

**Executive Summary**

New federal programs and resources through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act will provide...

experience enabling digital access and skills building, they have a proven track record of stewarding public funding to...

Accordingly, the American Library Association (ALA) recommends that:

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enced in tackling digital equity gaps, boosting literacies and digital skills needed to survive and thrive in today's networked world, and developing collections and resources relevant to local needs; and

- **Sustainable, flexible collaboration** ranging from digital equity coalitions to state workforce development plans to telehealth collaborations that strengthen networks and support sustainability.

These assets align with the goals of the IIJA and must be leveraged as part of upcoming state planning efforts, as well as efforts to boost awareness of and enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program. Not only do library staff have deep

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## INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the pandemic, the federal government is making historic investments in advancing digital equity, literacy, and inclusion. One such investment is the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which includes \$65 billion to support expanding broadband access to unserved and underserved communities. It also provides funding to support community anchors, like libraries, to help individuals build their skills and confidence to fully engage in and benefit from the digital economy. With a long history of enabling and advancing equitable access to information, literacy, and broadband-enabled services, America's libraries are essential

- government agencies, and other partners, local libraries provide needed resources and services to their communities. Libraries also act as hubs when they connect residents to relevant services provided by community partners. These networks and referrals also are essential to addressing underlying systemic issues such as low literacy, homelessness, food insecurity, and mental and physical health services that may be substantial barriers to social, economic and educational opportunity.

So, how can libraries and policymakers build on these assets and leverage new funding to enable and sustain internet for all in the United States?

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## THE CONVENING

In June 2022, the American Library Association, with the financial support of the Mellon Foundation, hosted the ALA Workshop on Digital Inclusion & Broadband in Washington, D.C. The convening brought together library leaders, policy advocates, and other experts in broadband and digital inclusion. Participants came from across the United States and represented schools; public, academic, and tribal libraries; and partner organizations.

Through panels, discussions, and informal conversations, participants worked together to plan for the future of digital equity, literacy, and inclusion at the local, state, and national levels. They explored what we have learned from past and current digital equity, literacy, and inclusion efforts and how we can use those experiences to advance the work libraries do in the future.

The goals of the convening included:

- highlighting library initiatives on broadband and digital inclusion;
- exploring opportunities for libraries to advance digital equity, literacy, and inclusion in the future;
- identifying how ALA can support libraries in promoting, supporting, and advancing digital equity, literacy, and inclusion;
- identifying how ALA can advocate for libraries at the local, state, and national levels; and
- exploring how libraries can best prepare to apply for funds available through NTIA.

This opportunity to share promising practices and connect with colleagues and collaborators has advanced the ALA's efforts to identify and amplify library-led initiatives for digital equity and inclusion. This report captures and shares examples from convening participants and related research and explores how libraries and policymakers can build on and expand this foundation over the coming five years of the IJJA implementation and beyond.

- territories will receive funding based on a formula to implement their digital equity plans. Over the next five years, states will implement digital equity plans.

Libraries are actively involved in a larger digital equity ecosystem, and often have long-established partnerships and relationships with local and regional groups that can be leveraged to achieve community broadband equity goals for vulnerable populations. Considering libraries' successful history in advancing digital equity, states should leverage libraries' expertise, experience, services, and existing connections at the state and local levels to avoid costly program duplication and accelerate planning, development, implementation, and operational efficiency.

### **Holistic Approaches to Digital Equity**

To create a future where everyone is fully connected and engaged online, each community needs to leverage all its assets including non-profits, internet service providers, businesses, government agencies, schools, state libraries, etc. to work together to understand the problems and implement appropriate solutions. Community-based digital equity coalitions are growing in number and sophistication throughout the nation. They combine the unique experiences and expertise of diverse organizations, as well as the lived experiences



Barber Library provides hotspots that faculty, staff, and students can check out for one term.<sup>33</sup> COCC serves an area that is more than 10,000 square miles, and most students live in rural areas. This service helps connect students who “live in or near steep canyons or remote areas of the Warm Springs Reservation, where wi-fi access is nearly impossible.”<sup>34</sup> The library also lends other tech like laptops, cameras, calculators, voice recorders, microphones, and more.<sup>35</sup>

Library staff, often in concert with digital navigators, also raise awareness of low-cost home internet options. Many libraries, like Fort Vancouver (Washington) Regional Libraries, have guides highlighting how their residents can utilize programs like the ACP to obtain low-cost internet in the home. Others have hosted webinars and events to promote and support ACP enrollment. Recent research found a correlation between the presence of public libraries in a 5-digit zip code and ACP enrollment. The “library effect” is associated with 6% higher ACP enrollment in 5-digit zip codes with a public library compared to those without.<sup>36</sup>

### Technology Access

In addition to having an internet connection, residents also need devices that can connect to the internet. Libraries of all types are lending or giving away the technology their community needs to meet their personal digital goals.

Santa Rosa (California) Junior College is a formally designated Hispanic Serving Institution<sup>37</sup> and provides technology and other tools their students need to support their academic success. The library includes public computers with specialty applications like the Adobe design software, graphing and scientific calculators, and students can check out laptops and iPads.<sup>38</sup> They also have Wi-Fi hotspots students can check out for the semester. The application to apply for this service is in both English and Spanish.<sup>39</sup>

Using ECF program funding, Charlotte Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Library “will be issuing 20,000 refurbished laptops to eligible adults in Mecklenburg County. Each laptop is free and includes preloaded productivity and education applications and all necessary hardware needed for set-up.”<sup>40</sup> When the recipient picks up their laptop, a partner organization will be on hand to provide information on the ACP, and recipients can schedule an appointment with a tech tutor, assess their technology literacy, and attend classes on various topics and software.<sup>41</sup>

Many libraries also provide specialized hardware and software to support users who have disabilities. One example is the University of North Texas University Libraries. All public computers include JAWS, a screen reading application, and the Windows integrated adaptive software or Apple Accessibility. In addition, the library

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Programs also are geared to learners across ages and backgrounds, from students to English language learners to older adults. Illustrative examples of this work include:

- Silver STEAMers at Los Angeles County Library in California. The program “brings fun and educational experiences to older adults through STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) events.” The Silver STEAMers program includes online and in-person classes and online tools to help them build new skills.<sup>45</sup>
- Some schools within the school district of Collier County (Florida) serve primarily rural, migrant, and immigrant students. Many students do not have internet access or computers at home, so the district designed programs to provide internet and devices. Once those services were in place, many of the district’s school librarians noticed that the students, families, and caregivers did not have needed digital skills. In addition to the technical support the school librarians and district provided to these students and families, the librarians stepped in to help students strengthen their digital skills. As student confidence grows, school librarians and instructional resource teachers provide opportunities for students to explore their interests through classes, makerspaces, and hands-on activities focusing on coding, robotics, and circuitry.
- During the pandemic, many college and university libraries supported faculty as they transitioned courses from in-person to online. One such school was Davidson College (North Carolina). Their library’s teaching staff they transitioned and hands-on activities focusing on codingy transiti.8Pi7 the school districih and university



## TOOLS YOU CAN USE

### Information Literacy

#### **Association of Colleges and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education**

[ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework](http://ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework)

Community colleges, colleges, and university libraries use this framework with faculty to connect information literacy with student success and learning.

#### **American Association of School Librarians Standards Framework**

[standards.aasl.org/framework](http://standards.aasl.org/framework)

Reflects a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning by demonstrating the connection between learner, school librarian, and school library standards.

#### **Civic Online Reason (COR)**

[cor.stanford.edu](http://cor.stanford.edu)

This tool provides lessons and assessments educators can use to teach students to evaluate online information.

In Connecticut, the Naugatuck Valley Community College, a Hispanic Serving Institution, and Waterbury Public High School librarians partnered to develop and deliver an information literacy instruction program for high school students to ensure they had the skills needed to be successful when entering college.<sup>52</sup> This is part of a larger program that is preparing students for success in post-secondary education. The program is made possible by the GEAR UP grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which supports programs that “increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.”<sup>53</sup>

The IJA programs, particularly the Digital Equity Act, bring overdue attention—and funding—to build the literacy and skills needed for educational and economic opportunity. Libraries are well-positioned to address this priority.

## WORKFORCE AND SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Libraries are critical anchors supporting workforce and economic advancement in their communities. The Digital Equity Act recognizes the importance of workforce development in helping residents achieve their digital goals by earmarking funds through the State Capacity and Competitive Grants to support the implementation of workforce development programs, especially for those populations who have been disproportionately impacted by digital inequity.

Libraries offer a variety of services and programs to support students, job seekers, small business owners, and entrepreneurs, including providing access to digital technology, such as high-speed internet, computers, cameras, specialty software, scanners, printers, etc., and traditional resources like books and specialty databases, hands-on training, individual and collaborative workspaces, and individual assistance.

A recent report by the National Skills Coalition stated that “nearly one-third (31 percent) of workers lack digital skills. This number includes the 13 percent of overall workers who have no digital skills and another 18 percent who have limited skills. An additional 35 percent have achieved a baseline level of proficiency.”<sup>54</sup> These findings illustrate that access to a affordable, reliable internet service is insufficient. “Access to foundational and occupational-specific skills as well as reskilling is necessary to close the digital divide and achieve digital equity at work.”<sup>55</sup>

Workforce and small business development also encompass a range of programs and services that stretch from high school equivalency or other certifications to adult literacy and entrepreneurship support. Libraries can and do play important roles in this spectrum of service, often in formal or informal collaboration with state and local workforce and economic development agencies. Illustrative examples include:

### **GED**

Approximately 9% of the population age 25 and older in the United States had less than a high school diploma or equivalent.<sup>56</sup> Libraries like the Los Angeles County Library in California provide their residents “a second chance” to “earn an accredited high school diploma for free online in just 18 months or less.”<sup>57</sup> In addition to earning their degree, the library also provides personalized online career coaching.

### **STEM**

K–12, community college, and universities nationwide offer programs to engage students in problem-based learning that integrates Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) to solve real-world problems. Norman High School Library Learning Commons in Oklahoma created a maker lab where students can use 3D printers and scanners to create physical objects; video equipment to create short films, 360 videos, and stop motion animation; audio mixing to create podcasts or albums; and design software to create art, advertisements and so much more. The maker lab includes software and hardware that supports students in their quest to build digital skills, support experiential learning, and spark creativity and innovation.<sup>58</sup>

The Peoria Public Library in Illinois received LSTA funds to purchase virtual reality headsets that will be used to support STEAM programming for children. Two mentors were hired to teach VR programming. While the VR technology can be used for various STEAM activities, the first year of the program will focus on space. Through VR headsets, students can walk on the moon, dock at a space station, and explore in a fun, safe environment. This branch serves a culturally diverse and low-income population.<sup>59</sup>

The North Carolina State University Hunt Libraries provides multiple services for faculty, staff, and students to explore current and emerging digital technologies. The digital media space focuses on audio/video production, gaming development, graphic design, and VR and AR development.<sup>60</sup> The Makerspace supports electronics, 3D printing, 3D scanning, textiles and cutting and drawing with digital tools.<sup>61</sup> In addition, the Data Experience Lab (DXL) is the libraries' community hub for data science, visualization, and digital research and scholarship. It offers collaboration space, computing resources, and support for the university community working with data, creating visualizations, using geospatial methodologies, or employing new digital methods and approaches.<sup>62</sup> In addition to providing these different spaces and tools, staff are on hand to support the faculty, staff, and students in the creation process with one-on-one assistance and hands-on workshops.

### **Job Searching**

Libraries of all types provide workshops, services, and tools to provide employment support to residents in their community.

The Booth Library at Eastern Illinois University is working with the University's Career Services and the School of Extended Learning "to present a series of workshops designed to provide resources for the local workforce. Topics include creating resumes, how to complete an online application, how to interview, etc."<sup>63</sup> The grant award was part of the Illinois State Library's grant program titled "Bouncing Back from the Pandemic: Developing Resources for the Local Workforce," which provides funds from ARPA to support libraries in providing essential resources and services to those seeking employment.

### **English-Language Learning**

Queens Public Library in New York provides the course English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) "that will help customers build the language skills they need to have a successful career."<sup>64</sup> In these courses, participants learn how to create resumes, interview, increase their comfort communicating at work, make suggestions, communicate better with supervisors and peers, and prepare presentations and reports. Once participants complete the ESOL for Health-care course, the libraries "help connect students who have completed our English language course in health care with reputable home care agencies."<sup>65</sup>

### **Small Business and Entrepreneurship**

Notably, almost 1 in 2 public libraries provide services to entrepreneurs who wish to start or grow their businesses.<sup>66</sup> In 2020, ALA launched Libraries Build Business (LBB), a national initiative supported by Google.org, intended to build capacity in libraries offering programming or services to local entrepreneurs and the small business community, prioritizing low-income and underrepresented entrepreneurs. Over 18 months—during the pandemic—the 13 participating libraries reached and impacted 14,000 people with business development resources.

Yakama Nation (Washington) Library is one library that participated in this program. The library provides internet access, computers with specialty as 1 Tf5.pn 327 Bp, Lang t

to create their own businesses.<sup>67</sup>



Libraries:

- Bring the internet to their community.
- Aid their community in building digital skills.
- Create informed internet users.
- Support workforce development and entrepreneurship.
- Support and connect their residents to social services and telehealth.
- Lend or provide technology like computers, tablets, hotspots, etc., to users who do not have one.
- Build coalitions of community partners to create digitally equitable communities.

Libraries have a proven track record over many decades of advancing these activities. Funding libraries will allow us to not only support these efforts in our community now but allow us to build and implement new approaches that can promote and support digital equity, literacy, and inclusion in the years to come.

Finally, ALA recommends that:

- State broadband leaders and policymakers include state library agencies in statewide digital equity planning groups and leverage their unparalleled reach into all public libraries to strengthen communications and outreach statewide;
- State and local education agencies include K-12 school librarians and college and university library leaders in digital equity planning and deployment;
- Libraries increase awareness of their local technology assets to improve coordination across all

levels of government and develop grant proposal ideas for the forthcoming funding programs;

- Congress enable sustainable funding for digital equity through measures like the Digital Equity Foundation Act; and
- Federal agencies continuously work to reduce administrative and record-keeping barriers that limit participation by small libraries and other community-based entities and increase incentives and streamlining for consortial applications.

ALA will continue to synthesize and share policy information and best practices libraries and allies can use to build a digitally equitable future for all. Learn more online at [ala.org/advocacy/broadband](https://ala.org/advocacy/broadband).

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# ALA American Library Association

The American Library Association (“ALA”) is the foremost national organization providing resources to inspire library and information professionals to transform their communities through essential programs and services. For more than 140 years, the ALA has been the trusted voice for academic, public, school, government and special libraries, advocating for the profession and the library’s role in enhancing learning and ensuring access to information for all. For more information, visit [ala.org](https://ala.org).

For further information about this publication, contact:

Megan Janicki, Deputy Director, Strategic Initiatives, ALA Public Policy & Advocacy Office,  
American Library Association, [mjanicki@alawash.org](mailto:mjanicki@alawash.org), 202-628-8410.

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## ENDNOTES

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