

Libraries were selected from a pool of those responding to the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study survey, with an emphasis on selecting two states from diverse regions and one BTOP recipient and non-recipient for comparison purposes.



## REPORTS FROM THE FIELD: GEORGIA AND IDAHO

**PUBLIC LIBRARY FUNDING  
& TECHNOLOGY ACCESS  
STUDY 2011–2012**

Following recommendations of staff at their respective state libraries, selected interviewees were representative of rural, suburban, and urban libraries, as well as geographical diversity within each state. State library staff were also interviewed to provide a statewide context for these field interviews. The interviews are not meant to provide a comprehensive view of public library technology in each state, but rather to offer descriptive, qualitative data that deepens the understanding of issues related to library funding and sustainability.

## Key Findings

The greatest common challenge of the libraries in Georgia and Idaho is equipping libraries with sufficient broadband speeds to meet public demand.

In Idaho, the issue is the lack of availability of any broadband in some rural communities. Idaho has had the greatest gains in this arena, thanks to the award of a Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) grant, which provided increased bandwidth and other resources for 40 percent of Idaho's public libraries. Although Georgia's public libraries are supplied with broadband connectivity from the state, all of those interviewed reported this connectivity is far below the amount needed to provide reliable and consistent service.

While libraries in both Georgia and Idaho have struggled with funding challenges since the very early days of the current recession, Idaho's libraries and communities have generally stabilized. Georgia's libraries have yet to

experience recovery, and reduced open hours, furlough days, languishing collections, and dependency on soft money are taking a toll on the quality of and access to services.

The two states offer different stories of technology support. Georgia's structure of regional library systems provides for one or more IT staff to coordinate technology support and maintenance for all system locations. Conversely, a large majority of Idaho libraries depend on non-IT specialists on staff, often the library director or volunteers, to provide technology support and maintenance.

Nearly all libraries in both states report an increase in demand for technology training and assistance, yet are limited in their response by funding and staffing shortages.

## GEORGIA FIELD REPORT

### Executive Summary

Since the start of the current economic recession, Georgia's public libraries have been subject to a vicious cycle of limited supply and high demand for all library services. Despite budget cuts that have reduced hours and limited days of service, both on-site and remote use of library services continues to increase.

Georgia's unemployment rate, which decreased to 9 percent in March 2012 from its peak of 10.5 percent in January 2010, continues to be above the national rate.<sup>1</sup> As more people struggle to make ends meet and find jobs, the demand for free computer and Internet access, technology training, and job search resources and assistance has placed a tremendous burden on the library's ability to respond.

For this reason, public access technology remains a budget priority by those interviewed, despite substantial cuts to collections, open hours and staffing levels. The need for basic level computer training is still very high, and

many libraries report having trouble meeting the demand due to staff shortages and a lack of dedicated computers for training. A lack of staffing also affects how libraries provide assistance for e-government and job search services.

Despite information system upgrades in 2011, increasing broadband demands by online video and social media mean that 70 percent of Georgia's libraries experience network saturation on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> The Georgia Public Library Service (GPLS), which provides this broadband connectivity to all of the state's public libraries, is researching affordable, alternate models to support a more extensive capacity upgrade.

IT staff are adopting more cost-effective open source software and free software for a wide variety of library functions. They are also successfully taking a "do-it-yourself" approach to save money on technology projects, (e.g., firewalls, digital lobby displays, and online transaction systems). However, open source and do-it-yourself

solutions are not cost-free, although they have provided measurable savings. Library staff believe that, in many cases, the free or low-cost options are equal to or superior to the quality of equivalent commercial products.

Expect more innovation from Georgia's libraries. With the support of a 2011 Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Grant, the GPLS will lead a national planning effort for the development of an open source software system for libraries that provide services from the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

### Background

Georgia has 61 public library systems, consisting of 33 regional library systems and 28 single-county systems, with 389 physical locations and 17 mobile libraries. As the ninth most populous state, Georgia libraries serve a population of 9.68 million.<sup>3</sup> The state provides support for administration of the public libraries through



Athens-Clarke County Library – Athens Regional Library System

GPLS. The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia oversees the GPLS, as well as the state's 35 colleges and universities.

State funding for each library system is comprised of three line items: professional salaries, materials, and maintenance/operations. The state also provides broadband connectivity for each system, funded with a mix of 25 percent state funding and 75 percent E-rate.

In 2006, the Georgia Public Library Service initiated the [Evergreen Project](#) to develop an open source integrated library system (ILS). The majority of the libraries (80 percent) utilize Evergreen/PINES (Public Information Network for Electronic Services), the state's ILS. Libraries use the software to provide their public catalog interface, as well as to manage circulation, acquisition of materials, and resource sharing among all member libraries. After Evergreen was released, more than 1,000 consortia and individual libraries in the U.S., Canada, and worldwide, adopted this ILS.

In FY2009 (the most recent year for which national statistics are available), Georgia's public libraries reported hosting 40.9 million visits, answering 8.7 million reference questions, and circulating more than 47.8 million items. Georgia residents are served by 3,104 library employees, of whom 691 hold a Master's degree in Library and Information Science.<sup>4</sup>

The state ranks 47th in the nation (including the District of Columbia) for full-time equivalent (FTE) staff per 25,000 residents, with 8.22 FTE compared to the national average of 12.14 FTE. The state also ranks 46th in total operating revenue per capita, with \$22.60 compared to the national average of \$39.02 per capita.<sup>5</sup>

Georgia averages 16.6 public access computers per library outlet, which is above the national average of 13.9, and the state ranks eighth in public access computers per 5,000 residents.<sup>6</sup>

Eight library directors and 13 additional staff members from administration, IT, training and community relations at eight libraries were inter-

viewed between December 2011 and January 2012. These staff from participating libraries work at six regional library systems and two single-county library systems, represent libraries serving populations ranging from 42,000 to 700,000 people, and provide service from library systems ranging from four to 23 outlets.

Research staff also interviewed GPLS staff. Although the interviews are not meant to provide a comprehensive view of public library technology in the state, interviewees' comments help illuminate the trends, challenges and successes when serving the public in Georgia libraries.

## Funding Landscape

Georgia's economic struggles followed the same trajectory as the rest of the nation, with a state budget shortfall that experienced a peak of 28.8 percent in FY2010, and then eased to a 7.6% shortfall for FY2012. As in the majority of states, funding for Georgia public libraries was negatively affected at both the state and local levels.

During the past four years, Georgia's state funding for public library services has decreased 25 percent. This includes funding for state agency operations and state grants to the public library systems. Each library system has been able to determine how to allocate its budget reduction for the year from among three budget categories: professional salaries, materials, or maintenance/operations. The varied fiscal situation in each of the 61 library systems is due to the individual mix of city, county, and state funding. However, when specifically asked about cumulative effect on overall budgets for the past two years, all eight systems interviewed reported decreased funding.

To meet increased community demand, budgets for public access technology remains a high priority

among those interviewed. Collections, open hours and staffing levels have suffered the most from these budget cuts.

For a few libraries, collections expenditures are now gutted. Since 2008, the collections budget of the DeKalb County Public Library has been reduced by 96 percent (from \$2,200,000 to \$100,000). In FY2011, the Three Rivers Regional Library System took its full state cut to collections. In that year, for libraries within the system that did not receive additional local funding, only donated materials were added to the collection.

Overall, 30 percent of Georgia's public libraries report reductions in open hours since the last fiscal year, a percentage well over the national average of 9 percent. Most of those interviewed tried to cut hours versus whole days, but that tactic is not always sufficient. In January 2012, the largest library and headquarters of the Sara Hightower Regional Library System implemented closures on both Fridays and Sundays, due to the library's inability to afford the utility costs for the 75,000 sq. ft. building. Two of Hall County Library System's six outlets have been closed, and the remaining four have all experienced cuts to days and/or open hours.

In Georgia, 58 percent of public libraries report being the only free access venue to computers and Internet in their communities. Staff at a few of the libraries note that, in addition to the community at large, this access is critical for the college students in their service area. For example, the library at a community college in the Southwest Georgia Regional Library service area closes at noon on Friday and is only open on Saturdays for four hours. The community college's students depend on the public library for computers, Internet access, research resources and assistance.

Those interviewed have all reduced



Decatur Library – DeKalb County Public Library

staffing levels, mainly by implementing hiring freezes. Layoffs have occurred in a few libraries, including the Three Rivers Regional Library System, a system that serves an area larger than the combined states of Delaware and Rhode Island. Normally allocated 10 librarians from state funding, now only four librarians are available to serve the entire region.

To deal with staffing shortages, many staff are sharing duties in other departments. The webmaster/technology trainer for the Sara Hightower Regional Library System is now also working at the circulation desk, resulting in significant delays to work on the library's website and the number of public technology training classes that can be offered. Managers at a number of libraries are doubling and tripling up on the departments they oversee. For two among those interviewed, the IT managers are also responsible for the cataloging departments.

Many of the libraries depend on foundations, endowments, and Friends groups to fill in the growing gaps in services and resources. The director of the Southwest Georgia Regional Library commends the "progressive board chair that led the creation of the library foundation in 1990." This past year, their foundation funded the e-book collection, and named endowments provided over \$30,000 for books and materials. The

director of the West Georgia Regional Library reports that matching funds programs, initiated by two of the Friends groups within the system, have brought in extra donations.

## Technology Resources

Most of those interviewed report the same trend as 66% of Georgia public libraries —increased use of public access computers over the past year.

"The only reason we didn't report an increase this year," said one library director, "is because we have been maxed out on available public workstations. Not enough money and not enough space."

Many report surging public demand for technology training and are busy searching for solutions to help meet those needs.

With a high percentage of retirees in its service area, the Mountain Regional Library System has experienced an influx of patrons who lack technology experience, but are eager to learn. Library staff has developed a five-part basics series, that upon completion, leads to more advanced classes, such as how to use word processing software and how to book travel online.

"What has been so amazing is we started out with two classes, and right away every class we added was double-booked. We are doing multiples of

those classes to meet demand. It has mushroomed beyond anything I could have imagined,” said the library director. As the library does not have a computer lab, many of the classes are held after hours. Students are bringing in their own laptops to overcome the lack of available training workstations.

The Athens Regional Library System has enhanced its public training with the creation of a robust remote interactive training program using the WebEx platform. This popular initiative, funded by a grant from the Institute for Museum and Library Services, provided added benefit after the closing of the computer lab in Athens for a year-long expansion project. The library system also uses the online platform for staff training. The GPLS now provides a WebEx account to all library systems, used both for statewide staff professional development and to support expected growth in the demand for online training for the public.

Demand continues to be high for open lab time for self-directed instruction and one-on-one tutoring. However, many libraries report having insufficient staff to provide this level of assistance and are constantly searching for qualified volunteers to provide support.

Public libraries are overwhelmed by the demand to provide for public e-government needs as government agencies increasingly offer exclusively online access to information and services. Over 95 percent of Georgia libraries report providing assistance for what many describe as an “unfunded mandate.”

Those interviewed describe the needs of one distinct group: professional truck drivers. A few years ago, the State of Georgia required that all Commercial Driver License (CDL) renewals occur online.

The IT librarian of the Three Rivers Regional Library System reports that

no computers are provided at the license bureau for drivers to complete this online renewal. “The bureau staff directed people to the public library, but never communicated this change to the libraries.” The libraries saw a large influx of people who had never before used a computer, needed an e-mail address, and then had to develop enough computer proficiency to take the online test to get their renewal. “This was a challenge for the libraries because staffing was starting to decrease,” said the IT librarian. “And the people who came in were already frustrated because they’d been turned away from the license bureau, and based on what they were told at the bureau, came in expecting a level of assistance that was not immediately available to them. It was hard on all of us.”

All interviewed report demand for job-seeking assistance continues to be high, but also shared some success stories.

One library director recounted the story of a woman with limited computer skills who came to use the library computers to train for licensing that would improve her professional options. “A number of months after she completed her online work, she returned to let us know that, due to her work at the library, she had doubled her income. She was as grateful as could be, because our staff did much more than just turn on the computer and point at a website—we encouraged her every step of the way.”

The director of the Athens Regional Library System continues to communicate the role the library plays in economic development, especially to groups like the county commission and chamber of commerce. “It’s an

underappreciated service because, so often, they don’t realize the number of people who come here to use computers.” The staff documents success stories to share along with statistics: how the owners of a new bakery and a new restaurant both acquired their computer skills and small business training by attending Spanish-language programs held at the library.

The Athens Regional Library System director wondered aloud, “If someone wants to apply for a job at a national retail chain in our area, they are directed to our library to do it electronically.

Many employees at another national retailer must come to our library to print out their W2s. If we weren’t here, what would these corporations do?”

Five of the eight interviewed recently launched downloadable e-book collections, with four doing so as part of a statewide consortium. One library had downloadable audiobooks only. The three libraries without e-book collections report the cost is too prohibitive, particularly in light of the cuts made to their collections budgets.

“There is just too much upheaval in industry to make that kind of financial commitment,” said the director of the West Georgia Regional Library. “Sometimes there are advantages to not being at the forefront, and pull back for a bit. Remember VHS versus Beta, and video disks?”

While most libraries maintain some level of social media presence, primarily on Facebook, activity is generally moderate. Staffing shortages limit the volume and variety of postings. Still, libraries recognize the importance of utilizing this free platform and hope to be able to increase their social media activity.

Two interviewees host a mobile

**“The Digital Divide used to be the computer-haves and have-nots...now it is about the broadband-haves and have-nots.”**

optimized website with interactive applications. Three others host mobile websites without interactivity, and the remaining three others do not have a mobile optimized website. The IT manager at the Hall County Library System has created the mobile app for the library's website, which includes the functionality for texting a librarian. It is designed so the librarian receives the query and answers through e-mail, although the response is received by the sender as a text message.

One library staff member notes that not every library has the in-house staff expertise to develop a mobile application on their own. On his wish list is the donation by a developer from a major computer company to create a single app that allows a user to select their library, and includes a template to customize the look and the choice of available features.

## Connectivity

Since 1998, the GPLS has provided the state's public library systems with broadband connectivity, in various quantities of T1 (1.5 Mbps) units, as determined by the number of computers at each location. The range of T1 units per location for those interviewed ranged from one to six (9 Mbps) for a library with 100 public access computers.

Those interviewed note that no one ever imagined the amount of broadband capacity that would be needed in this age of online video and social media; this high demand incapacitates most of those interviewed on a daily basis. The high level of public use, exacerbated by shared staff and public broadband connections, results in virtual daily shutdowns of Internet service for both library staff and the public. Library Internet activity grinds to a halt every weekday around 3 p.m. after school lets out. Interviewees also experience a similar freeze-up right after the library opens. Administrative and technical services staff report

having to come in long before the library opens to conduct work that involves online transactions.

The GPLS is working to find a solution to these capacity issues, and individual library systems are lobbying to obtain additional connectivity from local entities. For a number of the multi-county systems, local support has been elusive, due to what has been described as a "lack of ownership" from their diverse city and county funding units.

A number of libraries have determined that, to stay functional, they must limit access to videos, including distance learning videos. The Southwest Georgia Regional Library moni-

tors bandwidth usage and will temporarily allow patrons to access anything that the filtering software allows. "Video access is not a guaranteed service," said the library network administrator. "When patrons are given the opportunity to access videos and other bandwidth-intensive websites, the usage (saturation rate) quickly rises to 100 percent."

Three of the eight interviewed have been able to obtain fiber connectivity, bringing much-needed relief to library staff. The Athens Regional Library System has been able to expand to 20 Mbps at one of its 11 locations. The DeKalb County Public Library's bond program provided the



Rome-Floyd County Library – Sara Hightower Regional Library



Carrollton Library – West Georgia Regional Library

funding to connect to the county’s Internet fiber ring. The library’s connectivity is now 100 Mbps, and library staff report that they are already at 70-80% capacity.

The Mountain Regional Library System was party to a federal stimulus grant to create a network to bring fiber to the area. The library was able to add 10 Mbps for \$250 per month, prior to calculating the additional 80% E-rate discount. The library was able to implement a solution that other libraries interviewed are seeking: a complete separation of staff and public broadband networks. Many libraries share the networks, separated only by firewalls. The Mountain Regional Library System has kept the state’s T1s for the PINES/staff network, and the additional 10 Mbps is solely for public Internet access. “We took money out of every place we could to pay for the fiber. We just couldn’t function without it,” said the library director.

Wireless connectivity in Georgia libraries is close to full coverage, with 97.9% of public libraries reporting that they provide access. All of those interviewed have Wi-Fi, although approximately 25% of the West Georgia

Regional Library’s 17 locations are still without it. The DeKalb County Public Library reports waiting for the fiber broadband upgrade before adding Wi-Fi two years ago.

### Technology Support and Maintenance

Each regional library system in Georgia has one or more IT staff member to coordinate technology support and maintenance for all system locations. Technology support includes setting up a network of technology liaisons at each location, remote monitoring technology, and, in the case of a couple of the larger libraries, field deployment of IT staff to outlets on a rotating schedule.

With ongoing reduced funding levels, most of those interviewed are unable to maintain replacement schedules for their public workstations.

“You can have a technology plan down on paper and talk about a replacement schedule, but you buy when there is money. Now it’s ‘pie in the sky,’” said the director of the West Georgia Regional Library.

One library IT manager commented, “When we have catastrophic

failure, then we replace.”

A number of interviewees expressed frustration with the inability to perform hardware and software upgrades on all their public access computers at the same time. Having different computers on different systems results in inefficient maintenance activities and extra expenditures of time and money. In response, some libraries have chosen to retain older programs for their computers until they can afford to upgrade all equipment at once.

To combat funding decreases, a number interviewees are actively researching and adopting open source software and free software for a wide range of service platforms.

“Because of the struggle with funding, I try to do everything that I can with open source software and get everything free that I can get my hands on,” said the IT manager of the Hall County Library System. “Open source is getting much better. When new programs are launched, they tend to be rather rudimentary, but give it a year or two. The open source content management system we use was very raw at first, but now it’s better than any paid equivalent system I’ve seen.”

The Athens Regional Library System has used open source ghosting technology for image replication. The library is also transitioning its website to an open source content management system that the IT manager believes will provide a more interactive management system than their current system.

“We cannot afford to purchase all the software that patrons are using outside and want to continue to work on in the library,” said the IT librarian of the Three Rivers Regional Library System. “So now we are utilizing Open Office, which will convert just about everything for us.” The library system has also adopted an open source fire-

wall solution. Small modifications are made to old computers, and the “brain” of the firewall is loaded on a \$10 flash drive. The total cost per firewall is about \$100, versus a typical commercial product cost of \$1,000.

The DeKalb County Public Library took the “do-it-yourself” route to set

**“Things don’t look as bad to the patrons who walk into a new building and see 48 brand-spanking-new computers, but walk into one of our old facilities and it’s duct tape.”**

up systems for online payments and for digital (virtual) lobby displays. The library’s automation services coordinator estimates that two weeks of work by their creative e-branch manager on an alternative lobby display saved the library close to \$60,000.

The trade-off in using open source development and do-it-yourself solutions in place of purchasing software and hardware is staff time, and that staff must possess advanced programming expertise. Still, libraries note that these alternative efforts have provided measurable cost savings.

## Challenges

The slow economic recovery and uncertain future levels of local and state support suppresses new initiatives and overall services for many.

“It’s too hard to continue paying for hard costs with soft money,” said the director of the Mountain Regional Library System. “Our Friends group has been paying to keep the library open one day, but they are nearly broke, so that will probably end.” A number of libraries named other soft money purchases, such as e-book collections and Wi-Fi.

More than one library director shared the observation that “budget cuts have removed our ability to plan.” This applied to all areas of library operations, including technology

resources, collection development and programming.

The director of the Hall County Library System is unsure what will be offered at their new technology library, scheduled to open in July 2012, because the County is not sure how much money will be available to equip the outlet. “We write technology grants when we can, but computers have moved beyond being cutting edge, so grants are harder to make attractive. When

working with lean staffing, it becomes disheartening to go after money when it is mostly speculative.”

For libraries that had passed bonds for new construction prior to the 2008 economic drop, staff noted major public perception issues regarding their funding situation. In 2005, the DeKalb County Public Library passed a \$54.5 million bond for 12 building projects, which increased the system size by almost a third. In 2011, the system had to open three new locations with no new staff. To manage this shortfall, they moved staff around and cut hours at all locations. Regarding the challenges with maintaining technology, the library director commented that, “Things don’t look as bad to the patrons who walk into a new building and see 48 brand-spanking-new computers, but you walk into one of our old facilities and it’s duct tape.”

With more than half of Georgia’s public libraries reporting inadequate Internet connection speeds, a number of staff at rural libraries felt that this limited their digital literacy efforts. “The Digital Divide used to be the computer-haves and have-nots, but more so now it is about the broadband-haves and have-nots,” said the assistant director of the Three Rivers Regional Library System. The library’s IT librarian noted that the “gap is closing in rural communities, but not

as quickly as we would like. We may be closing the gap on exposure to technology, but there is still a large gap in knowledge on how to do the things they need to do online.”

Envisioning a more robust solution for library connectivity issues, the director of the Hall County Library System said, “I look forward to the day when most library traffic moves airtime, via satellite, and fiber is only for the most secure transmissions.”

## Successes

Interviewees report successes and accomplishments in the past year that have made a difference in their communities. Each library director acknowledged important staff contributions to their library’s growth and innovation. “We just have the most wonderful, creative staff. They see the needs in our community and just go the extra mile to make life better for people. They absolutely are our most valuable resource,” said the director of the Mountain Regional Library System.

There is great enthusiasm and pride expressed on the part of IT staff for their innovative solutions to maintain public access technology. This includes in-house design of interactive mobile apps, do-it-yourself firewalls, and adoption of open source and free software for a number of platforms, including content management systems, ghosting technology, and e-mail.

Many of the library directors stress that community partnerships are critical to the current and ongoing viability of libraries, particularly in the light of decreased funding. The Goodwill Industries provides assistance to job-seekers at the DeKalb County Public Library. The assistant director of the Southwest Georgia Regional Library, who serves on the Department of Labor Employer’s Committee, commented that “we both rely on this partnership.”



Serving a region with the highest number of veterans per capita in the state, the Mountain Regional Library System's partnership with the Department of Veterans' Affairs provides classes for veterans, spouses and caregivers on how to use the department's website for a variety of health and medical needs. A technical school provides instructors for computer and English as a Second Language classes for a specialized outlet of the Athens Regional Library System. The outlet serves as a resource and information center for the nearly 18,000 Hispanic immigrants who live in the county; it is often the first stop for many new immigrants so they can learn English and computer skills.

A number of libraries note the importance of successfully commu-

nicating the issues they are facing to the public. "One of our greatest accomplishments has been keeping public computers and services available in the face of all the cuts," said the assistant director of the Hall County Library System. "Our patrons recognize that a public library does not have to offer Excel training, but we're still offering classes, albeit less often. But what has also helped us during these harsh times is that we have done a good job publicizing the challenges of our funding cuts and explaining what has been behind some tough choices."

### Conclusion

Georgia libraries are energetically pursuing innovative solutions to balance the continuing challenges of

limited supply and high demand for library services. Increased library use is being driven by needs from all demographics: basic level computer training for displaced workers and retirees, e-book enthusiasts, families taking advantage of free DVDs and CDs, and Internet connectivity for the thousands of Georgia residents without high-speed broadband at home. Library staff interviewed voiced their commitment to removing barriers to service through sufficient levels of broadband capacity, access to cutting-edge technology, expanded e-book collections, and, most importantly, funding to sustain the open hours and staffing needed to provide the critical digital literacy skills necessary to succeed in today's global, technology-driven marketplace.

## IDAHO FIELD REPORT

### Executive Summary

The Great Recession has affected Idaho more than almost any other state. Since 2008, the unemployment rate increased over 150 percent. In response to job losses in manufacturing, logging, mining, and construction, the unemployed are seeking GEDs, computer skills, and new training to reenter the workforce, and many are looking to their public libraries for computer access and training. Seventy percent of public libraries in Idaho reported that they are the only free public Internet access point in their communities. However, many are poorly equipped with low bandwidth and too few computers. Idaho ranks 41st in the country for providing public access computers per outlet — 8.5 per capita, compared to the national average of 13.9.<sup>7</sup>

However, there is also good news to report. Thanks to a \$1.9 million National Telecommunications and Information Administration Broad-

band Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) grant awarded to Idaho (and matching funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Idaho Public Television), 40 percent of the state's library buildings will increase bandwidth and the number of public access computers. Upon completion of the BTOP grant-funded installations, bandwidth, computers and Internet users are expected to increase by a factor of ten.<sup>8</sup>

### Background

Idaho has 104 public library jurisdictions, with 141 physical locations and 10 mobile libraries (bookmobiles) to serve a population of 1.4 million residents, of whom 34 percent reside in rural areas.<sup>9</sup> The majority of libraries are organized either as municipal libraries (48.1 percent) or district libraries (51.9 percent), including a few school/community libraries and multi-jurisdictional (city/district) libraries. In FY2009 (the most recent

year for which national statistics are available), Idaho libraries reported hosting more than 9.2 million library visits, answering 1.2 million reference questions, and circulating more than 13.9 million items.

Idaho residents are served by 724 employees, of whom 78 hold a Master's degree in Library and Information Science. The state ranks 46th in the nation (including the District of Columbia) for full-time equivalent (FTE) staff per 25,000 residents, with 1.44 FTE per capita compared to the national average of 2.77 FTE. The state also ranks 31st in the country in operating revenue per capita — \$33.38, compared with a national average of \$36.84.<sup>10</sup>

Seven library directors and one branch manager were interviewed between November 2011 and January 2012 as part of the Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study. They serve communities ranging from 6,000 to 100,000 residents. Five of those interviewed provide service from

one single outlet, while the other two manage four to eight outlets. The interviews are not meant to provide a comprehensive view of public library funding and technology in the state, but their comments help illuminate trends, challenges and successes in serving the public in Idaho libraries.

## Funding Landscape

Primary funding for Idaho's libraries comes from local sources (95.3 percent), and the largest percentage of operating expenditures goes for staff (66.1 percent). A few library directors report concerns about dwindling budgets and are expecting a slow recovery that corresponds with the national and state economic lag. The Ada Community Library experienced a 33 percent budget decrease over the past three years, forcing the library to reduce its databases and public programs. American Falls District Library experienced an operating budget decrease of 2 percent, and cut its materials and technology expenditures. For 30 percent of Idaho's libraries, total operating expenditures range from \$10,000 - \$49,000 (IMLS FY2009). The Lizard Butte Public Library, operating on a \$56,000 annual budget, has frozen staff salaries. "We had been able to increase the budget 3 percent each year but have put that on hold due to the town's economic climate, and staff has not had salary increases since 2007," said the library director.

Mountain Home Public Library experienced only a slight decrease over the past two years and thanks the city for that, "Based on the economy, and particularly Mountain Home's economy, the city has been proactive for the last two years getting prepared for the worst-case scenario." Others noted increases in funding over the past two years. Nampa Public Library was able to reopen the library on Tuesdays and add more staff to a new service desk. Burley Public Library increased staff salaries to match all



Burley Public Library

city employees and added new staff to provide two full-time positions at the circulation desk.

While most libraries report their budgets remained stable in FY2011-2012, prospects for the coming year are unclear. The consolidation with the Post Falls Library resulted in a 46 percent budget increase for the Community Library Network, which now includes eight service outlets, the largest consolidation in the history of Idaho public libraries. However, the director is moving forward cautiously due to the state's economic climate, "We will start to rebound in late 2012, 2013, so we're looking at a long, long slow haul. We didn't boom quite the way the rest of the country did."

## Technology Resources

Among those interviewed, the number of public access computers ranged from 11 in a small rural library to 83 in a large suburban library system. All of the libraries interviewed provide wireless Internet access to patrons. The 2011-2012 study indicates that 92.4 percent of Idaho libraries provide Wi-Fi, compared to 75.9 percent a year earlier.

Six of the libraries interviewed were direct recipients of technology and online resources provided through the BTOP grant awarded to the Idaho

Commission for Libraries. The State agency's LiLI (Libraries Linking Idaho) database portal acquired new online resources that include Scout, an online video encyclopedia, and LearningExpress, which provides tools for test preparation and skill-building. The complete LiLI portal is available to all Idaho libraries and residents.

The BTOP grant supports a partnership with the Department of Labor to provide workshops for library staff and community members concerned with economic development and serving the jobless and underemployed. Mountain Home Public Library retains student coaches to provide technology support to library patrons, while Ada Community Library and the Community Library Network set up courses for e-basics training and employment skills. "Job search is changing so much that it's nice to have a resource that patrons can use to get the help they need," said one suburban library director.

The BTOP grant also includes updates of equipment and services, new computers and laptops, firewall/server and filtering services for CIPA compliance, and faster Internet connections. Nampa Public Library is planning to use the 12 laptops they received to develop a technology train-



Top: Mountain Home Public Library

Bottom: Nampa Public Library

ing center for patrons. Right now, the library is limited to three public access computers for training. Burley Public Library allows patrons to borrow the 10 laptops that they received from the grant for use in the library.

Two of those interviewed – Ada Community and Nampa – have joined an Idaho consortium and will soon have downloadable e-books and audiobooks

available for patrons. One rural library director is delaying e-books in the library, due to high start-up costs and ongoing issues with the various supporting technical platforms. Of the seven libraries interviewed for this report, the Community Library Network was the only library currently offering e-books, which were added in October 2011. Over 66 percent of

Idaho libraries overall reported providing e-books, an increase of 28 percent from last year.

## Connectivity

A critical component of Idaho's BTOP project is bringing faster broadband speeds to some of Idaho's most under-served communities. Six of the libraries interviewed have upgraded their broadband speeds, ranging from a minimum of 1.5 Mbps to 50 Mbps. Mountain Home Public Library and a rural outlet of the Ada Community Library both increased their broadband speeds from 1.5 Mbps to 20 Mbps with the help of BTOP and an E-rate discount. Additionally, both BTOP and an 80 percent E-rate discount helped Nampa Public Library increase their broadband speed to 30 Mbps. Statewide, there has been a significant increase in the number of libraries reporting connection speeds greater than 10 Mbps: 26.8 percent this year, compared to 7 percent last year. At the same time, Idaho libraries with speeds less than 1.5 Mbps dropped almost 20 percent from the year before.

A few library directors raised concerns about getting any or enough broadband out to rural areas. The director of the Community Library Network in northern Idaho has large sections of the library system where virtually no residents have access to high-speed bandwidth "unless they are wealthy enough to buy a very elaborate satellite connection. So really, the fact that the library's providing high-speed access and good computers is a technological benefit that affects everyone." Prior to the BTOP project, the most rural Community Library Network service outlet had only a fractional T1 line that was supposed to guarantee 128 kbps, but only ran at 12 kbps. Through BTOP, they now have a dedicated T1 line and are working on a wireless solution that will bring them up to 5 Mbps when completed.

The Burley Public Library director

notes that rural communities' lack of broadband access is a huge issue, and it is vital that libraries provide access to those underserved patrons. National survey findings echoed the need for more broadband in rural communities, with almost 75 percent of rural libraries offering speeds below 10 Mbps.

The Director of the American Falls District Library reports being moderately satisfied with the library's broadband speed of 6-10 Mbps. "In rural Idaho, we have the best that's offered in our area right now, but that is one place that we really would spend money to improve."

## Technology Support & Maintenance

Fifty percent of Idaho's public libraries report that their IT support comes from the library director and 37.6 percent comes from public service staff. One director of a small library describes her IT support as "whomever I can find to do it."

Many of the library directors interviewed express uncertainty about how to balance IT maintenance with a variety of other technology-related needs. "It'd be really wonderful if we had a full-time staff member dedicated to IT support," said the Mountain Home library director. "For now, we stomp out the fires on an as-needed basis."

Ada Community Library has a four- to five-year technology replacement plan and, with the added resources from the BTOP grant, has been able to adhere to that plan. They also have one full-time IT staff member, and each outlet has an IT lead to be the go-to person. "Everyone needs to be tech savvy, even on the front line," said the library director.

## Changes Over the Past Year

Nampa Public Library's computer sessions are up 12 percent; they also



Lizard Butte Public Library

have had an increase in circulation, due to reopening the library on Tuesdays and restoring hours that had been decreased over the previous two years.

One rural interview reports patron use of computers has decreased by 22 percent over the past year. This significant change occurred due to the lack of adequate Internet connectivity, but once that was alleviated through the BTOP grant, computer usage soared. "It's a happy story in terms of waiting for something to come along that would change some of the woes that we were having," said the library director.

**One small library director describes her IT support as "whomever I can find to do it."**

Ada Community Library has experienced huge increases in their Wi-Fi usage over the past year, following a national trend of 74.1 percent of public libraries that reported that Wi-Fi usage has increased since FY2011. The library has also started offering laptop checkouts at two of its outlets.

## Challenges

For the Idaho interviewees, the predominant issues are providing adequate tech support for the rapidly changing technical devices available to patrons and funding stability for the future. Directors at the Burley and

Ada Community libraries both agree that, with technology changes moving at lightning speed, an added burden has been placed on their staff and limited IT support. "You learn how to do it one way and then it changes three months later," said the Burley library director. "You can be an expert today, and then tomorrow you're back at square one." Many of those interviewed noted that it is a struggle for library staff to keep up with the wide variety of technology applications, demanding more time away from other essential library duties.

For other library directors, increasing challenges continue, along with the uncertainty of future funding for maintaining reliable equipment and technology services. Many are doing what they can to keep the technology consistent from year to year. "If the replacement program isn't working and the funding isn't there, then you do the next best thing and begin to acquire what anyone wants to drop off, based on the fact that at some point, it's going to be usable," said the Mountain Home library director. The Ada Community Library reports funding has been a substantial challenge, delaying key projects such as updating a 10-year-old laptop lab.

The directors of Lizard Butte and Nampa public libraries both voiced concern regarding the funding avail-

able to obtain and sustain the level of IT support necessary for their library's public access technology. The Nampa Public Library director reports they have improved the library's technical support by no longer handling it independently, but instead relying on increased city support. "But my challenge is that they are under the same situation I am; they haven't had pay increases in a number of years, and that impacts the quality and availability of staff."

The director of the Lizard Butte Public Library depends on volunteers for IT support. With only four part-time staff members, including the director, there is no money in the budget for IT support. "My knowledge of the technology is very limited, and I do the best I can on my own as long as I can," said the Lizard Butte Public Library director.

## Successes

For the six libraries that received BTOP-funded increased broadband and new technology resources, directors agree this is the biggest success of the past year. Being able to provide a reliable and consistent foundation for library patrons is imperative for many of the library directors interviewed because it keeps people coming back.

"Libraries can be wonderful social gathering sites; customers can one-stop shop," said the Mountain Home library director. "They get books for their children, they access the Internet, they may discover some new digital resource, they may find a program they're interested in, and this is just the beginning."

Along with the BTOP grant, Ada

**"If you have one person that gets what they need—whether it's a job, medical information, or connecting with the boyfriend away at college—you are a success because they are successful."**

Community Library also received two other hugely successful grants over the past year: an LSTA grant for a computer center that established web conferencing, and a grant from Wal-Mart Foundation to purchase a white board and online homework help software. The Nampa Public Library director plans on using the laptops acquired through the BTOP grant to offer new training classes on résumé preparation and the online application process.

Several library directors mentioned meeting community demand and public access needs as among the past year's noteworthy successes.

"I think that we're providing a broad range of benefits through our technology with a heightened sense in the rural areas that we are probably the best broadband in town," said the Community Library Network director.

Directors of the American Falls District Library and Burley Public Library both note that keeping patrons connected to technology to that which they otherwise would not have access to is a fundamental role for libraries. "If you have one person that gets what they need—whether it's a job, medical information, or connecting with the boyfriend away at college—you are a success because they are successful," said the Burley Public Library director.

## Conclusion

With the receipt of the \$1.9 million BTOP grant (and matching funds from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Idaho Public Television), many more Idaho libraries are able to provide the faster connection speeds

and public access computers necessary to keep up with rapidly changing technologies and community demand. There has been an almost 20 percent increase in the number of libraries reporting connection speeds greater than 10 Mbps, and 92.4 percent of Idaho libraries now provide wireless Internet access. All of the library directors interviewed will be moving forward cautiously due to the state's economic climate, continuing to find ways to meet library patrons' technical demands, while trying to keep their software and equipment maintained and up-to-date, in spite of a lack of reliable IT support.

## ENDNOTES

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- 4 Institute of Museum and Library Services. *Public Library Survey: Fiscal Year 2009*. Washington, D.C.: IMLS, 2011. <http://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/pls/ondex.asp>
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