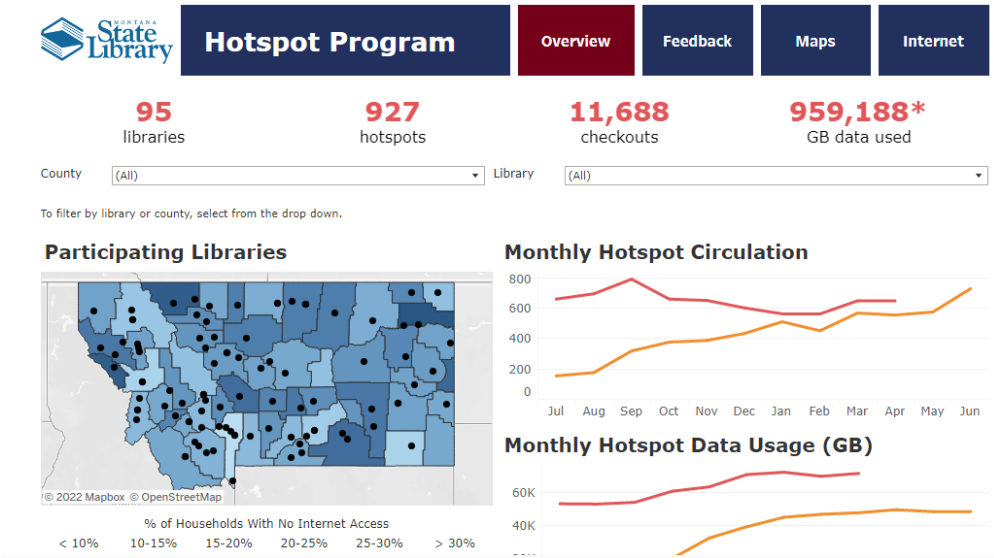


Digital Equity & Montana Libraries

August 3, 2022

Jennie Stapp, State Librarian

What is Digital Equity?

Digital equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

National Digital Inclusion Alliance, [Definitions - National Digital Inclusion Alliance]

Montana State Library Digital Equity Work

1996	Telecommunications Act passed by Congress
	Infomine of the Rockies contract
1997	Library Technology Consultants first hired
	Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) funds used to connect libraries
2010-2012	Broadband Technology Opportunity Program Grant
2019	Broadband in MT Libraries study
2020	Hot Spot Lending Program
2021	American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) Internal Wiring Project
2022	Montana applies for Digital Equity Act funds

MONTANA State Library

Early Investments in Digital Equity

- Telecommunications Act of 1996 passed by Congress
- In part, the act allowed for increased investment in the Internet
- The Federal Communications Commission established the E-rate fund and requires
- Libraries are required to create technology plans to be approved by the State Library
- The State Library helps libraries submit E-rate applications to supplement the cost of internet service

Early Investments in Digital Equity

- August 1996 InfoMine of the Rockies contract
- State Library funded a two-year contract to provide Internet service for public libraries
- Annual contract amount was $46,000 for 27 libraries
- The State Library was one of the first agencies to go "online"

Early Investments in Digital Equity

At the April 16, 1997 State Library Commission meeting, the Commission allocated $345,020 of 1998 LSTA funds to:

Connect 51 libraries to the Internet

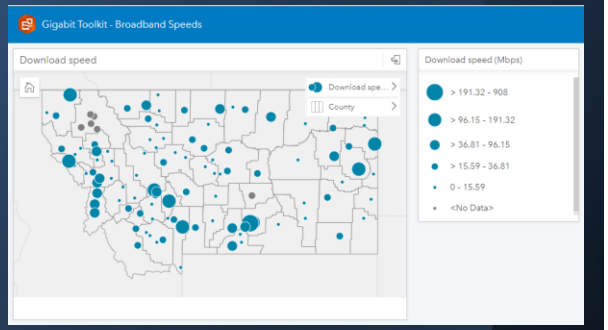
And to hire two technology consultants to assist libraries

Suzanne Reymer, our longest serving consultant, has been on staff since 1999

Broadband Technology Opportunity Program

- Grant funded by American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars
- Updated public access computers in libraries
- E-rate application support to supplement the cost of internet access
- Digital literacy training programs
- Technology "petting zoos"
- Over 18 months, 62,000 Montanans participated in technology trainings at their libraries
- Final Report Executive Summary

Broadband Access in MT libraries



The 2015 FCC E-rate Modernization Order established Internet guidelines for public libraries:

- Libraries serving fewer than 50,000 people should have broadband download speeds of at least 100 Mbps
- Libraries serving 50,000 people or more should have broadband download speeds of at least 1 Gbps
- Summary of the E-Rate Modernization Order | Federal Communications Commission (fcc.gov)

100 Megabits per second (Mbps) download speeds allows multiple, simultaneous Internet users to fully participate in a synchronys online world.

In 2019 the State Library funded a study of Broadband access In MT libraries. The study:

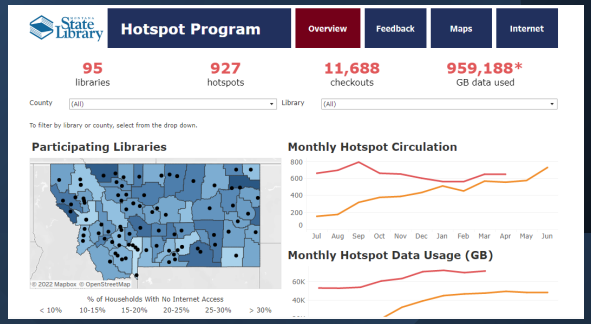
Identified broadband speeds in Montana libraries and

Prioritized needs for hardware upgrades to improve broadband speeds in libraries

In 2020 the library was the only source of free Wi-Fi in 28 communities with libraries

Gigabit Toolkit Dashboard

Hot Spot Lending Program



- Nearly 1000 hot spots are circulating through public, school, and academic libraries
- Monthy cost is approximately $40,000 for devices and data plans through Verizon, T-Mobile, and Nemont
- Funded through LSTA, CARES Act and ARPA dollars, funding is available through FY '23
- To date, Montanans have used nearly 1M Gigabits of data through the hot spots
- *"Thank you for making the mobile hotspots available. We used it to live stream my uncle-in-law's funeral. He passed away unexpectedly and lots of family and friends were unable to travel to Butte for the service. "*
- In addition to hot spots, some libraries lend laptops and tablets
- Hot Spot Program Dashboard

Internal Wiring Project

- The State Library is investing $650,000 of ARPA dollars to address some of the needs identified in the Broadband in MT Libraries study
- The study found that 40% of libraries have outdated wiring and Wi-Fi equipment including routers older than five years.
- The State Library procures equipment and hires contractors to complete the upgrades in between 25 and 30 libraries
- Montanans benefit from more stable Internet connections with better Wi-Fi in their libraries
- Library staff have more information to better manage and support their wide area networks.
- To receive upgrades, participating libraries are asked to upgrade their Internet speeds to 100 Mbps

Digital Equity through MT Libraries

Providing public access to 100Mbps Internet in libraries is especially important in Montana. According to BroadbandNow, Montana ranked last among all states in 2022 for broadband access.

28% of Montanans do not have access to 100Mbps broadband.

All Montana public libraries have Wi-Fi and delivered 944,256 Wi-Fi sessions in 2019.

Montana libraries offer 938 public access computers

In 2019, Montanans used library computers 828,760 times.

Montana ranked 13th for computer use in libraries nationally

Montana libraries offered 45,966 one-on-one technology assistance sessions last year.

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