

Welcome to the E-Government Library of the Future — Today

by Robert Davidsson

With the federal government outsourcing, state governments downsizing, and local governments facing budget cutbacks, public libraries in America are used as the social service providers of last resort for many citizens in need of an array of public sector programs.

The E-Government Act of 2002 mandates that federal agencies cut back many traditional programs for the public and, in their place, offer government services in digital form. This process allows agencies to cut staffing and office infrastructure costs. However, it often places the burden on citizens to find the means of accessing new electronic e-government services.

As defined by the Information Use Management and Policy Institute of Florida State University, e-government is the use of technology, especially the Internet, as a means to deliver services to citizens, businesses, and other government or organizational entities. One of the goals of the E-Government Act is to offer an electronic alternative to paper-based and direct agency-provided services requiring additional staff.

For citizens in need of government assistance, this change in the means of service provision by public sector agencies is resulting in the use of local public libraries as de facto e-government service centers. The public library provides the means (computers with Internet access) necessary to view and interact with electronic government services, especially for persons on the poorer side of the digital divide.

E-GOVERNMENT AND LIBRARIES

The list of e-government services transacted on local public library computers is impressive—and growing. It includes driver's license renewals, unemployment and workers' compensation claims, permit applications, IRS digital tax forms and filing services, traffic-fine payments online, immigration documents, and even U.S. Postal Service mail tracing. This trend toward digital public sector services continues unabated at all levels of government.

When the federal government required Medicare recipients to select a Medicare prescription drug plan in 2005–2006 from a digital listing of U.S. service providers, elderly beneficiaries nationwide entered their local public libraries and used library computers to register online. For many persons, it was their first experience using an e-government service.

Social Security Online, the official Internet site of the U.S. Social Security Administration (SSA), is currently promoting online applications for benefits, targeting retiring baby boomers in an effort to reduce long lines at SSA service centers. Other examples of digital SSA services include applications for disability and Supplemental Security Income benefits found on its Web site.

A frequently used e-government program at the state level is the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), which routinely refers its users to public libraries in the state of Florida to complete digital benefit forms online using both the computers and the technical expertise of staff found at their neighborhood libraries. The DCF's ACCESS Florida (Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency) Web site is accessed by state residents to apply online for food stamps, temporary cash assistance, and Medicaid.

In an effort to prepare librarians in the state of Florida for demands placed on them by clients in need of electronic government services, the

FSU Information Use Management and Policy Institute is currently developing an e-government Web site as a resource for professional staff. The institute's goals are to inform communities about e-government in libraries, assist libraries engaged in e-government services, and help public librarians and government officials assess and improve e-government Web sites and services. FSU's initiative works with both government and library service providers to resolve e-government issues in the community.

At the local level, the Palm Beach County, Florida, library system is demonstrating its commitment to electronic government services by

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providing a specialized "Government Research Services" information Web page designed as a user-friendly digital guide to indexed local, state, and federal online programs and documents. The site is edited and maintained by library staff. Since its inception in 1996, the site has been used annually by more than 45,000 patrons in need of e-government services.

The library system also offers monthly classes in e-government searching on the Internet in its main library computer center to help library users become familiar with online services and documents now available in digital format. More than 76 percent of public libraries in the United States now offer some type of information technology training, which encourages and prepares clients to use e-government resources.

E-GOVERNMENT USE STUDIES

The American Library Association (ALA) formally adopted the "Resolution Affirming the Role of Libraries in Providing E-Government and Emergency Services" on January 24, 2007, at its midwinter meeting. It states, "Libraries are eager to work closely with government agencies to service their local communities effectively." Eager or not, the reality is that public libraries are now essential purveyors of e-government services to a large segment of the public.

In its 2007 policy statement, the ALA viewed its role as "encouraging continued research documenting library needs and capacity to provide effective e-government and emergency response/recovery services and help libraries develop best practices and train staff to deliver these essential services."

In Florida, the landmark study, *Public Libraries and the Internet 2006*, conducted by the Florida State University College of Information, found 21.4 percent of the surveyed libraries listing "access to and assistance with local, state, and federal government electronic services" as one of the largest impacts (demands) of Internet service provision on the state's public libraries.

The findings in the Florida survey are supported by the comprehensive *Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, 2006–2007*, funded jointly by the ALA and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The national study collected information about public library Internet connectivity, use, services, funding, and sustainability issues.

Their report confirms that technology is bringing more—not less—public library use. The ALA study states, "While technology is being woven more and more into people's daily lives, about one-third of Americans still do not own desktop computers or have Internet access at home."

The nationwide library user survey recorded 1.3 billion patron visits in fiscal year 2004. The new role of the

PM Look to ICMA

As part of ICMA's sustainable communities work, a variety of resources are available, including the *Management Perspective Local Government Managers and Libraries: Partners for a Better Community*. Visit the Web site at icma.org/public_libraries.

ICMA is engaged in the Local Government and Public Libraries Partnership Initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

local public library as a government-linked community computer center is a factor contributing to an annual growth rate of 4.6 percent currently experienced by public libraries.

E-GOVERNMENT FUNDING FOR LIBRARIES

One finding in the 2007 ALA study is of great importance to the future of e-government services in the United States. A total of 73 percent of the surveyed libraries reported they are the only source of free public access to computers and the Internet in their communities. While many agencies are converting to e-government services, they are not all providing the computers, training, and Internet access technology necessary for their clients to access their digital forms or conduct online transactions.

The poor, the elderly, the disabled members of our society—who are often the persons most in need of government social services—would be denied free access to online government applications, services, and programs in communities if not for public computers made available by their local libraries.

By providing a network of computers for public use, as well as wireless Wi-Fi access, libraries are addressing an essential community need for a large segment of users. As additional government agencies automate their services, the corresponding demand for library computers for conducting e-government transactions is expected to increase in the future.

Funding for computer hardware and technology upgrades is the main barrier facing public libraries in the provision of e-government support services. Professional library staff also require training in the use of new

government databases and Web-based services so they can effectively assist the public.

According to the ALA study, total technology expenditures, including staff training, database licensing, and telecommunications services, cost the average U.S. public library \$166,181 in fiscal year 2006. The largest single source of revenue for technology-related expenditures comes from local and county sources, supplemented with state and federal telecommunications special project funding.

According to the ALA, many libraries depend on private donations and nonprofit grants, such as Gates Foundation technology grants, to cover the cost of computer hardware expenditures and upgrades. Their 2007 report states that public libraries may not be in a position to rely on local tax support to fund technology; instead they are relying on external fundraising to provide what have become basic library services.

WHAT'S NEXT?

When the federal E-Government Act was enacted, some pundits were of the opinion that libraries would be among the obsolete institutions replaced by electronic information services. Contrary to this prediction, public libraries have become vital partners of agencies providing digital e-government services by offering public access computing services to the users of their social services.

For an e-government service provision partnership between government agencies and public libraries to be successful and of continuing benefit to their taxpayer-clients in the future, cooperative funding strategies for new computer technology upgrades and staff training must become a high-priority issue in communities across the country. **PM**

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Editor's Note: This is the second in a series of three *PM* articles on the importance of libraries in our communities. Published in March was "Libraries: Partners in Sustaining Communities." Coming in May is "Public-Private Partnership Saves Public Libraries, Avoids New Taxes."

PM Web Resource

www.nbia.org/impact

This is the Web site where the National Business Incubation Association's (NBIA) guide, *Measuring Your Business Incubator's Economic Impact: A Toolkit*, is accessible. Information also is available on how to obtain the toolkit as a PDF document or as hard copy.

The toolkit can help business incubator managers collect and distribute economic impact information. It describes 10 data points that all incubators should track and offers advice on how to analyze data. Also included are electronic documents on separate surveys for clients and graduates and a spreadsheet for data collection. For more information, contact NBIA at publications@nbia.org or 740/593-4331.