In the modern world, consistent internet access is often as vital as other utilities on which we’ve come to depend.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many to work or learn from home, underscored this more than ever. A majority of Americans now characterize their home internet as “essential.”

Despite this, many Hoosiers, especially low-income and rural residents, do not have it available to them. The pandemic put this “digital divide” into starker focus.

More than 58 percent of Ind. libraries teach classes on digital literacy and nearly 85 percent provide one-on-one digital literacy tutorials.

Fortunately, many communities can rely on their local public library, often the only consistent place to access the internet. “I have been advocating in my county for several years how relevant libraries are, and this pandemic proved it to me more than ever before,” Latisha Provo, Otterbein Public Library director, said.

More than 375 library branches expanded Wi-Fi into parking lots and other surrounding areas so residents could still get access.

“In the fall when one of the local schools opened via e-learning, we added picnic tables outside for additional seating, and that was used quite a bit,” Kelly Ehinger, Adams Public Library System director, said.

Libraries increased internet speed and hours of availability, with many going to round-the-clock Wi-Fi.

How Dire Is It?

A 2020 study from Ball State University’s Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) estimated approximately 68,000 to 84,000 school-age children did not have home internet access. The consequence, said CBER Director Michael Hicks, is an increased learning gap.

Another recent study from Purdue University’s Center for Regional Development also highlighted internet speed shortcomings. While the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines areas served by internet as having access to speeds of 25 megabits per second download and 3 megabits upload (25-3), the study pointed out that it is often not sufficient in households with multiple connected devices. A more robust 100-25 ratio is recommended.

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Going Above & Beyond

Libraries offer more than just access. In a survey of Indiana public libraries, ILF found more than 58 percent teach classes on digital literacy. Nearly 85 percent provide one-on-one digital literacy tutorials on topics such as internet privacy.

Half of libraries loan mobile hotspots and approximately 43 percent loan out computers, tablets, or similar devices. Kim Porter, director of the Batesville Public Library, says the hotspots are incredibly popular and always checked out in her area, where the hilly terrain creates spotty internet coverage.

“The funny thing about the hot spots is that they offer better coverage in some of these areas that can’t get access or wireless access from other providers,” she said. “I am glad we can help them out.”

Mobile hotspots provide a stopgap solution while broadband infrastructure is built in the unserved and underserved areas of the state. Broadband adoption and digital literacy are critical for these rural areas. Libraries, as one of the most trusted institutions, assist rural residents with understanding their options and learning topics like internet safety.

Public libraries aren’t the only kind of libraries helping their communities access the internet; school libraries also stepped up with devices and support when pandemic forced many students to learn from home.

Chad Heck, the school librarian for Pike Township Schools in Indianapolis, arranged a public-private partnership with a local business, TRIMEDX, to provide hundreds of computers to students. “We were able to get them to students quickly and directly,” he said. “It illustrates a great public-private partnership.”

The question of how to find the necessary resources to serve the whole community and stay current with technology is always front-of-mind for libraries.

“We are well-equipped for the moment, but...