MONTANA STATE LIBRARY
A GREATER STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

MEMO

To: Network Advisory Council

From: Jennie Stapp, Tracy Cook, Suzanne Reymer

Subject: Digital Equity/Digital Divide

Date: April 27, 2023

MSL staff have been working with the Montana Cooperative Development Center on a variety of issues. One of those items has been digital equity. There are millions of federal dollars available for digital equity initiatives.

Libraries play an important role in providing digital equity. They provide internet access, computers, and assistance for community members. We asked librarians where we should focus our energies if federal funding becomes available. The full results of the survey have been shared in your meeting materials.

Funds are available in a variety of federal grant programs. The Digital Equity Act focuses on the following populations. Please keep this in mind as you review the survey data. With these audiences in mind, which survey items should we prioritize?

The Digital Equity Act focuses on addressing the needs of "covered populations" as defined by the statute

Covered Populations
Identity groups and communities disproportionally impacted by digital inequity

- Low-income households
- Aging populations
- Incarcerated individuals
- Veterans
- People with disabilities
- People with language barriers
- Racial and ethnic minorities
- Rural inhabitants

We are sharing our analysis of the survey with you for the following purposes:

1. For you to consider and preview prior to discussing and adopting an FY2024 Library Development Plan.
2. To give MSL staff directions on what to prioritize should federal funding become available prior to the adoption of an FY2024 Library Development plan.

Analysis of survey responses

65 out of 82 public librarians responded to the survey. We had excellent geographic and size representation.

Top community needs identified by respondents
1. Affordable internet for schools and libraries
2. Affordable internet for households
3. Digital literacy/digital skills gaps
4. Access to digital devices
5. Improved online content for disabled or other target populations
6. Availability of high speed broadband in communities and libraries
7. Improved online content for community members (job seekers, etc.)

Questions about community needs: What questions, comments or observations do you have about the top needs? Which ones are within the mission of libraries? Which ones fall to other community partners? Who are those partners?

Top programs libraries would like to expand or offer as identified by 63% or more of the respondents. Staff added the responses under the expand the service or would like to offer the service together to determine the top priorities of public libraries.
1. Create digital equity plan for the library = 57
2. Digital skills training/classes = 45
3. Technology centers (makerspaces, etc.) = 43
4. Job seeker assistance = 42
5. Adopt cybersecurity policies = 42
6. Online community resources = 41
7. Information about affordable Internet = 40

Questions about library priorities: What questions, comments, or observations do you have about the priorities? Which ones should MSL staff pursue? Why?

Barriers to libraries expanding or providing digital equity programs: Given the barriers listed – lack of staff time, money, and/or knowledge – what should MSL staff keep in mind when pursuing a project?

Top responses for what MSL should do as identified by 63% or more of respondents.
1. Continue funding for hotspot program = 54
2. Assist with digital equity plans = 51

3. Training for library staff on digital/technology skills = 50
4. Create state grant program for local digital equity programs = 41

Questions about top MSL priorities listed: What questions, comments, or observations do you have about the list? When you compare these priorities to community needs and what libraries want, what should MSL staff prioritize?

This discussion will help inform staff on next steps – either in preparing for the FY2024 Library Development Plan or in requesting federal funds for libraries.