

Strength in Numbers

Study findings provide foundation for advocacy

During this slow and winding economic recovery, how do we effectively advocate to regain, sustain, and enhance library funding? How do we make the case that libraries are an essential public service, along with the fire and police departments, and streets and sanitation? The foundation for all local, state, and national advocacy is built with the same material: reliable, thorough, and timely data.

The importance of statistics to library advocacy is certainly not new, but many library leaders and advocates were not always sufficiently aware of what was available and how to effectively utilize data. But the market downturn, and subsequent consecutive years of cuts to library funding, have thrust advocacy education and action for libraries of all sizes and types to the forefront.

Most fortunately, in 2006, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation joined forces to fund the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study (PLFTAS). This support allowed for the continuation and expansion of groundbreaking research on the availability of public access technology in libraries that was initiated in 1994. The expanded study added questions to provide more extensive analysis of public library budgets and expenditures, a survey of the Chief Officers of State Library Agen-

cies (COSLA) on state support for public libraries, and field interviews with library staff to help illuminate the quantitative responses. As a result, the critical data was already available when we needed it the most – at the beginning of what has been termed the Great Recession.

Utilizing the available PLFTAS data and supporting resources, state and public libraries throughout the U.S. have been able to conduct truly effective advocacy initiatives. The PLFTAS has provided libraries with much more than raw data. It has given libraries a number of quality advocacy resources and tools: state-specific handouts that provide national comparisons, national maps that give visual impact to discussions on broadband connectivity and digital literacy, and press release and op-ed templates for dissemination of our stories to local, regional, and state media.

Libraries continue to be supported by the use of PLFTAS data to inform and influence national policy. It has been used in Congressional testimony. And it is currently helping direct the development of digital

literacy initiatives of the Federal Communications Commission and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

I share some of the PLFTAS history as this is the last year and final report for the Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study. Many individuals and organizations have contributed to the success of this study. I would like to especially thank staff members at the state library

agencies that coordinated participation by their public libraries, and of course, the thousands of library staff members who contributed their time and effort to this important research.

A most sincere thank you is due to the ALA and the Gates Foundation for the commitment of funding and leadership they have provided in support of this study, as well as for their many other contributions that have advanced public access technology in U.S. public libraries.

—Lamar Veatch
President, Chief Officers of State
Library Agencies (COSLA)

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