

Findings from Site Visits

As part of the 2007–2008 *Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study*, the research team visited 30 public libraries serving urban, rural, and suburban communities in four states. Among them was New York, with more libraries (754) than any other state and North Carolina, which, although larger than most other states visited, has among the fewest libraries (75) for its population size and ranks near the bottom in full-time staffing levels.

In states so different in so many ways, several themes stood out from focus groups and site visits in New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia:

- **Managing a more complex technology environment.** More than a decade after libraries began offering public access to computers and the Internet, the level of sophistication and complexity in managing these technology resources continues to increase. In addition to nearly ubiquitous online catalogs, libraries are building impressive suites of online services—including audio, video, and digital collections—and managing access to computer resources via reservation and time and print management systems. Many libraries also are deploying computers and staff support in a tiered way to accommodate more users and types of usage. This includes “express” computers, computer labs and the general public access computers, and staffing that may include tech assistants or volunteers to help with troubleshooting while reference staff focus on information literacy, formal training, and Web content development.
- **Libraries step up fundraising efforts.** Most libraries visited and interviewed as part of the focus groups

reported stable—if often inadequate—funding. Where tax funding has been mostly flat, many libraries have stepped up private fundraising efforts. More libraries of all sizes are reporting they’ve established library foundations and/or set up endowments that assist with maintaining or growing services in sluggish economic times. At least a few libraries also are beginning to leverage these more discretionary funds to pilot new projects.

- **Increased demand for computer and Internet services.** The survey finding that only 17 percent of libraries have enough public access computers to meet demand throughout the day was confirmed in site visits. In most cases, people were waiting outside the library for the doors to open, and computers were their first stop. Lunchtime and after-school hours also are peak usage times. Half the library computers users interviewed in site visits did not own home computers, and only 32 percent have access to the Internet at home. About 70 percent of these users said they used library computers at least once a week. Among the most frequently cited uses for Internet access include communication (e-mail and social networking), employment, education, e-government, entertainment, and routine tasks (including paying bills, shopping, or banking).

The digital divide is alive and well in our areas. We serve urban and very rural areas. They either cannot afford high speed or (service providers) do not go there.

—Virginia library director

- **Library staff stretched thin.** While the number of computers in libraries and the number of library visits have increased significantly over the past year, there has been little staff growth. The reported average is about 50 percent, but some library staff, particularly those on library reference desks and in libraries that manually manage time limits, estimate that as much as 80 percent of their time in a given day may be spent on technology-related tasks. Staying current with technology training and hiring/retaining IT staff also were key staff concerns expressed in focus groups and site visits.
- **Increased attention to library advocacy.** The need for and interest in advocacy is growing in the four states visited. The most successful libraries have positioned themselves as leaders in technology, as well as traditional library services. There was much discussion about the ongoing need to educate both board members and government officials about libraries and their technology needs.

These visits also allowed the team to learn more about the key barriers and the effective practices being employed to improve technology access and funding.

Barriers

Every focus group and site visit included an open-ended question related to the library's most significant information technology needs and priorities for improving technology access. Feedback confirmed findings from the quantitative survey about the ongoing need for additional public computers to meet patron demand and the accompanying need for additional space; concerns about improving Internet connection speeds to support library operations, wireless, and high-bandwidth applications like streaming media; and the need for dedicated IT staff.

Technology expenditures, fiscal planning, and advocacy were key areas of interest for this qualitative research. Despite its increasing importance to library patrons, many libraries still report there is no dedicated line item for technology expenditures, including computer replacements and upgrades, impacting their ability to forecast and plan for future technology growth. This is far more true in nonprofit and rural libraries than their suburban and urban counterparts. Several directors with dedicated funding report they strive to have technology funding at a level similar to their materials budgets—around 10 to 15 percent of their overall budget.

Libraries of all sizes expressed frustration with the difficulty of obtaining funds (particularly grants and private fundraising, but also public dollars) to maintain tech-

nology and fund ongoing operating costs, including staff to deploy and maintain new technology.

There's no real money available for the smaller libraries to do any replacements. It's pretty much the upkeep on what they have.

— Pennsylvania IT director

Overall, libraries in New York, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania confirmed that library operating budgets have been mostly flat over the past several years, although Pennsylvania libraries are only now returning to 2003 state funding levels, and North Carolina's local economies suffered at the turn of the millennium as industries were outsourced and unemployment rose dramatically.

Libraries in the eastern part of Virginia were somewhat anomalous in reporting greater than cost of living increases in the past five years. The tide was turning swiftly, however, during February 2008 site visits. There was a 4 percent cut in state aid in FY2008, and a few libraries also reported cuts in local funding in the current year and/or in FY2009. One invited focus group participant was called into emergency budget meetings at the time of the visit as the impact of home foreclosures became more pronounced.

Also telling are national data about capital expenditures, which found that in each of these states 73 to 89 percent of libraries received zero or less than \$50,000 in capital funding.¹ A 2007 survey by the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies found that a majority of library buildings are 25 to 50 years old, and 40 percent are estimated to be in fair or poor condition.

A lot of the libraries are older libraries—computers weren't even thought of. (One) library was built in 1979, and it's got two-foot concrete floors. I had to go buy a drill just so I could run a wire, because there's just nowhere to get wires through. It's not like a building that's built today, where wire runs are in place and everything's in place to expand on computers, and to do that's going to cost money because you're going to end up having to rig something up to get it done.

— Pennsylvania IT manager

Effective Practices

While increased understanding of the barriers and challenges that libraries face can aid state and national agen-

cies to better prioritize efforts to assist these libraries, learning more about the variety of ways library staff improve technology access within a constrained budget environment has been the most rewarding. While some libraries with tech-savvy staff are leveraging technology to solve technology problems (like a library that digitally videotapes technology trainings, then chunks them into just-in-time resources for library staff via the intranet), many solutions are relatively low-tech.

One of the more common and increasingly recognized for its effectiveness in maximizing resources is the important role library regional cooperative systems—funded in whole or part by the state—play in supporting technology.² New York stands out for its state-funded public library consortia. The state's 23 public library systems facilitate resource sharing among member libraries and provide cooperative programs and services. These regional systems have had a particular impact on technology access, providing even the smallest libraries with IT support, training for library staff and board members, and joint purchasing and price negotiation for hardware and software. They also manage computer networks for managing circulation and access online catalogs and provide access to electronic information, databases, and e-books. Pennsylvania's district library centers play a similar role, but are less robust in the level of support they are able to offer their libraries and communities.

Along the same lines, 5 libraries started and now 16 libraries in North Carolina pooled funds to provide access to downloadable audiobooks, music, and video to residents in their communities through the North Carolina Digital Library.³

One emerging trend is the number of libraries that report they are setting aside small funds to seed pilot technology projects. One North Carolina library created such an "Opportunity Fund" within its foundation in 2007. "We want to be able to prototype to help justify [projects] to the county," a foundation board member said. "This allows the library to stay on the vanguard." Donations to this effort have been as high or higher than to other funds dedicated to collections, programming, and preservation. A 2005 report commissioned by the Virginia State Library identified this as an area for improvement. According to the board member, "The consultants found little evidence that Virginia's libraries had any dependable source of funding for innovative projects."

More libraries also are reporting that they are leasing rather than purchasing equipment, which allows for a regular replacement cycle and ongoing tech support in many cases. One library director also predicted an increased reliance on outside vendors for technology support,

which allows libraries to benefit from technology-specific staff without needing to pay benefits and the relatively high wages required for this service.

Some of the most successful libraries have positioned themselves as leaders in technology, as well as traditional library services. They see local governments as clients and work with them on improving community bandwidth, plus serving schools and community organizations. More than one library even hosts its city's website. They share successes as well as needs when seeking more funding. They build community partnerships by providing valuable services.

There was much discussion of the need to educate both board members and government officials about libraries. Most of the state libraries produce trustee manuals that are found to be helpful, but many board members said they would like to receive more training. In North Carolina, directors and trustees valued and spoke highly of trustee training provided through the State Library. Directors, and board members in all four states described creative action such as orientations for new legislators and programs for local government officials with lunch and demonstrations of technology. They make sure to communicate outside the budget season. One North Carolina director encourages her board and staff to consistently promote the library's role in community building, economic development, and education.

Finally, who's on the board matters. It is important to have well-connected board members. Some libraries have appointed liaisons from local government, and others seek out former city or county council members or other local leaders. The more active board members interviewed mentioned doing one-on-one sales to "tell anyone and everyone that the library is the best thing."

Notes

1. 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 18, 2008)).
2. For more information on library networks, coops, and consortia, please visit the webpages for the 2007 ALA study "Library Networks, Cooperatives and Consortia: A National Survey": www.ala.org/ala/ors/lnc.
3. The North Carolina Digital Library is sponsored by the N.C. Public Library Directors Association, <http://ncdigital.lib.overdrive.com/DD3367A7-BBDF-4601-A393-9366A77847EF/10/262/en/Default.htm>.