

# Introduction

As this issue of Library Technology Reports goes to print, the American economy is in the middle of one of its most challenging periods in decades. We have seen a major failure of the banking industry, people across the country are unable to make mortgage payments and are losing their homes, and unemployment is rising rapidly. While there is considerable debate about the best way to solve this crisis, there seems to be consensus that in order to do so, we need to act fast and we need to get it right.

Almost anyone who has worked in a library understands that librarians are constantly working on a tight budget, even when the economy is strong. With state and local governments struggling to stay afloat, budget cuts for libraries have already begun, and more are expected. Ironically, as the economic crisis forces libraries to slash spending, demand for library services actually increases as cash-strapped families try to use more free sources of entertainment.

With this issue, we aim to assist librarians in budgeting and planning for library technology during a difficult financial crisis. By offering both a detailed analysis of the current state of library technology funding and expert-authored, practical guides to stretching your budget and planning for maximum efficiency, the content of this issue can help librarians fulfill their technological needs while weathering the ongoing economic storm.

*Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007–2008* marked the second year of this study, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the American Library Association (ALA), and continued the research of previous surveys conducted by John Carlo Bertot and Charles R. McClure, with others, since 1994.<sup>1</sup> The study presented

national and state data gathered through three integrated approaches: a national survey that collected information about public library Internet connectivity, use, services, funding and sustainability issues; a questionnaire sent to the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA); and focus groups and site visits held in four states

This 2007–2008 report expanded our understanding of the strain on public libraries to provide public access to the Internet and other technology and sounded a warning about the long-term sustainability and future quality of free public access to the Internet and other technology in our nation’s libraries.

Key findings included:

- Libraries serve a unique and important role in providing free access to all types of information and telecommunications services. The demand for these services has increased significantly with a growing need for access to digital and online information—including e-government, continuing education, and employment opportunities. Almost 73 percent of libraries report they are the *only* source of free access to computers and the Internet in their communities.
- Funding data indicates volatility in how libraries support this public technology access. Even libraries with historically stable funding are experiencing flat levels of local funding and have reacted to this by shifting to soft funding sources (fees/fines, donations, grants, etc.) as a way to support public access computing services. Local government revenue and “other” (soft funding) account for nearly 90 percent of overall public library funding.<sup>2</sup>
- Library staff with higher skill sets are needed to support technology-based services; staffing levels are not

keeping pace with patron demand—both for those staff who provide training and other direct patron services, as well as for those staff who maintain the information technology infrastructure. Libraries cite the need for greater staff expertise and availability as a barrier to being able to support and manage public access technologies.

- An increase in the number of libraries reporting connection speeds greater than 769 kbps (up 11 percent from last year) is tempered by the vast majority of libraries (75 percent) that report their wireless and desktop computers share the same network, thus diminishing the effective speed of access to the Internet at the workstation. Further, libraries are not moving above the T1 speed as had been anticipated during 2006–2007.
- Public access Internet services (including homework resources, e-books, audio, and video) grew dramatically over the past year. These resources provide more options for library patrons, but further tax the library's public services and technology infrastructure.

- Many library buildings, inadequate in terms of space and infrastructure (e.g., wiring and cabling), cannot support additional public access computers and technology infrastructure.

The interconnectedness of funding, staffing, buildings, and maintenance cannot be underestimated, as all have a direct impact on the amount and quality of public access technology services that public libraries can provide to their patrons.

## Notes

1. Information about the reports from the 1994–2006 studies is available at [www.ii.fsu.edu/plInternet](http://www.ii.fsu.edu/plInternet).
2. National Center for Education Statistics, *Public Libraries in the United States: Fiscal Year 2005* (NCES 2008-301), (Washington, DC: NCES, 2007), <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008301.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2008).