May 11, 2022

To the Working Group for the Status of Libraries in Vermont:

Of the technology currently provided by Ilsley Public Library, access to high-speed internet is certainly the most critical. Over the past several decades internet access has shifted from being a luxury to a basic necessity. The pandemic has underscored how essential it is to our daily lives, from accessing medical care to applying for jobs to connecting with loved ones. Unfortunately, the pandemic has also revealed just how deep the digital divide runs in Vermont. The Vermont Department of Public Service surveys and maps the deployment of high-speed internet access in Vermont, and a review of the most recent data (2021) demonstrates that about twenty percent of Vermonter households do not have access to internet with 25/3 Mbps or above.[1]

Not surprisingly, Vermonters that live in rural areas, or are low-income, are less likely to have the kind of speed and bandwidth required for multiple users to access the internet at once. In many communities, public libraries are the only provider of free public internet, and Ilsley Public Library is no exception. Ilsley offers free, high-speed Wi-Fi 24/7. We always knew that some community members would utilize library Wi-Fi after hours, but during the pandemic, when the building was closed to the public, we noticed a significant uptick of people parking close to the building, working in their cars. We learned that, in addition to adults using library Wi-Fi to work remotely, caretakers were bringing their children to the library parking lot to complete and submit assignments for school, using the library's internet.

In response, the library installed a new router and additional access points to provide longer-range deployment of our wireless.[2] We specifically placed access points to allow for stronger Wi-Fi in the parking lot and library garden, recognizing that many community members require internet access during non-business hours. Of course, accessing Wi-Fi requires a device, and not all community members have a laptop, tablet, or smartphone. Ilsley Public Library has eleven public access desktop computers. While we have reduced the number of public desktops over the past few years (as more and

[1] State of Vermont Department of Public Service. "Broadband High-Speed Internet Availability in Vermont." Accessed May 9, 2022. https://publicservice.vermont.gov/content/broadband-availability
[2] This work was funded by a VCF Technology Grant.

more library patrons arrive with private laptops), we recognize that we will always need to provide some number of public access computers for community members that either do not have, or did not bring, a personal device to the library.

It would be a mistake to think that the only people who access the internet at Ilsley Public Library cannot do so at home. On the contrary, many community members come to use the library as a space to work remotely or engage in distance learning, even though they have adequate internet access at home. As the post-pandemic world shifts to more remote and hybrid work, we are seeing more and more people come to the library and "set up shop" for the day. Many people don't want to work exclusively in their home, and the library provides a quiet space with many amenities, as well as a sense of community. In an effort to support this increase in remote work at the library, we recently purchased three large tables with embedded power ports in the tabletop, allowing patrons to plug in their devices easily, and cutting down on the number of cords in the ground/wall that people can trip over.[3]

During the pandemic, the library learned how to hold programs and organizational meetings remotely. The technology that supports these meetings (a 360 degree video conference camera and microphone, monitor, laptop) is also available to the community for use in the library building.[4] The combination of technology and our private conference room has been especially valuable, as more community members have needed to conduct business, health, and class meetings online. A silver lining of offering hybrid library programs and meetings is an increase in attendance. The library trustees, for instance, have noticed an uptick in citizen participation during hybrid meetings. Offering hybrid meetings has become a tool for increasing inclusion and participation.

In addition to internet, public computers, and meeting technology, the library provides access to printing, scanning, and faxing. This is an important community resource; people need to fax and scan documents for medical or legal purposes, and most do not have the ability to do so at home. The library provides chargers (and access to electricity) to power small electronics such as phones and tablets. Many people don't realize this is a resource of value until their phone dies in downtown Middlebury, at which point it becomes their "favorite library resource ever."

Several years ago, the library partnered with Middlebury Community Television to create a Digital Media Lab. The Digital Media Lab is a sound baffled room, featuring an iMac workstation with full Adobe Creative Cloud suite, studio grade audio recording capability, and a turntable, cassette player, and VCR/DVD deck. Equipment and

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[3] To learn more about Ilsley Public Library as a co-working space, you can read an article I recently wrote for the Addison independent, as well as a companion piece written by a library patron, Steve Gross:
https://www.addisonindependent.com/2021/12/30/dana-hart-libraries-can-be-good-co-working-spaces/
https://www.addisonindependent.com/2021/12/30/opinion-ilsley-welcomed-me-for-co-working/
[4] The library's Meeting Owl Pro was purchased with an ARPA Grant to Public Libraries for Equipment and Supply Purchases, through the VT Department of Libraries.

software in the Digital Media Lab allows for video conferencing, podcasting, recording voice overs, video editing, and screen-casting, as well as the conversion of numerous types of analog media, such as LPs, cassettes, and VHS tapes.

All of this technology would receive very little use if we didn't offer training on how to use it; before community members use the Digital Media Lab, they book an appointment for an overview and training session tailored to their project needs. The library also offers Youth Media Lab, an introductory video and animation workshop for students in grades three and up. Participants learn to use iPads and cameras to capture still photographs and video, and create and edit short films on laptop computers.

More broadly, the library offers "tech help" to community members on a range of issues and devices. Librarians coach community members on tech skills as various as setting up an email address, how to access and navigate electronic resources and phone apps, and how to transfer files to another computer or device. Community members increasingly need assistance bridging technologies, and come to the library not to master a particular digital skill but to achieve a specific goal or task. They may have a smart television, but need assistance accessing the library's film streaming service. They may have a smart phone, but don't know how to use two-factor authentication with their email account. Librarians play a vital role in helping community members navigate these technology challenges.

As we look to the future, providing access to emerging technologies needs to be a priority for public libraries, perhaps especially rural public libraries. Increasingly, familiarity with technology and IT skills will be required for job applicants. Exposure to and familiarity with cutting edge technology already provides a significant advantage in today's job market; it isn't a stretch to imagine that an absence of this kind of exposure and skill development for children could have long-term economic consequences. In the same way that all children deserve access to materials and programs that promote early literacy and numeracy, all children need access to emerging technologies.

Several years ago, Ilsley Public Library arranged to borrow virtual reality equipment from the Hannaford Career Center for a week of drop-in VR experiences. We turned our Community Meeting Room into a VR space and provided one-on-one tutorials for all ages. To attract children, we billed this as a fun video-game type experience, but when I gave the tutorials, what I saw was a group of young people becoming comfortable with a technology they will likely encounter in school and then in the workforce. Learning at an early age that emerging technologies are not scary, and can be mastered with time and an open mind, is a powerful message for children.

In addition to providing instruction, public libraries provide an opportunity for communities to share resources that may be too costly for individuals to purchase and maintain, such as 3-D printers and simple robotics. Emerging healthcare technologies

might be a good candidate for circulating technologies, such as home heart rate monitors and fitness trackers. We don't know what the future holds, but we know that technology evolves quickly and being an early adopter is expensive. We need to prepare our communities for the reality that libraries investing significant sums of money in cutting edge technology isn't just appropriate, but necessary.

Thank you for the work you are doing on behalf of Vermont's public libraries.

Respectfully submitted,

Dana Hart
Director