

Connecting Communities

Libraries Bridging the Broadband Gap

A Conversation with Cindy Church, Continuing Education Consultant and State E-Rate Coordinator for the Library of Virginia

Across the Commonwealth, many households rely on public libraries as their primary point of broadband access to connect to loved ones, complete homework, and access essential services. Virginia residents who have home access to broadband also turn to libraries for help navigating daily online tasks. As high-speed internet access expands through the Virginia Telecommunication Initiative (VATI) and the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program, libraries continue to support both unconnected and newly connected households.



Cindy Church, Continuing Education Consultant and State E-Rate Coordinator for the Library of Virginia, shared her perspective on how libraries help communities get connected and fully participate in an increasingly digital world.

1 What are some of the most essential online services people without reliable broadband at home come to the library to access?

Public libraries remain a critical point of access for individuals without reliable home broadband. Patrons depend on their local library for high-speed internet, public computers, hotspot lending, access to databases and digital resources, online educational and research materials, and digital literacy instruction. For many residents, the library is the only dependable and cost-free environment where they can access essential online tools needed for work, education, healthcare, and daily life.

2 Why is it so critical for libraries to provide this access, including through tools like privacy pods?

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the profound gaps in broadband access, particularly across rural areas of southwest Virginia. As remote work, telehealth, virtual learning, and online communication became essential, libraries saw a dramatic increase in demand for both reliable internet and private, functional workspaces.

The Bland County Public Library, for example, believed their existing services were sufficient. However, the shift in 2020 made it clear that community needs had evolved. Patrons required not only internet access, but also quiet, confidential spaces for meetings, interviews, virtual appointments, and work. Tools like [privacy pods allowed them to support this shift](#) while maintaining the quiet, reflective environment central to the library's mission.

Libraries have also seen that while broadband expands, the digital literacy gap still exists. People often do not feel comfortable with computers or with sharing information online. My mother is a prime example. She does not understand her patient portal, and navigating it is a big leap for her. Libraries are very important in that regard because they can be a trusted partner. People can come in, sit down with library staff, and receive the digital help they need, such as uploading a PDF to a telehealth portal.

3 Can you provide a story from your work where access to broadband at the library made a meaningful difference for a Virginian, household, or community without reliable connectivity elsewhere?

One meaningful example from the Chesterfield Library involved a mother who visited a library branch with her children to sign up for library cards. She had recently experienced a major life change and was navigating the challenges of single parenthood, pregnancy, and reentering the workforce after several years at home. During her visit, library staff helped her join the hotspot waitlist so she could have reliable, free internet access at home. She was deeply grateful not only for access to technology but also for learning that these resources existed at all. With hotspot access, her family was able to stay informed about school communications, access to books and materials, and, most importantly, she was able to begin applying for jobs and rebuilding stability and independence.

Another instance involved a father returning a hotspot and hoping to renew it for his son, who was preparing to receive an insulin port that required dependable Wi-Fi to operate correctly. They had no home broadband, and his grandparents also lacked internet access. Fortunately, the device was available, and the family was able to check it out again, enabling the family to support his medical needs safely at both his own home and his grandparents'.

4 How do libraries and their staff support digital navigation and digital adoption for individuals with limited or newly established broadband access?

Nearly all job postings are online now, so it is important to teach digital literacy skills so people can apply. Library staff routinely assist patrons with writing resumes, completing online job applications, navigating websites, and developing foundational computer skills. Recently, public library staff reported assisting a couple who were creating resumes from scratch. One partner was hesitant to use the computer, and the other had only basic digital skills. Over 2 hours, the staff member supported the couple in developing the foundational skills necessary for job applications, including document creation, formatting, file management, and completing online employment forms.

Beyond individualized support, libraries also serve as trusted referral points. School intervention specialists and community organizations frequently direct families to local libraries for hotspot lending, computer use, research tools, and employment resources. For individuals just gaining home broadband access, local libraries remain a vital bridge to digital adoption, confidence, and independence. For example, someone newly connected to broadband may begin a home search online but feel overwhelmed by the volume of results. Library staff are available to help people navigate home listing sites and teach users how to vet online sources.

5 As more Virginians gain reliable broadband access at home, how do you expect the relationship between libraries and the communities they serve to shift?

As broadband infrastructure improves statewide, affordability remains a major concern. A household may technically have access to high-speed internet but still be unable to afford a monthly plan. Virginia's public libraries will continue to bridge this gap by offering free internet, hotspot lending, and computer access.

During the pandemic, Smyth County Library supported a community member who returned repeatedly with new questions as he evaluated his options for home broadband access. His experience highlights how libraries continue to be a trusted resource to help residents navigate new broadband access.

Libraries also provide community connection and educational support. Patrons with home broadband continue to rely on us for digital navigation support, research guidance, access to specialized databases, and new learning opportunities.

6 What do you want Virginians to understand about the role libraries play in their communities, and why the broadband access they offer remains important?

Libraries are the only remaining free and inclusive public spaces available to everyone, regardless of income or background. We provide meeting rooms, collaborative environments, access to technology, and professional staff who help residents navigate information and digital services. Broadband access at the library ensures that every Virginian, whether applying for a job, attending a telehealth appointment, completing homework, starting a business, or connecting with others, can fully participate in modern society. This role is essential today and will remain vital as technology continues to evolve.

Cindy Church has 40 years of experience working in libraries and is passionate about connecting Virginians to the resources they need. She has a master's degree in library science from North Carolina Central University. Alongside her roles at the Library of Virginia, Cindy is the Librarian Coordinator for Virginia Department of Corrections.

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