Findings from the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies

Over the past two years, the Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study has included a high-level survey to the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies. Their responses contrast and expand information provided at the local library level through the survey and site visits.

One of the most difficult areas in which to gain current and detailed information about libraries is funding—overall and specifically targeted to technology. State library staff helped fill some gaps in looking at funding for public libraries in fiscal year 2007. The majority of state libraries (64.4 percent) reported level or modest (1–2 percent) increases in state funding, while about 9 percent saw a decrease. Of states that saw an increase, the increase clustered in the 1–4 percent range (50 percent) and over 11 percent (38 percent). The distribution was similar for those that reported a decrease. When asked about overall public funding (all sources of tax revenue) for public libraries, the distribution was similar to that for state funding.

Two thirds of the state libraries that reported increases credited advocacy efforts as the most important factor leading to state funding improvements. "Advocacy efforts by libraries led to a restoration of $1 million in state aid and an increase in a special collections appropriation of $750,000," reported one state library. Another wrote: "State advocacy efforts by libraries resulted in a $3 million General Obligation bond funding for public libraries to be used for collection and technology resources." Leadership in state government was the second most important factor cited.

In each case where state funding had been cut and often even when funding was flat, state libraries attributed it to budget shortfalls and deficits. Tax limitation legislation and increased gas and oil prices also were mentioned frequently.

State libraries reported that the five most common technology-related expenditures the state library funded directly on behalf of public libraries in FY2007 were: licensed resources (77 percent), "other" (39 percent, including interlibrary loan, continuing education, all of the above, and none of the above), telecommunications services (30 percent), instructional technology (18 percent), and wireless access (11 percent). This contrasts with the 2006–2007 *Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study,* in which public libraries reported FY2006 state funding for: licensed resources (58 percent), telecommunications services (19 percent), instructional technology (3 percent) and wireless access (5 percent).[1]

Another area of specific interest has been the state libraries' perceptions and roles related to supporting high-speed Internet access for public libraries. In the 2007 study, 42 percent of state libraries reported there were few or no barriers to broadband connectivity in their states. The remainder clustered primarily in three areas: broadband connectivity cost is too high (56 percent), capacity for connectivity doesn't exist in all parts of the state (49 percent), and a lack of local staff expertise at the local level (40 percent).

Cost also is the top barrier cited by all public libraries to increasing the adequacy of their Internet connections, but rural libraries report lack of capacity is the greatest impediment to higher bandwidth. Nearly one quarter of all rural libraries reported this year that they are at the maximum speed available.

> *The return on investment for telcos in rural areas is insufficient to support broadband infrastructure build-out without a technology breakthrough or subsidy support*

When asked about the state library's role in supporting high-speed Internet access, almost 60 percent responded that their role was one of advocacy and increasing awareness through the legislative process. About 26 percent of state libraries reported their role was in brokering this access and negotiating telecom costs.

In an open-ended question, most state libraries reported that their goal for high-speed and broadband deployment for public libraries is to achieve a minimum level of connectivity for all libraries in the state. While this minimum level varied from T1 to 10 Mbps or was not defined, a few respondents called for bandwidth that would be adequate to immediately access information, rather than waiting for webpages and applications to open.

Five themes emerged from the goals about how state libraries are working to improve broadband deployment. They are:

- Investing in staff or consultants to explore options and make recommendations for improvements
- Piloting or facilitating pilot projects (including those funded by LSTA funds)
- Including all public libraries on a statewide network
- Improving state funding for statewide networks and other broadband options
- Identifying or actively working in partnership with other government or nonprofit agencies to address broadband issues

Statewide telecommunications networks referenced by survey respondents include BadgerNet in Wisconsin; the Illinois Century Network; JerseyConnect (launched in New Jersey in 2006); the Kentucky Education Network (KEN); MOREnet in Missouri; the Ohio Public Library Information Network (OPLIN); and the Rhode Island Network for Educational Technology (RINET).[2]

Several state libraries work in collaboration with their state department of education and/or a statewide technology office to develop and implement plans for more robust connectivity and statewide networks. About one quarter of respondents did not share a goal or reported that this was a local responsibility.

When asked if their state has a target goal for minimum connectivity, 35 percent reported there was no state goal. Of the 16 states that do have a target minimum, the majority (10) reported that this minimum goal is 1.5 Mbps (or T1). Twelve states selected "other," and most reported that this was a "moving target." One state library expressed a common sentiment: "The goal is to improve the access for all public libraries—for some that is greater than 10 Mbps, for some that is T1 and others it would be 769 kbps."

Note

1. *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2006–2007* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007), 59, www.ala.org/ala/ors/plftas/0607report.cfm (accessed November 18, 2008).
2. For more information on statewide networks and partnerships, please see the American Library Association Office for Information Technology Policy Public Library Connectivity Project: Findings and Recommendations, July 2007, www.ala.org/ala/ors/lncc/lncc.cfm (accessed November 18, 2008).