

Chapter 23

Implementing and Managing Public Library Networks, Connectivity, and Partnerships to Promote E-Government Access and Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the implementation and management issues faced by public libraries in the provision of e-government access and education to their patrons and communities. Due to a complex set of factors – policy decisions, widespread trust of libraries, and a lack of social institutions that play similar roles – public libraries now stand as the social guarantor of public access to and education about e-government in the United States. Drawing from data collected through a 2009 national survey of public libraries, a 2009 series of site visits of public libraries, and previous research by the authors, this chapter examines the challenges of implementing public library networks and connectivity to support e-government access and education, as well as the numerous management issues raised by providing these services. The primary focus of this chapter is examining the dual role of public libraries as providers of public Internet access and education and as partners with government agencies to collaborate effectively in the provision of e-government.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 15 years, the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access*¹ studies have documented the rapid changes in Internet access and services in public libraries and the accompanying successes and challenges that the Internet has raised for libraries. The data from these studies are used by public libraries, state libraries, and local, state, and federal agencies in documenting and policy-making related to libraries and technology access for the public. Over these years, the presence of the Internet in public libraries has significantly shaped the social roles of public libraries and the expectations for public libraries by patrons, communities, and governments (Bertot, Jaeger & McClure, 2011). As a result of the early embrace of providing free public Internet access, public libraries have become centers of Internet access in society, with patrons, communities, employers, and governments relying on the availability of free public Internet access through public libraries (Bertot, 2009; Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008; McClure, Jaeger, & Bertot, 2007). The most recent findings from the *Public Library Funding and Technology Access 2010* study show that 99% of public libraries in the United States provide free public Internet access and that, in 66.6% of communities in the United States, public libraries are the only provider of free public access to computers and the Internet. (American Library Association, 2010).

The Internet both serves to augment existing library services and to establish new social roles, with e-government access and education perhaps being the most prominent new role (Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Bertot, 2009; Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007). For all practical purposes, the public library has become the social guarantor of access to and guidance using e-government for interactions with local, state, and federal governments, including seeking unemployment benefits and other social services; registering to vote; renewing licenses; applying for jobs; paying taxes; enrolling children

in school; applying for citizenship; scheduling appointments; and completing numerous other important government functions online.

The e-government activities of libraries focus primarily on the roles of e-government in connecting governments and citizens, with connections between small businesses and governments occurring to a lesser extent. The roles of e-government discussed here will relate to these uses. Beyond the roles at hand, it is important to note that e-government has significant other functions internal to governments themselves, involving intra-government uses by government employees, elected officials, and contractors, as well as serving to connect large business and government.

Recent economic crises have increased patron reliance on the public library (Carlton, 2009; CNN, 2009; Van Sant, 2009). At the beginning of the recession in 2008, applications for library cards were already ten percent higher than 2006 levels (American Library Association, 2009). In the current economic downturn, use of public libraries and library computers for applying for unemployment benefits and social services, seeking employment, and other e-government activities have increased substantially. Further, as some people consider home Internet access to be a luxury that can be cut to save money in harsh economic times, this usage of libraries for information e-government is likely to continue to increase as more people cut home Internet access (Horrigan, 2008).

The new responsibilities that relate to e-government access and education have significantly increased reliance on Internet access and training by patrons seeking social support, completing government forms, applying for jobs, and other e-government interactions. However, the same economic challenges that are increasing library and Internet need and usage are simultaneously draining library budgets, as state and local governments have been increasingly disinclined to invest in public libraries given badly declining tax revenues and the financial uncertainties of

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