PHOTO COURTESY ARVRLS

From strengthening Wi-Fi signals to reach public spaces beyond the library building to offering checkout programs for portable hotspot devices, Arkansas' libraries are helping expand internet access.

The Dewey Decimal connection

How local libraries are bridging the digital divide

By Emily Cooper Yates

In November 2021, the federal government passed the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Arkansas was awarded $100 million to improve broadband internet coverage in the state. A large percentage of our state's population lacks access to critical resources provided by broadband internet, including healthcare services and educational and employment opportunities.

The Federal Communications Commission reports that 15 percent of Arkansans live in an area with no broadband infrastructure. Additionally, according to data from Microsoft, only 38.8 percent of Arkansans use the internet at broadband speeds. While citizens await planning on how this federal funding will be used, local libraries are taking charge in providing internet access immediately.

Historically, the local library served as a major hub for communities, filling gaps in accessibility to information, technology and education. This role is no different when it comes to broadband internet access. Libraries across Arkansas are taking it upon themselves to get citizens online.

The Malvern-Hot Spring County Library instituted a wildly popular hotspot checkout program. This program

was established well before the COVID-19 pandemic and allows patrons to check out Wi-Fi hotspots to take home and use. The library also established Wi-Fi hotspots in or near local businesses for easy public access and strategically placed Wi-Fi hotspots in "dead zones," where wireless connectivity is poor or nonexistent.

The Arkansas River Valley Regional Library System (ARVRLS) updated cabling at libraries throughout their service area. This was necessary to ensure they provided patrons with adequate broadband speeds and allowed the libraries to extend their Wi-Fi reach outside of the library itself and up to the property line. Now, citizens have 24/7 access to Wi-Fi, no password necessary. Like Malvern-Hot Spring County Library, ARVRLS libraries also implemented a Wi-Fi hotspot checkout program.

According to census data, 42 percent of households in Forrest City do not have internet. To address this need, the Forrest City Public Library also updated their network equipment, improved their internet speed and implemented a hotspot checkout program. The library took an extra step in bridging the digital divide by providing classes on digital navigation that allow citizens to learn about the internet and how to use it.

Planning is underway to determine how to utilize the funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. Lou McAlister, CEO of Broadband Development Group, is developing a master plan to expand broadband access in Arkansas. According to *Talk Business and Politics*, McAlister's report is to be completed and presented to the Arkansas legislature by April. Additionally, the FCC is updating its broadband access map, which shows the areas in the state most lacking in connectivity. All of this information will guide decision-making around spending on broadband projects.

Amber Gregory, manager of E-Rate Services of the Arkansas State Library, and Misty Hawkins, director of ARVRLS, both explained that libraries need to be included in these planning initiatives. "Libraries know their communities, inside and out," Gregory said. "We have boots-on-the-ground knowledge. We are very connected to our communities; we know who doesn't get service and where."

Hawkins added, "Libraries have the service, reach, insight and knowledge. Many of us have already updated our equipment and services so we know what it takes."

The best thing individuals can do to support their local library's effort to expand broadband access is to spread the word of services and raise awareness. "We have to do a better job to spread awareness. There are people in our communities who have no clue what we've been doing," Hawkins said.

The internet is vital to everyday life. It is used to search and apply for jobs, for online course work, for paying bills and beyond. The COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on the necessity of access to broadband internet. Suddenly, our homes became offices and schools, with meetings and coursework taking place online. While our state awaits rollout of broadband expansion projects, libraries are meeting an immediate need by offering programming and equipment.

Arkansas is working on a statewide broadband plan and you can be a part of it. To determine the true broadband coverage in your area, fill out this survey and encourage your community to as well: www.surveymonkey.com/r/JFSRYZH.

Don't forget to support your local library! Contact your local branch to see how you can help. ▥

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