

In 2020 the global COVID-19 pandemic forced work, school, and other daily tasks online, exposing and exacerbating already existing digital divides. Millions of Americans lack home broadband service—most notably in rural and remote areas, while for others the cost of a home internet connection is too great for a limited budget to bear. The country's nearly 17,000 public libraries—long a key institution in ensuring access to and meaningful use of high-speed broadband—have stepped up across the nation to keep communities connected during this turbulent time.

## Providing Wi-Fi During the Crisis and Beyond

Libraries quickly mobilized to maintain or expand outdoor access to their Wi-Fi networks as the pandemic began, keeping the millions of Americans who rely on library networks connected even as library buildings closed to the public. Some **93% of libraries surveyed currently allow outdoor access to their Wi-Fi networks**, while 44% have located Wi-Fi access points to further improve access outside the building.

- In **Florida** the St. Lucie County Library installed exterior access points with quarter-mile range as part of the Park n' Surf Project.
- And, in **Colorado**, the Buena Vista Public Library partnered with the town to expand its public Wi-Fi service to a local park.

Libraries also are leading the charge to bring Wi-Fi to under-connected community locations as part of their pandemic response.

- Through its WiFi-On-Wheels initiative, the Orange County Public Libraries in **California** are bringing internet connectivity to low-broadband neighborhoods via trailers that are parked at pre-designated locations each week to provide broadband access to patrons.

## High Demand for Hotspots

Before the pandemic, some 21% of libraries surveyed reported offering hotspot checkouts as a service. Since then, many libraries have added or expanded this service to meet increased demand. In **Utah** about half of libraries offered hotspots for loan in November 2020, up from 15% six months earlier. This rapid expansion was supported by CARES Act funding which helped bring hotspot lending to 30 library systems.

This popular offering allows community members to get online at home, to pursue their GED, complete job searches, connect with family, research medical concerns, start businesses, and more. For example:

- In **Arizona** the Prescott Valley Public Library has created Stay Connected Tech Kits for community members to check out that contain laptops, mice, and internet hotspots—recognizing that people who do not have home broadband may not own computing devices.
- The Ottawa Tribe of **Oklahoma** Library has increased its capabilities during the pandemic to loan laptops, tablets, and hotspots to tribal members.
- In **Washington**, the Seattle Public Library dedicates one-third of its hotspots to those most impacted by the digital divide and partners with local organizations to lend them to people with disabilities, refugees, low-income workers, and people experiencing homelessness. Library staff also provide digital support services.

