

ALA American Library Association

April 9, 2021

The Honorable Patty Murray, Chair
The Honorable Richard Burr, Ranking Member
Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee
428 Senate Dirksen Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Input from stakeholders on policy ideas on workforce development

Dear Senators Murray and Burr,

Thank you for inviting input from stakeholders on workforce development policy ideas. The American Library Association (ALA)¹ welcomes the opportunity to discuss how the nation's 117,000 libraries advance workforce development with other state and local partners through the bipartisan Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and other federal efforts. With increasing policy focus on the recovery from the pandemic, ALA highlights how libraries can strengthen efforts on upskilling, job search, and career exploration in coming years—with state and federal partnerships.

As the nation begins its economic recovery, people are seeking opportunities to build skills and find employment. Digital inclusion and skills building will play an especially important role, as pandemic-related job losses have compounded an already growing economic divide and trends toward an increasingly digital economy. To meet the needs of BIPOC individuals, rural communities, and New Americans, our workforce ecosystem must provide services and on ramps beyond American Job Centers (AJCs). America's libraries are poised to respond to these rapidly changing community needs with expanded services and strengthened workforce collaborations.

Libraries Are Essential Partners in Workforce Development

Libraries have long served as trusted and non-stigmatized “front doors” to employment and educational opportunities. During the Great Recession, a 2010 Training and Employment Notice issued by the Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration² recognized library assets and benefits to diverse job seekers and encouraged their networks to leverage this library infrastructure at the state and local levels. These assets include: extensive and trusted reach in communities of all sizes, staff expertise and relevant resources, and flexible collaboration with

¹ The ALA is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, ALA has been the trusted voice for libraries, advocating for the profession and the library's role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all.

² Oates, J. (2010, June 29). Encouraging Partnerships between the Workforce Investment System and Public Libraries to Meet Career and Employment Needs. [Internal U.S. DOLETA Training and Employment Notice]. Washington DC: Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

workforce and training partners. Surveys and research since then show continued library engagement in workforce development, adult education, and digital literacy.

The Pew Research Center provides data on the use of and perceptions of libraries by Americans through a series of surveys and reports.³ A 2012 Pew survey found that in the wake of the Great Recession, 36 percent of individuals that reported visiting the library did so to look for or apply for a job. In the 2015 survey, this number decreased to 23 percent, but still represented a substantial number of patrons who reported a workforce-related reason for visiting the library. Pew's 2015 survey found that 48 percent of all Americans 16 and older said that libraries help people find jobs "a lot" or "somewhat," but this was much higher among certain groups. For example, 58 percent of Hispanics, 55 percent of African Americans, and 53 percent of those in households with annual incomes under \$30,000 reported that libraries help people find jobs. A 2016 survey found that a majority (56%) of respondents thought that libraries contribute a lot or somewhat to their community through helping people find jobs or pursue job training.

The John J Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University released a significant study on the relationship between public libraries and workforce development in 2019.⁴ The study included surveys and interviews with state and local library staff across the country and found:

- Seventy-five percent (75%) of survey respondents reported that libraries in their state provide career services. Most library staff respondents describe a strong demand for career services.
- Respondents reported that public libraries are regarded as accessible alternatives to traditional workforce service providers due to their flexibility, accessibility, and openness to all patrons. However, library staff reported that not all community members and potential partners are aware that libraries play a role in the workforce system.
- Survey respondents noted that their public libraries have partnerships with nonprofit organizations (79%), One-Stop Career Centers/American Job Centers (69%), and community colleges or universities (69%).

Scaling Up and Integrating Libraries within the Workforce Ecosystem

With nearly 17,000 public library locations alone, the range of workforce-related programs and services varies widely from technology access and referrals to WIOA-funded adult education programs to services, outreach and credentials co-developed with workforce partners. For instance:

- *Co-located Job Centers:* From southern Nevada to Pennsylvania, many public libraries have embedded workforce staff and services within their facilities, improving public access and easing connections among family-friendly library career services and specialized workforce resources. "Embedding access to the One-Stop Delivery System in the public libraries helps us bring employment and training services closer to where businesses are located and where job seekers live," said Jaime Cruz, Workforce Connections executive director in Southern Nevada. In other cases, public libraries host mobile workforce staff on a by-appointment basis with a particular focus on connecting our most rural residents with workforce opportunities. "We have 2,000 square miles in the county, including actual

³ Pew Research Center, "Libraries" reports and presentations. <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/libraries/>

⁴ Holcomb, S., Dunford, A., & Idowu, F. (2019). *Public Libraries: A Community's Connection for Career Services*. New Brunswick, NJ: John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University.

wilderness. Libraries are a fundamental partner,” said Mary Houston, Snohomish County (Wash.) Workforce director. The agency has established MOUs with the Sno-Isle Libraries and the Everett Public Library.

- *Access to post-secondary training and credentials.* A growing number of public libraries are exploring ways to help their patrons earn portable, stackable credentials in high-demand sectors. The national Skilling for Employment Post COVID-19 initiative by the Public Library Association and Microsoft Corp. with access to IT help desk certification, among others, and the Advanced Manufacturing certification program in development by the Pikes Peak Library District (Colo.) with local employers and the Colorado Advanced Manufacturing Association illustrate this trend. Through its “Learn. Practice. Certify.” Initiative, the Washington State Library supports a range of entry-level, industry-recognized certifications that include Microsoft Office Specialist, IC3 digital literacy, and Adobe Certified Associate.
- *Flexible and innovative problem solving.* Even when the pandemic closed many library buildings to the public, staff innovated and coordinated with local partners to shift services to meet ongoing and new demand. The Kenton County (Ky.) Public Library launched Job Search Central to meet the needs of career changers with services ranging from career coaches to virtual job fairs. The Berks County (Penn.) Public Libraries partnered with its local workforce development board to launch a Mobile Job Lab, to bring workforce resources and instruction to community centers during the pandemic. And the Fresh Start @ Your Library program is a multi-state collaboration led by the New Jersey State Library that is focused on reconnecting returning citizens with their communities and helping prepare them for successful reentry into the workforce. Participating libraries serve as Reconnection Centers, in partnership with the New Jersey State Parole Board, and provide services that include job readiness and occupational skills training, GED preparation, and referrals to employment opportunities.

Libraries are playing and can play an even greater role in advancing an equitable economic recovery. Integrating libraries as part of economic recovery and workforce initiatives increases entry points and improves service delivery for those most marginalized in our communities, including workers of color disproportionately impacted by Covid job losses.

Improve workforce capability with greater focus on and investment in digital literacy

Congress can improve workforce training by expanding funds available for digital literacy, which is foundational for equitable economic recovery, and investing in infrastructure for remote and collaborative learning. U.S. libraries are cornerstones for digital equity and skills building in virtually every community.

Research from the National Skills Coalition estimates 48 million people (or one-third of the U.S. workforce) lack foundational digital literacy skills.⁵ NSC further notes that this lack of skills may be disguised by *fragmented knowledge*, or the ability to use a mobile phone to text a photo, for instance, but lacking familiarity with using a mouse or uploading a resume. This gap becomes a chasm for many low-income and people of color and disproportionately affects workers in some

⁵ Bergson-Shilcock, Amanda. (2020). *The New Landscape of Digital Literacy*. Washington DC: National Skills Coalition.

sectors, including hospitality; retail; and construction, transportation and storage. One-third of health and social workers also have no or limited digital skills.

When libraries closed their doors to the public during the pandemic, this need for internet access and assistance filing for unemployment, applying for work, and improving skills did not go away. Libraries across the nation kept communities connected by providing public Wi-Fi, hotspot lending, virtual and in-library digital resources, and technology support.⁶ While Congress and the Federal Communications Commission have rightly increased attention and funding to improve broadband access, there has been far less of a focus on digital skills building and applied use of broadband-enabled programs and applications. Whether through further WIOA reforms or legislation like the Digital Equity Act or similar, the digital skills gap should be a priority, and libraries should be enabled as eligible providers and partners to address this need. Ninety-four percent of public libraries offer technology training to patrons, including basic internet use (90%), productivity software (84%), and social media use (56%).⁷ In FY19, North Carolina public libraries helped 28,000 people look for a job, and 42,500 people attended a technology class at a N.C. library.⁸ Across the country libraries also are partnering with public and private entities to expand the reach and range of digital skills training, including the Libraries Lead with Digital Skills in collaboration with Grow with Google⁹ and Skilling for Employment Post COVID-19 with Microsoft Corp.¹⁰

Continue WIOA reforms and address long-term underfunding

Congress should continue to build on and expand previous reforms to the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act. To do so, Congress must start by addressing long-term underfunding ranging from WIOA formula funds to adult education. More investments must be made to meet the need. With adequate funding, several useful reforms may be enabled, including:

- Increasing the emphasis on the explicit role for libraries under Title I, such as allowing local workforce boards to provide funds directly to public libraries to carry out digital literacy training and other workforce-related services.
- Amending WIOA to make digital capability/literacy an allowable activity and fund use the same way as ABE, ASE, ESOL, and Integrated English Language and Citizenship services. Amend the definition of Measurable Skill Gain to include documented digital skills.
- Exploring avenues for libraries to expand opportunities for Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education, perhaps working with state and local partners.
- Increase funding for WIOA Titles I, II, and IV to create career navigator positions in the community, such as at libraries. Ensure navigation is articulated as a Title I and II service, libraries are eligible providers, and make the use of funds for this purpose allowable.
- Additional funding for Wagner-Peyser to expand access to career coaching for the newly unemployed at remote sites, such as libraries.

⁶ American Library Association. (2021). *Libraries Connect Communities: COVID-19, Internet Access, and Libraries*. http://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/telecom/broadband/Libraries_Connect_Communities_ALA_020421.pdf

⁷ Bertot, J.C., Real, B., Lee, J., McDermott, A.J., & Jaeger, P.T. (2015). 2014 Digital Inclusion Survey: Findings and Results. College Park, MD: Information Policy & Access Center, University of Maryland College Park. Available at <http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/>.

⁸ State Library of North Carolina, Public Library Survey FY2019. Available at <https://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/services-libraries/resources-library-staff/data-and-evaluation/infographics-templates-and-design-tools>.

⁹ Project information available at <http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/google>.

¹⁰ Project information available at <http://www.ala.org/pla/initiatives/digitalskilling>.

- Revise reporting systems to make it easier for libraries and other providers to provide services.

Include libraries in pre-apprenticeship programs

Include libraries in pre-apprenticeship programs to develop early skills and awareness of careers, as well as improve the pipeline to apprenticeship and other training opportunities in these fields. Examples like the RhodeCoders 2.0 program for high school students that provides web development and coding programs at the Providence Public Library (R.I.) is one example, but virtually all public libraries offer youth programs and have expanded STEM and computational literacy programs that are particularly well-suited to support 21st century workforce needs.

This year, for instance, Nevada's Carson City Library will host socially distanced Think Bionics Camps for middle-school youth during school breaks and on successive Saturdays. The camps will use FESTO bionics kits and curriculum for an interactive and hands-on learning experience. The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) jobs will grow twice as fast as other fields in the coming decade. To prepare youth for future careers in these fields, Think Bionics Camps will increase their knowledge of STEM topics, improve problem-solving skills, and provide encouragement to pursue a career in STEM fields.

Libraries on school and colleges campuses, as well as public libraries, provide college and career readiness training, scaffolded learning and wraparound support for learners of all ages. These library services and resources are largely self-directed and inquiry-based.

Equitable economic recovery demands collaboration

There are a range of strategies, large and small, that can encourage innovation and better support workers. Overall, though, Americans need more entry points and scaffolding for upskilling and cost-efficient workforce development by combining technology-enabled applications and resources with "high-touch" staff support that will help close access and skills gaps. A "navigator" model, as was used in libraries and other community-based institutions to support enrollment in the Affordable Care Act, holds promise for both general skills building, as well as career exploration. The Digital Navigator program, led by the Salt Lake City Public Library, began in early December 2020 as a response to the pandemic. It adapts traditional digital inclusion programming to provide one-on-one tech support by phone, training, and remote access to digital resources. The library is working with several community partners, including Catholic Community Services, to have one full-time navigator each to complement the library's employees. The program is funded through a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

Another example specifically relevant to health care can be found in Nevada. The Nevada State Library has enabled the College of Southern Nevada to offer the first-ever dialysis technician training using 3D and virtual reality. The training is embedded within the Nevada CareerExplorer program, which is available through all libraries in the state and supports library staff as career navigators. The project demonstrates both of how we may use virtual reality to expand how people may explore potential employment opportunities, but, more importantly, how library staff and community partners working through libraries may serve as career navigators.

Beyond traditional workforce upskilling, libraries are responsive to the needs of entrepreneurs, small business owners, and freelancers, as well. By offering business centers and maker spaces,

networking opportunities, training, and one-to-one coaching, libraries offer resources for entrepreneurs considering starting or growing a business. Through strategic partnerships, libraries are able to offer relevant training for high-demand industries. For example, the Broward County (Fla.) Library has partnered with General Assembly, a global leader in skills education, and Black Valley Digital, a minority-owned education and marketing agency, to offer technology workshops and a business incubator to aid minority solopreneurs and freelancers launch and grow tech businesses. In California, the Los Angeles Public Library provides micro-enterprise readiness skills (e.g., bookkeeping, credit building) to the sidewalk vending community in both English and Spanish, preparing vendors for success in navigating city permits and licenses. And Georgia's Gwinnett County Public Library has launched the New Start Entrepreneurship Incubator to help community members who have served time in jail or prison to create their own business.

Conclusion

America's libraries combine an expansive reach of accessible technology-rich locations; trusted staff trained to provide access to the most relevant resources for people of all stages of educational and employment readiness; robust learning and employment print and digital resources; and sustained and flexible collaboration with workforce partners. Further integrating and investing in libraries as part of the workforce ecosystem benefits diverse job seekers, adult learners, and incumbent workers—as well as complementing and strengthening workforce networks.

We welcome the opportunity to further explore these prospects with members of the Senate HELP committee. Beyond naming libraries explicitly as workforce partners in WIOA reforms, adequate library funding is critical. Specifically, annual federal appropriations through the Library Services Technology Act (LSTA) strengthen library staff and technology resources, and the Build America's Libraries Act would improve our facilities to better enable services and partnerships, including those related to workforce development. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kathi Kromer". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Kathi Kromer
Associate Executive Director,
Public Policy and Advocacy
American Library