

## Libraries help Marin patrons struggling with 'digital divide'

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Posted: 07/19/2014 05:28:03 PM PDT

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It's 3:30 p.m. at the Pickleweed Library in San Rafael's Canal neighborhood, and every one of the 16 computers is in use as residents of this working-class community avail themselves of their only form of Internet access.

Despite living in wealthy Marin County and the tech-savvy Bay Area, many lower-income residents, Latinos and others are caught in a stubborn gap between the state's digital haves and have-nots that shows little sign of closing anytime soon.

According to a statewide Field Poll released Tuesday, broadband adoption rates have stagnated over the past few years. Access by Latinos and seniors lags behind that of younger adults and those with higher incomes — the "digital divide."

### Internet access

According to the poll, 75 percent of adult Californians have broadband Internet connectivity at home. While that's up from 55 percent when the first poll was done in 2008, this year's number was unchanged from 2013 as growth appears to have stalled.

Perhaps even more troubling, usage patterns vary significantly across different segments of the state's population. For example, while nearly 90 percent of Californians age 18-29 and those who have graduated from college or who earn annual household incomes of \$60,000 or more report having broadband Internet access at home, significantly smaller slices of other groups were able to say the same.

They include adults who have not graduated from high school (32 percent of whom have broadband Internet access), Spanish-speaking Latinos (46 percent), seniors 65 or older (47 percent) and residents with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000 (53 percent).

The majority of Canal area residents come from Latin America or are Latin American descendants, according to Irene Morales, supervising librarian at the Pickleweed Library. For some of them, the library's computer lab offers their only access to the Internet.

"It's a diverse, multicultural area," Morales said. "It's a working class immigrant community." As the Field Poll results indicate, these are the people who are likely to find themselves caught in the digital gap.

"This is a place where the poorest ones come to have access," Morales said.

"A lot of people use the computer for filling out job applications or looking for jobs or placing ads on Craigslist. It's a way for them to stay in touch with their families in other countries via Facebook. We have quite a spectrum of usage," Morales said. "I have one patron who uses the

wireless connection at the library to access Skype so he can talk to his daughter in another country."

## Internet access important to education



*Adreaizana Cook works on a computer at the Marin City Library on Thursday, July 10, 2014, in Marin City, Calif. They work for the Webstar program in which*

Many times, students and their parents will come in to use school websites, the manager said.

"They are doing this because they can't do it at home. I have a lot of parents whose kids go to the local school and the schools send them to the library to access the school website if they don't have a computer at home," Morales said. Bahia Vista Elementary School is one example, she said.

help them to get situated on the website," Morales said.

"They come here to access the school website, which has resources to help kids with reading and math skills. We

"Libraries in general help close the digital divide by providing access to families. We need to also provide training. It has to be a combination in order to close the gap," Morales said.

"People have to have access to resources and they have to know where to go. In this community it's a combination of organizations and libraries working together to help people get computer resources and advance themselves in this country," Morales said. Canal Alliance, a community resource center, provides instructors who give computer classes in Spanish at a low cost and the library supplies the computers, she said.

The Marin City library also has a program to help patrons learn how to use computers, according to Diana Lopez, a community library specialist with the library.

"We have 14 computers and they get a lot of use," Lopez said. "We have patrons who come in every day to use our computers. They don't have computers at home. This is their only access to the Internet.

"We also have people who come in with their laptops and tap into the free wifi," Lopez said.

"For the last 15 years we have had a training program here at the library called Webstars," said Etienne Douglas, who coordinates the program. "The program is modeled after the Explainer program at the Exploratorium.

"We hire high school age students and I train them how to use the computer programs and they in turn teach classes and help people who come into our branch use the computer. We teach basic computer information such as email, Internet, Facebook, Excel, Word," Douglas said.



A community library specialist at the South Novato branch of the Marin County Public Library emphasized the importance of the nine computers there to seniors and low-income patrons.

"This branch is located relatively close to a retirement community as well as in walking distance of Homeward Bound, an advocacy group that helps people get back on their feet after being out of work or homeless," said Library Specialist Nathan Kelly.

"Looking for work these days is very much a web-driven process. Applications are online and they expect you to fill them out online or email your resume in, and a lot of jobs are posted on Craigslist," Kelly said.

### **Smartphones aren't enough**

Morales mentioned that use of Pickleweed's computer lab has decreased as more residents acquire smartphones. However, this is not necessarily good news.

"Using a smartphone is a much different way of accessing the Internet than using a desktop or laptop," said Santa Clara University law professor Allen Hammond, who heads the Broadband Institute of California. Smartphone-only users were far less likely to go to community or government websites. While 61 percent of home-computer users got medical information or communicated online with their doctors, only 41 percent of smartphone-only users did so.

"Mobile phones ... are not enough to help poor Californians access many of the services they need to break out of poverty or close the education achievement gap," said Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, which partnered with Field on the poll.

McPeak called on federal regulators to press Internet providers to offer affordable broadband service for low-income customers who qualify, and she asked the Federal Communications Commission to consider making online access easier for all Americans as large telecommunication companies continue to merge. "If the authorities do this right," said McPeak, "they can help close the digital divide and, in turn, close the achievement divide in schools as well."