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What Happens When Libraries Stop Sharing Wi-Fi?

By [Sydney Johnson](#)  Jun 5

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Joe, known as Rebel (left), and Hollywood sit outside the Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial Branch of the San Francisco Public Library in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco on May 30, 2023. *(Beth LaBerge/KQED)*

Free Wi-Fi is a staple service of public libraries everywhere today. It's also become a fixture of local debate around how to address homelessness in one pocket of San Francisco.

"We are here, and they feel we don't deserve to have Wi-Fi because we're homeless. It's spiteful, is what it is," said Hollywood, who didn't provide his last name and lives unhoused in the area surrounding San Francisco's Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial Branch Library.

Hollywood is one of several unhoused residents who frequent the library and connect to the internet inside as well as outside after the building closes. But last August, **the branch cut off its Wi-Fi after hours**. It's the only public library branch in the city that discontinues Wi-Fi at night, and the policy continues today, despite a simultaneous citywide push to increase internet access for San Franciscans with lower incomes.

City and library officials said the change was made after neighbors in the area complained that the free Wi-Fi was part of what attracted unhoused people to the area and contributed to crime.

'For those who are trapped in poverty and have many other circumstances that make daily existence difficult, it is even more challenging if you're not connected to the internet.'

—Sunne Wright McPeak, CEO, California Emerging Technology Fund

Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, whose district includes the library branch, pushed neighbors' concerns forward and requested that the library cut off Wi-Fi in the evenings, **email records uncovered by Twitter user HDizz** show.

But curtailing Wi-Fi has been only one part of a larger effort to clear sidewalks and discourage unhoused people from staying there.

"Neighbors in that area have been dealing with repeated encampments, open-air drug sales and use, harassment of local businesses and all-around problematic situations going on for a decade at this point," said Mandelman. "It reached its nadir in the pandemic in 2020. There were encampments on both sides of the street, the sidewalk was impassable, and the

historic AIDS mural had been wildly defaced. Neighbors were being threatened. It was bad.”



Flowers grow at the entrance to the Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial Branch. *(Beth LaBerge/KQED)*

Nestled between the heart of the Castro and Mission Dolores Park, the Harvey Milk library branch is a gem within San Francisco’s public library system. At the entrance is a fireplace with stylish reading chairs, and beyond rows of books and LPs is a colorful kids’ section where the library hosts story times for toddlers and babies.

Michael Lambert, city librarian, recently wrote in an email to library staff addressing concerns raised about the Wi-Fi hours at the Harvey Milk branch.

He cited “individuals camping on the roof of the Branch, hacking into the Branch’s electrical power, and breaking into a small closet on the exterior perimeter of the building,”

among acts of vandalism that led to the change.

But email records obtained by HDizz show that those incidents dated back to as early as 2015, before the 2017 study on crime in the area was released, and that the library for several years pushed back against cutting off Wi-Fi at night.

Lambert wrote that the Harvey Milk branch was the first to bring on a fixed security officer, however, and that other branches have since replicated that practice. He added that the library has worked with the city's Recreation and Parks Department and Public Works to remove needles and other waste from the sidewalk area outside the library and improve landscaping.

Hollywood said he feels that people like him are being blamed for city-wide problems and punished for using a public service.

He also doesn't plan to leave the area he's called home base for several years, despite having a tougher time connecting online there at night.

"I know the librarians here. I talk to them all the time," Hollywood said. But the decision to discontinue Wi-Fi at night, he added, "doesn't help anyone. It only hurts people."

Digital divide

Even in high-tech San Francisco, internet access is uneven. Unlike some rural areas that struggle with connectivity, fiber-optic cables and infrastructure are available here. But for people with lower or no incomes, monthly internet plans don't always fit the budget.

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Nearly 124,000 San Francisco residents are eligible for discounted or free internet through the federal Affordable Connectivity Program, but only 26% of those eligible are enrolled, according to a press release from the city.

ShelterTech, a technology nonprofit, found that less than half of the people experiencing homelessness in the Bay Area have access to reliable internet. Often, public libraries are a primary source of internet access for them.

“For those who are trapped in poverty and have many other circumstances that make daily existence difficult, it is even more challenging if you’re not connected to the internet,” said Sunne Wright McPeak, CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund. “This is as much a problem if not more so today if you’re trying to navigate any system or get assistance, find shelter, find food and help without having the internet.”

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But anyone, regardless of their housing status, may use free Wi-Fi at libraries, even after hours. A common example, McPeak said, is when students without enough bandwidth at home study from cars in library parking lots.

“Throughout the pandemic, library parking lot Wi-Fi has provided a critical baseline connectivity. Among the uses, libraries reported that ‘patrons frequently used Wi-Fi in the parking lot to apply for unemployment benefits and complete job applications while we were closed to the public,’” reads a [March 2022 report from the American Library Association \(PDF\)](#).

A vast majority of libraries — 93% — kept their Wi-Fi on during the pandemic, even when their buildings were closed, according to the report.

While Harvey Milk is the only branch in San Francisco to not continue Wi-Fi at night, it's not the only library in the Bay Area to do so. San Bruno's public library also turns off its Wi-Fi network between the hours of 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., [citing "safety reasons" \(PDF\)](#).



A library patron uses a computer at the Eureka Valley/Harvey Milk Memorial Branch. *(Beth LaBerge/KQED)*

San Francisco officials recently announced a new push to get more lower-income households to sign up for free or discounted internet service. The Connect San Francisco effort started on May 11 and aims to increase enrollment in low-cost and free Wi-Fi services across the city.

Meanwhile, San Francisco library officials said they have received three direct emails and two public comments so far asking for the evening Wi-Fi hours to be turned back on. Residents have also started a [campaign to turn the hours back on](#).

“My priority is to try to continue to reduce the number of encampments in my district and this city, and get the right kind of care to a lot of sick people,” Mandelman said. “Twenty-four-hour Wi-Fi at Harvey Milk is not among my top priorities right now.”

Correlation conundrum

Pressure to cut off the Wi-Fi at the Harvey Milk branch goes back several years. In 2017, the San Francisco Public Library, or SFPL, studied Wi-Fi usage at the Harvey Milk branch and found no correlation with the number of security incidents.

“We have found no new findings since we issued that report,” said Kate Patterson, spokesperson for SFPL, in an email to KQED. “We can confirm that incidents such as vandalism and other criminal behavior at the Eureka Valley Branch Library remain low and consistent with previous years.”

Police, fire and other emergency calls in the area have decreased since the change was implemented in August, though. In the nine months prior to July 2022, 780 incidents were recorded on the library’s block, compared with 488 in the nine months after.

But that drop in emergency calls can’t be directly correlated to the Wi-Fi being shut off, the library’s study suggests.

Jackie Thornhill, legislative aide for Mandelman, pointed to a number of efforts their office has made to target the block near the library, including revitalizing a mural and helping some individuals sleeping there find permanent housing placements.





Rebel sits outside the library. He lives unhoused in the neighborhood and often uses the library Wi-Fi from his tablet. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

“Obviously the presence or lack of all night WiFi isn’t going to make a huge difference on its own, but it was one of many factors on this block that created an attractive location for persistent encampments, open drug use, and associated antisocial behavior,” Thornhill said in an email.

For several unhoused people who live in the area, and who use the library’s free Wi-Fi, losing the nighttime access hasn’t changed their living situation. Instead, it has made things like messaging with friends and family at night, playing games or even signing up for services more difficult, and the nights more isolating.

“My family is here, this is my group,” Joe, who goes by Rebel and did not provide his last name, said outside the library on a recent Tuesday.

Vicky, who also didn’t provide a last name, was visiting her friends Rebel and Hollywood on Tuesday. She recently moved inside after being unhoused for several years. But she frequently comes back to spend time with her friends in the area, who all know her and her dog, Chunks.

When asked for her thoughts on neighbors’ safety concerns, Vicky said, “At the end of the day, they are one paycheck from being where we are at.”

This story has been updated.

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