

Maine's BTOP Information Commons Project:

The Building Block to Statewide Digital Literacy Efforts

By Janet McKenney

The Maine State Library (MSL) received a \$1.36 million Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant for the Maine Public Library Information Commons Project in the Public Computer Centers (PCC) category. The awards are administered by the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Recovery Act/ARRA).

The project had three major goals: (1) to increase the number of computers and workstations available to the public by more than 40 percent in the 107 participating public libraries so Maine citizens have better access to broadband connectivity at their libraries; (2) to purchase and install Internet protocol (IP)-based videoconferencing units in 11 regional hub libraries; and (3) to provide training and online learning resources to Maine citizens who are unemployed, low income, or seniors, and to assist local librarians with both technology skills and information skills needed to assist citizens in their communities to use these computers and resources.

Through the grant the 107 public libraries received 247 all-in-one desktop computers with webcams; 265

laptops with webcams; three mobile labs (10 laptops each with projectors and rolling cases); 11 Tandberg videoconferencing units with infrastructure licenses; and MOVI desktop videoconferencing software. Local training at public libraries focused on several classes: basic computers, computer applications, and Facebook for seniors, along with providing walk-in help for resumes, cover letters, e-readers, and tablets. Many libraries offer scheduled sessions to work one to one with any hardware or software.

The Maine State Library had many partners during this project and continues to work with them on joint projects. For infrastructure, Internet connectivity, technology expertise, and online resources our integral partners have been Networkmaine, the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN), Maine Telecommunications Education Access Fund (MTEAF), and Maine InfoNet. These organizations provide foundational services and matches for the grant. Our partnership with the Department of Labor began with the Center for Workforce Research and Information (CWRI) and expanded to work with the Bureau of Employment Services and the Maine Career Centers. Another significant and ongoing partnership exists with Maine's Justice Action Group for the Lawyers in Libraries initiative. MSL has worked closely with the Volunteer Lawyers Project to provide legal information clinics through new library videoconferencing technology at public libraries. (See article by Mead, this issue.)

During the BTOP project, the MSL developed a learning portal called the Information Commons that corralled a number of resources to be used by patrons and librarians. The website can be found at www.maine.gov/msl/commons, where users can search and access a variety of online courses and resources. The trainer went on the road throughout the state providing training to both patrons and librarians. The MSL also purchased a web-based learning tool, LearningExpress Library, as a statewide resource that includes video software tutorials (Microsoft Office, Adobe products), skills building, career and test preparation, job search and resume-building resources. This resource can be accessed through the Information Commons web site or through the state's virtual library known as MARVEL.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PARTNER COLLABORATIONS

The Maine State Library's BTOP trainer collaborated with the Maine Department of Labor's Rapid Response Team and the McArthur Public Library in Biddeford to present a workshop December 14, 2011, on employment resources for displaced Lowe's employees. The workshop was designed to help unemployed workers to learn about the online resources available to them at their local libraries. Other sessions offered through the grant were designed to teach unemployed workers how to use social networking sites and other online resources found on their local library computers to search for jobs, create better resumes, and prepare for interviews.

The Maine office of the Internal Revenue Service's Small Business /Self-Employed Division has been using the videoconferencing capabilities at the Portland Public Library, Bangor Public Library, Maine State Library, and other videoconferencing hubs to provide tax practitioner training for Maine tax professional organizations. The Maine State Library also worked with the Maine Center for Entrepreneurial Development (MCED) for a statewide videoconferencing event that brought Steve Blank, a renowned entrepreneurship educator, to Maine. Students and Maine entrepreneurs participated at university and public library locations across the state. We anticipate that use of the videoconferencing hubs will continue and expand as other users and organizations take advantage of their capabilities. 



Janet McKenney is the director of library development for the Maine State Library and is managing the Maine Public Library Information Commons Project. She has worked in public, academic, and special libraries for more than 25 years.

REFERENCES

Mead, Andrew. 2013. "'Lawyers in Libraries': A New Approach to Access to Justice in Maine." *Maine Policy Review* 22(1): 94–95.