

# Chapter 3

## E–Government Success in Public Libraries: Library and Government Agency Partnerships Delivering Services to New Immigrants

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### **ABSTRACT**

*For much of their history in the United States, public libraries made services for immigrants a key part of their mission by offering them many long-term services, such as developing job searching skills and learning English as a second language. Internet-enabled services, such as navigating the citizenship process, establishing residency, and delivering other key functions through e-government, are a recent addition. This chapter reports the findings of a multi-method study that provides insight into the development of e-government partnerships in various realms (including immigration), highlighting the extent to which these partnerships enhance the ability of libraries to overcome the various challenges that arise in connection with providing e-government services to different populations.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Following the advent of the World Wide Web (the Web), the use of e-government by national, state/provincial, and local governments to deliver information, communication, and services to

citizens has grown dramatically around the globe. E-government has since matured into a dynamic socio-technical system encompassing issues of governance, societal trends, technological change, information management, interaction, and human factors (Dawes, 2009).

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E-government development primarily focused on interactions between the government and members of the public, with many government agencies viewing e-government as their primary method for public engagement (Bertot & Jaeger, 2006; 2008; Ebbers, Pieteron, & Noordman, 2008; Streib & Navarro, 2006). The promise of e-government is often presented as being either to engage citizenry in government in a user-centered manner or to develop quality government services and delivery systems that are efficient and effective (Bertot & Jaeger, 2008). In practice, however, agencies typically focused on making the interactions easier for themselves, rather than for citizens (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010). Increasingly, government content and services are available only online, and even when a physical version is still available, many governments strongly encourage citizens to use e-government. As a result, the average individual now uses e-government to fulfill important needs—paying taxes, seeking unemployment benefits and other social services, registering to vote, completing license applications and renewals, enrolling children in school, navigating the immigration process, establishing water rights, finding court proceedings, submitting local zoning board information, searching property and assessor databases, and innumerable other important federal, state, and local government functions (Bertot, McClure, & Jaeger, 2008; Gibson, Bertot, & McClure, 2009; Holt & Holt, 2010).

In many locations in the United States, however, the lack of availability of computers, Internet access, or even basic telecommunications infrastructure, is a barrier to successful e-government interactions. Many households lack Internet access and many with Internet access lack broadband capacity, which is necessary for many online activities, including many types of social media (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012).

Lack of access to technology is far from the only barrier to universal usage of e-government. Members of the public seek assistance with e-government from public libraries because they

lack the technical skills to use the online functions or simply are uncomfortable engaging in online interactions without guidance (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006a; 2006b). Moreover, as awareness of political information and how to use it depends heavily on the awareness of the people with whom an individual interacts (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998), it is likely that e-government awareness and usage functions in a similar social manner. Notwithstanding an ability to ultimately locate the e-government information or service they need, individuals may still not be able to fully interact with e-government services due to issues of government literacy, terminology, transparency, understandability, and timeliness, among other factors (Fenster, 2006).

The public library has become established as the primary place to which members of the public turn when seeking help with e-government, creating considerable new responsibilities for libraries in ensuring access to e-government (Jaeger & Bertot, 2011; Heanue, 2001). Paradoxically, the ongoing economic downturn has resulted in even more people coming to the public library for assistance with completing applications for employment or social services online at a time when public libraries are facing significant budget cuts (Bertot, Lincoln, McDermott, Real, & Peterson, 2012). In order to rise above the challenge of having to provide more services with fewer resources (namely, computer workstations, broadband capacity, and staff members with expertise in these areas), public libraries are increasingly seeking opportunities to collaborate with government agencies and community groups to provide enhanced or entirely new services to members of the public.

Drawing upon findings from a multi-method study conducted by the authors during the summer and fall of 2011, as described in greater detail in the methodology section, this chapter focuses on the development of successful e-government partnerships in the immigration realm. In recent years, public libraries have assumed a central role

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