Edwardsville Hub Anchors Illinois Library Technology Lending Initiative

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EDWARDSVILL*E* —America is online. Nine in ten US adults use the internet daily, and 41% report using it “almost constantly.” Nearly 80 percent of Americans have a high-speed internet (also called broadband) subscription at home. This isn’t just a consumer trend or screen addiction epidemic, though.



While correlation doesn't equal causation, higher-income households are more likely to report near-constant internet use and have high-speed access, while low-income households may rely on smartphones for home internet access. Remote work, web-based job applications and resources, and distance learning all show that web access is vital for socioeconomic mobility.

A significant portion of Illinoisans live on the wrong side of the digital divide, without actual broadband access. Microsoft finds that 39.3% of Illinoisans lack reliable broadband access that meets the FCC's high-speed standard. According to the US Census Bureau's 2024 five-year estimate, 28% of Illinoisans and nearly 43% of our rural residents lack a reliable home subscription to high-speed internet. A full 9% of those rural Illinoisans have no home internet at all. As a result, residents there also tend to lack digital literacy in addition to quality internet access.

Libraries are often the first place people turn for reliable internet and computers, but many libraries in these digital deserts don't have the technology and broadband to help patrons get up to speed. Thus, the digital divide persists. At least, for now.

Better internet access is pending. Since 2021, the Illinois Office of Broadband (IOB), a division of the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO), has been expanding broadband infrastructure in underserved areas through its Connect Illinois grant program. This project will continue through 2029.

That addresses half of the problem. The other half has just received its own solution.

As the infrastructure grows, the IOB has granted Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) $1 million to equip public libraries in digital deserts with better technology to serve patrons, at no cost.

IHLS, a state-sponsored library support organization, is using the grant to launch its Laptops for Libraries program, which equips underserved public libraries with Microsoft Office-enabled laptops, tablets, portable projectors, and video conferencing devices to power in-library computer classes, community meetings, hybrid events, and more.

Here's how it works: Libraries borrow the equipment as kits while IHLS owns and maintains it. When a library requests a kit, IHLS sends it to them via Illinois' existing interlibrary loan delivery service from the IHLS hub in Edwardsville. During the loan period, libraries keep the kits on-site for programs such as computer classes, one-on-one tech help, virtual speakers, or expanding access to computers when public terminals are full. Some libraries will keep these kits on a "permanent loan," meaning they'll stay on-site unless the equipment needs servicing. For the remaining borrowing libraries, the kits return to the IHLS Edwardsville hub the way they came.

Each part of the program has a purpose, IHLS IT Director Troy Brown explains. "We' ve made sure to maximize taxpayer dollars every step of the way, so we can provide the most benefit to our libraries and their patrons."

For example, by loaning the kits rather than giving them away, Illinois Heartland Library System lets libraries access the tools without the cost or confusion of upkeep.

Additionally, keeping the kits in the library allows more people to use them daily during the loan period. "Because the equipment supports programming rather than circulating collections, it expands what even the smallest rural library can offer its community," said Brown.

Finally, the Laptops for Libraries program's use of the existing infrastructure of Illinois' unique statewideinterlibrary loan delivery network translates to savings and greater access across the state. The Illinois State Library already funds this system, through which books, movies, and a myriad of other items circulate throughout Illinois. Adding the technology kits to the stream at no additional cost lets the program allocate funds to acquiring and maintaining more equipment, so more libraries have access.

"It's absolutely aligned with the purpose of the delivery system to share resources, and, for us, it just makes sense," said IHLS Executive Director Leslie Bednar. "Most of the

IHLS service area is rural and spread out, so we're especially committed to supporting equitable resource-sharing."

This commitment is evident in the Illinois Heartland Library System's Functional Five-Day Delivery service, which will deliver the equipment to its members across central and southern Illinois. Unlike volume-based delivery programs, IHLS offers delivery to its members five days a week, regardless of request volume. Just as patrons' requested books are carried to their libraries Monday through Friday, so will their libraries' laptops, projectors, and video conferencing devices.

The other half of the state will still have reliable access to these devices. IHLS' sister organization, Reaching Across Illinois Library System (RAILS), has agreed to also circulate the IHLS-owned kits through its own robust interlibrary loan delivery service at no cost to member libraries.

IHLS has created a dedicated website for the laptop grant program to guide libraries from either system through requesting and using their equipment. For libraries on tight budgets, this initiative turns a major capital expense into a ready-to-use resource and advances statewide digital equity.

The Laptops for Libraries program launched in October as half of **Bridging Illinois' Digital Divide (BIDD)**, a larger project by Illinois Heartland Library System. **Digital Basics**, the second half, funded by a grant from the Illinois State Library, will launch as IHLS Membership Team members begin offering "train-the-trainer" digital literacy classes to library staff.

Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS) is a dedicated partner to public, school, academic, and special libraries across southern and parts of central Illinois. As one of the state's two multi-type library systems, IHLS supports libraries with efficient interlibrary loan delivery services, seamless automated lending, robust e-resources, and consulting and continuing education in librarianship. By connecting diverse library communities across the region, IHLS empowers its members to provide their patrons with access to the information and services they need, when they need them. IHLS is funded through the Illinois State Library in accordance with the Illinois Library System Act.

IHLS has offices in Champaign, Carbondale, and Edwardsville, Ill.