



The Role of Public Libraries in Workforce Development and Digital Equity

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Public libraries serve as pillars of their communities, providing resources that support residents of all ages. Patrons who only visit the library to check out books and periodicals may not realize that, in addition to those services, these institutions are well equipped to address two of the most pressing challenges facing U.S. communities today: inequitable access to the internet and internet-enabled technology, and continued high levels of under- and unemployment. These issues are interconnected, as access to the internet and certain types of technology affect education outcomes and attainment, and labor market connection and stability.

Public libraries have historically served as the bridge in combating the “digital divide”—the gap that exists between more affluent populations in urban and suburban communities who enjoy easy access to computers and the internet, and poorer, more rural, older or those with disabilities who do not—by offering free computers, internet access, and computer and technology training; they may also be the closest places that offer help creating résumés and filing job applications. In addition to these critical services, research shows that libraries have several features that make them uniquely good partners in the workforce development sphere, including extended hours of operation, ubiquitous presence within communities, and a long history as trusted community centers. More recently, some libraries have been able to expand their technology initiatives to include hotspot loans (where library users can borrow devices that allow them to connect to the internet for free from their own homes) and extended Wi-Fi signals. A 2018 survey of New Jersey libraries from the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University found that libraries provided classes, online job search support, résumé development, job application assistance, literacy programs, test preparation, and a range of other career services. Moreover, library staff are experts in research and community resources, and in some cases provide free one-on-one support for job-seeking patrons.

Changes in Approach from the Great Recession to COVID-19

In many ways, the role of libraries as workforce development providers was expanded and institutionalized in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Following the Great Recession, local libraries—and their counterparts at the regional, state, and national levels—began to mobilize to get people back to work through collaborative partnerships and innovative deployments of staff expertise. By 2014, libraries were recognized as a formal workforce development partner in federal legislation. During the pandemic, libraries are again working to meet both community needs and long-term workforce challenges; as with the response to the Great Recession, the response to the COVID-19 crisis builds on a foundation of community service that libraries have developed since their inception.

In addition to the wide-sweeping health and wellbeing effects of the pandemic, the virus inhibited libraries’ ability to provide the fundamental community resources their patrons rely on. Libraries were able to pivot to virtual programming for many of their critical services, but they still were charged with serving community members with lower computer literacy or no access to a computer or internet. In addition, U.S. public school students across all levels of learning were suddenly expected to participate in virtual learning from home—how could libraries assist school children in need of computers and internet access without their physical presence in the library?

Digital equity became a top priority for libraries, which started boosting their Wi-Fi signals so patrons could access it from parking lots, equipping bookmobiles with Wi-Fi, and introducing or increasing hot spot loans.

Despite these efforts, gaps in access to devices and the internet remains. Even in locations with relatively high levels of computer and internet access, community members may still need the computer literacy or job search support previously offered through their local library.

Post-Pandemic Opportunities for Civic Partnerships with Libraries

Following the Great Recession, workforce development providers such as state Departments of Labor and One Stop Career Centers developed strong partnerships with their local libraries to meet the unprecedented need faced by their communities, particularly around employment. In the years that followed, labor markets improved and in some cases these partnerships stagnated as priorities shifted back to other initiatives. However, when the need for these partnerships and services reemerged with the pandemic, some states and regions had to recreate these initiatives from square one, wasting time and resources in the process. It is incumbent upon these agencies to strengthen their partnerships regardless of the current state of the economy, as economic recovery is inequitable and some people will need targeted workforce services well beyond the time it takes to see improvement in the overall unemployment rate. For example, older long-term unemployed job seekers were still facing record levels of unemployment long after the Recession, and rely on continued community programming and resources to get by.

Libraries should be treated as a valuable resource to government agencies, educational institutions, business membership organizations, and workforce development providers as all strive to support economic recovery and continued growth. Identifying and breaking down silos to maximize resources and better meet the needs of community members is an important first step, for which workforce development boards and other existing commissions may serve as a platform. However, libraries are not without their own challenges in this crisis, as they too have suffered from layoffs and furloughs as the result of stressed state and local government budgets. Even before the economic downturn, library personnel reported that a lack of funding and staff affects the quality of their programming and the amount of time needed to meet the demand for career services, particularly around their ability to provide the one-on-one attention needed for individualized service.

Through established partnerships and existing knowledge and resources, libraries will continue to be an important actor and partner as the country assesses and begins to address the damage COVID-19 has caused the labor market. The extent of their impact will depend on policymakers and program leaders finding ways to integrate the library system as an important delivery and service institution for job seekers and learners in an increasingly changing workforce development environment.

Read more in Stephanie Holcomb, Amy Dunford, and Fopefoluwa Idowu, “Public Libraries: A Community’s Connection for Career Services.” John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, Rutgers University, September 2019.