



Stories from the frontline

Library branches across our community are open up to seven days a week, ten hours a day. During these hours, computers at each of our 17 locations are nearly always in use. Wait times can be more than an hour at busy locations. Those with library cards can log on, use the computer and access the Internet. To maximize access, computer time is limited to one hour each day per user. The library also offers a limited number of computer labs where people can get help and can work for more than one hour.

The Gates Challenge will help Multnomah County Library expand access to computers—and help from library staff and volunteers—during this challenging time. These are a handful of stories from library staff.

HOLLYWOOD LIBRARY: A lot of job applications and government programs require computer literacy. We've had people come to us who have difficulty even signing onto the library's system with their library card and don't have any idea what to do with the URLs they have scrawled on a piece of paper. It is heartbreaking to see people try to learn a complicated new skill under such pressure. Staff members are compassionate about hand-holding and give extra time whenever possible. We are often the only help available to them.

HILLSDALE LIBRARY: An elderly man, 81, who was laid off recently, is relying on the library to help him get back on his feet. We think he had a professional career before he came to the U.S. He can't survive on his Social Security, so he needs to apply for jobs online but has not used a computer before now. The single hour available to library patrons is just not enough for him. Fortunately, we have been able to offer him a computer lab with the assistance of a volunteer. He has taken several of our computer classes. His learning curve has been steep. He freezes when he encounters something that confuses him and he has difficulty retaining what he learns. But his livelihood depends on his ability to apply for jobs online, so he has stayed with it. He is always so polite and effusively appreciative of our help, both in the classes and when we are helping him on the computers individually. We are rooting for him in his job search!

ST. JOHNS: We're increasingly experiencing long lines of people waiting for the computers. We have a lot of people who need to fill out applications for jobs online—many companies will only accept online applications. I sat down to help one elderly woman who was applying for a housekeeping position at Macy's. The application was 23 pages long. For people with limited literacy and computer skills, an hour just isn't enough time to complete what they need to do. Computer labs where volunteers can help people one-on-one get through this challenging process are really important. We need more of them.

FAIRVIEW LIBRARY: People are also coming to find online debt-counseling. Last Saturday a woman was looking for help for herself and her husband. He is somewhat speech-impaired and needed assistance. She was trying to help him after she finished her session. Neither knew how to use a computer. I helped them set-up accounts at a debt-counseling site and helped her determine what she needs to pull together to be able to continue the process.

CENTRAL LIBRARY: I helped a patron one evening who had just finished her one hour of computer time. She came to me afterwards with some questions. She has just gotten out of prison where she was incarcerated for ten years for armed robbery and is trying to put her life back together. Getting a job is her first step. She said she didn't have much of a chance to learn about computers in prison, so her skills are very weak. She had been on the computer an hour, but didn't get very far in searching and applying for jobs since it takes her a long time to find what she's looking for. She is facing a huge challenge in this economic climate. I told her about our free computer classes and about the computer lab. I explained that a volunteer would be there to help her get started and answer basic questions. I encouraged her to give it a try. She was very grateful for the opportunity to get help.

NORTH PORTLAND LIBRARY: We are seeing more people who depend on the Internet to search for jobs, submit applications and take online tests. Some have had to suspend their home service but many have never had a computer at home. I worked with a woman who turned off her Internet service and now depends on library for access. She was disappointed that we closed for the holidays. She uses our public access, and the computer lab, as much as possible.

HOLLYWOOD LIBRARY: We worked with three people who were simultaneously referred by three different social service agencies. One spoke very little English. The second was elderly and had few computer skills. The third person was using his laptop and our free wi-fi service. The first two needed extensive assistance to navigate the forms they needed to fill out. They all ended up being in the library for several hours working very close to one another. After they were done, they left together. Perhaps they were going to network or just share stories.

NORTH PORTLAND LIBRARY: We have new people coming in all of the time these days. I help Spanish speakers at the North Portland branch who are looking for work—on the phone and in person at the information desk, at the computer lab and at individual computer workstations. A number of people bring in laptops so they can use our high-speed Internet service. It is not uncommon to see more than ten laptops in use at our small branch. I expect this will continue to increase.

NORTH PORTLAND LIBRARY: A “student” at our Cyberseniors lab came in knowing absolutely nothing about computers. He doesn’t see or hear particularly well but is patient, persistent and brave enough to take chances. First, he got to the point where he could log himself onto the lab computer. This was a pretty big deal. Then he was able to get on the web and eventually, he was sending and receiving photos via e-mail from his family. He felt very good about improving his life, taking control of his own learning and staying in touch with the people he loves.

CENTRAL LIBRARY: About two weeks ago, a couple with basic English skills, but no experience using computers, came in looking for help using the USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) website. Immigrants are directed to this site if they need to book an appointment, renew their green card or do any immigration related business. We were able to help them set-up an email account, which is required by USCIS, and start the process of renewing their green card.

FAIRVIEW LIBRARY: At our branch, people we have not seen before are coming in to do resumes, cover letters and job-searches. We have also had an increase in those who come to the library to print because their printers are broken or out of ink. The cartridges cost too much to be replaced.

ST. JOHNS LIBRARY: Around the holidays at the St. John’s branch, I helped a woman set up and use free email and messaging. In the course of guiding her, I learned that she had been laid off indefinitely the day before she was going to buy a plane ticket to visit her daughter and grandchildren just after Christmas. She didn’t feel she could risk spending the money. Her granddaughter had the great idea of using their family’s webcam, so she could at least see them. But she doesn’t have a computer. A neighbor suggested using the library, and though she can’t project her image to them, she can see—and hear—her family. She said it was the first time she’d been in a library since her own daughter was 10 or 12. She left beaming.

HOLLYWOOD LIBRARY: We have noticed a real increase in the “newly homeless.” These people are not like the people we often work with who are homeless. They are well-groomed and come to the desk asking questions that do not make it obvious that they are homeless or struggling to navigate a new lifestyle. A particular case around the holidays was really touching. A gentleman described having gone through a 7-month downhill slide. He had ended up living in his car. His sister sent him a DVD for a Christmas present: the first season of “Heroes,” his favorite show. He was hoping the library had a way to view it but we don’t. But we told him about a website that lets you view TV shows online for free. He comes in regularly for an hour of escape from his difficult situation.