

# TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL EQUITY

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As community anchors with high-speed broadband, computer labs, and technology lending and digital learning programs, libraries increase digital equity and support the information needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century society.

Even though most Americans have a cell phone,<sup>1</sup> one in four people use the public computers, broadband, or Wi-Fi during their visit to the public library.<sup>2</sup> They also borrow laptops, Chromebooks, and hotspots. Many people nationwide, particularly lower-income households and those living in rural areas, still lack home computers and adequate connectivity. They depend on libraries.

Library users check out e-books, access databases, and take part in programs through library websites. Library staff assist virtual visitors through chat, email, and other online reference services. Virtual visits to California libraries almost equaled in-person visits in 2019—113 million online and 138 million in person.<sup>3</sup> Once the pandemic hit in 2020, virtual visits became the way most Californians connected with their libraries.

Libraries also offer innovative technology-based services including multimedia labs, augmented reality, coding, and robotics programs, as well as online gaming. Library staff provide personalized tech-help sessions for patrons, setting up their mobile devices for checking out e-books and audiobooks.

**S**upporting the Information Needs  
of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Society

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## CONNECTING PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY

- California’s State Broadband Action Plan affirms that broadband is “*a critical service, not a luxury*” and its first goal is to ensure that “*all Californians have high-performance broadband available at home, schools, libraries, and businesses.*”<sup>4</sup>
- As of 2019, 12 percent of California households still did not have a broadband internet connection, while a further 10 percent were connected through a smartphone only.<sup>5</sup> The digital divide impacts communities inequitably. “*Residents in less populated areas have much less access to broadband services ... and the poor, the less-educated, the differently abled, seniors, and people of color also feel the costs of the digital divide.*”<sup>6</sup>
- Libraries play a key role in the state’s strategy to expand broadband access. As anchor institutions that provide critical services like access to technology and high-speed broadband, and that are “*leading the way*” in digital skills and literacy training, libraries are essential to delivering “Broadband for All” in California.<sup>7</sup>
- With 24,000 internet terminals statewide,<sup>8</sup> California public libraries provide free online access for their communities—helping to bridge the digital divide between those who can and cannot afford private access to the internet. Over 98 percent of public libraries have public internet terminals and free public Wi-Fi.<sup>9</sup>
- Eighty percent of California’s main and branch libraries (897 locations) are connected or connecting to high-speed broadband through the California Research and Education Network—a high-capacity network with more than 8,000 miles of optical fiber.<sup>10</sup>
- Nearly every library has some kind of program to provide basic training in internet and computer use.<sup>11</sup> With digital literacy skills named as a top priority for workforce development by the federal government, libraries are essential partners in the nationwide network of job centers.<sup>12</sup>

## BEING A 24/7 COMMUNITY RESOURCE

- Library websites welcome virtual visitors around the clock, offering services like chat reference, access to the library catalog for holds and checkouts, and connections to databases and other online resources.
- The number of checkouts of electronic materials by California library users more than doubled between 2014 and 2020, increasing from 20.7 million to 44.5 million.<sup>13</sup>
- Wi-Fi hotspot lending programs, movie streaming and downloads, and after-hours wireless access that extends to outdoor seating areas and parking lots are among the technology innovations that make public libraries “*anchor institutions in smart communities.*”<sup>14</sup> These same offerings enabled libraries to maintain high levels of service to users while buildings were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.



**T**weens who took part in Palo Alto City Library’s Coding with the Robot program, taught the library’s programmable humanoid robot to walk, talk, and dance using coding, robotics, and computational thinking.<sup>c</sup>

**A** digital media lab at Burbank Public Library supports the workforce needs of the entertainment industry. It gives adults opportunities to improve their skills and create prototypes and portfolios, and offers students access to specialized equipment. During summer 2020, lab staff provided teens with a virtual summer camp where they produced a news show capturing stories from the pandemic.<sup>a</sup>

**I**n 2019, LA County Library hosted nearly 1.5 million internet sessions on library PCs and over 4 million sessions on library Wi-Fi, demonstrating the high level of use of these resources. Expanding library Wi-Fi range ensures an essential connection to job-seeking resources, educational materials, information, and benefits that the most underserved in these communities lack.<sup>d</sup>

**I**n Humboldt County, the public library, Humboldt State University, and the Chamber of Commerce have partnered to increase access to technology among low-income students, and support lifelong learning, digital literacy, and job seeking. Together, they provide students with Chromebooks and offer digital literacy workshops.<sup>b</sup>



## NOTES

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- b. Project results reported by Humboldt State University to the California State Library, 2019–2020.
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- d. Project results reported by Los Angeles County Library to the California State Library, 2020–2021.

Value of Libraries photo credits: Christian Koszka, Terry Lorant, Becky Ruppel, and the California public libraries that contributed photographs of their programs and activities.

