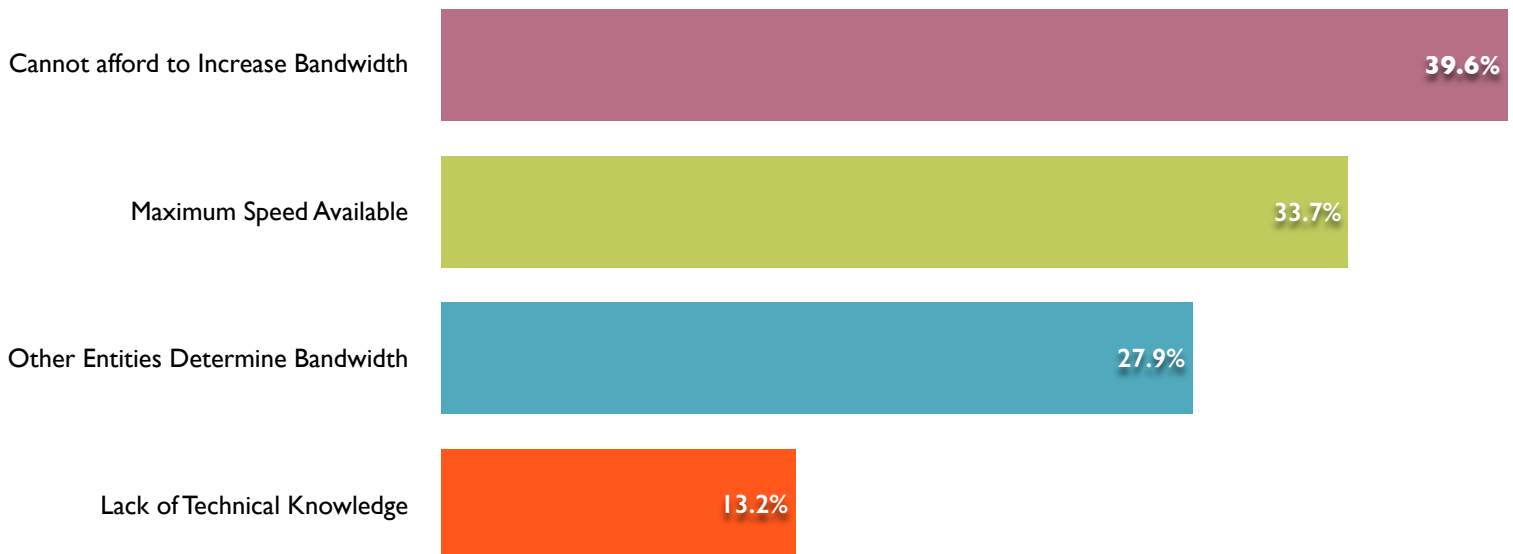| Factor	Percentage
Cannot afford to Increase Bandwidth	39.6%
Maximum Speed Available	33.7%
Other Entities Determine Bandwidth	27.9%
Lack of Technical Knowledge	13.2%

Figure 2. Factors that Affect the Ability of the Public Library Location to Increase Broadband Connectivity.

IPAC
INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

PUBLIC LIBRARIES & ACCESS

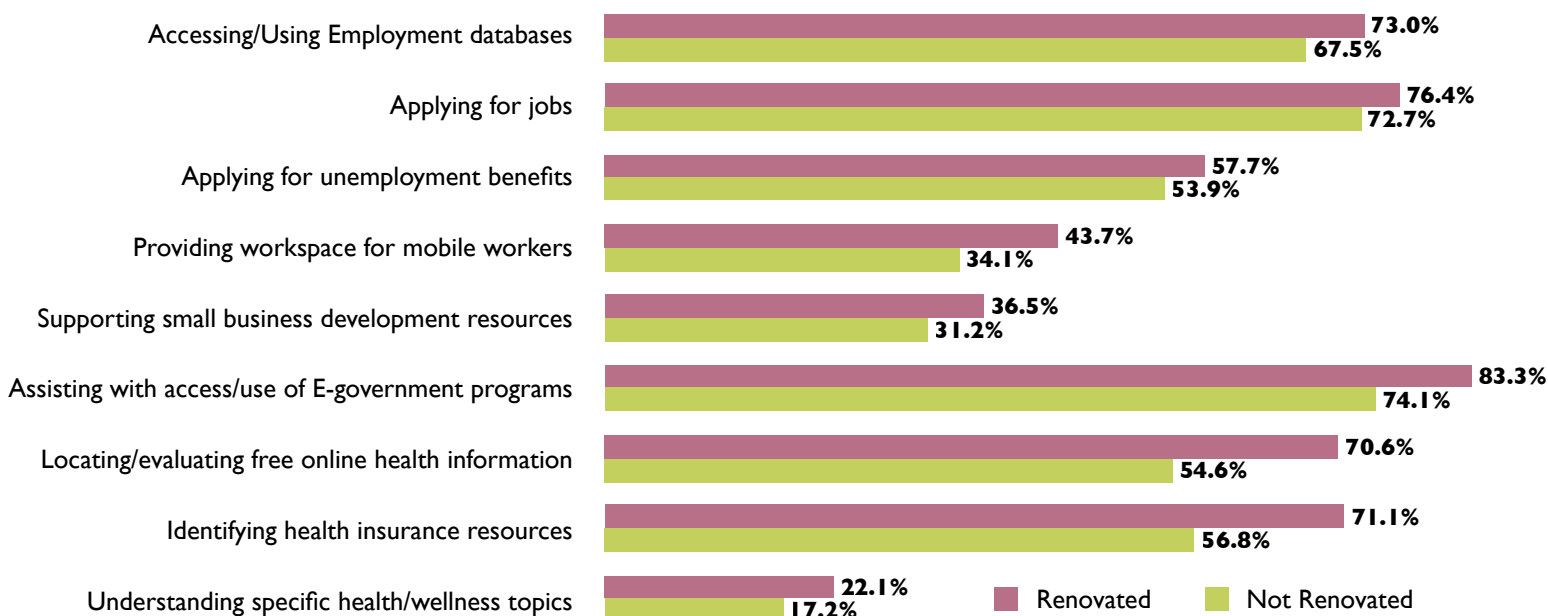| Program	Renovated	Not Renovated
Accessing/Using Employment databases	73.0%	67.5%
Applying for jobs	76.4%	72.7%
Applying for unemployment benefits	57.7%	53.9%
Providing workspace for mobile workers	43.7%	34.1%
Supporting small business development resources	36.5%	31.2%
Assisting with access/use of E-government programs	83.3%	74.1%
Locating/evaluating free online health information	70.6%	54.6%
Identifying health insurance resources	71.1%	56.8%
Understanding specific health/wellness topics	22.1%	17.2%

Figure 3. Public Library Program Offerings Overall for Libraries Renovated and Not Renovated in the Last Five years.

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] Bertot, J. C., McClure, C. R., & Jaeger, P. T. (2008). The impacts of free public Internet access on public library patrons and communities. *Library Quarterly, 78,* 285-301.

[3] Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., & McClure, C. R. (Eds.). (2011). *Public libraries and the Internet: Roles, perspectives, and implications.* Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

[4] Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., & McClure, C. R. (2006). Drafted: I want you to deliver e-government. *Library Journal, 131*(13), 34-39.

[5] Bertot, et. al. (2012).

[6] Horrigan, J. (2015). "Libraries at the Crossroads. Pew Research Center. Available at: http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/09/15/2015/Libraries.

[7] Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Langa, L. A., & McClure, C. R. (2006). Public access computing and Internet access in public libraries: The role of public libraries in e-government and emergency situations. *First Monday, 11*(9). Available: http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue11_9/bertot/index.html.

[8] Bertot, J. C., Jaeger, P. T., Wahl, E. E., & Sigler, K. I. (2011). Public libraries and the Internet: An evolutionary perspective. *Library Technology Reports,* 47(6), 7-18.

iPAC
INFORMATION POLICY & ACCESS CENTER

http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/