

## Internet Access Services in Georgia's Public Libraries

Public Internet access is now an essential, foundational service of public libraries.

### The Impact of Internet & Public Access Computing Services on Patrons Lives' Across Georgia

First: These days even carpenters have to fill out applications online. So one day I notice a well-tanned middle aged man at a computer asking an elderly gentleman questions about whatever is on the screen. Being the computer geek I walk over and find that the younger man was asking where the period was on the keyboard because he had never used one. How to capitalize was the next question. As I pull up a chair, he hands me his Hand-written (in pencil) resume so I can type it out for him. What would have taken him all day to type out took me 5 minutes. And another 10 minutes we had his brand new (and only ever) resume online and registered with the company he wanted to apply for. About two weeks later I got a call from the security desk that a customer was "looking for the computer geek". It was the well-tanned man wanting to shake my hand again for helping him get the job.

Next: Our south branch had a customer that is taking online classes and needed to take an online, proctored test. This also involved a device to monitor him and take a fingerprint. The branch manager and I quickly figured out that a regular public computer would not be fair to him or the other customers. We setup the device and installed the software he needed (and it actually required that he have admin privileges) in one of the offices so that he would have privacy. He passes his test and assures us that there will be more so we just leave the device on the computer for him. He's so pleased with us that he hasn't yet stopped telling anyone who will listen, "how much our library cares about our education".

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This was a couple of years ago but...they passed a regulation that all holders of a CDL had to go online, watch this 90+ minute video about identifying terrorists on the highway, take & pass a test, get a certificate proving that they had done so, and then go in and renew their license. This is an area with a LOT of truck drivers! The big companies had their drivers do it in-house but we have a lot of independents, particularly those from the logging companies and one-man tractor operators. It was a nightmare! The requirements had them having to register online with an email address, watch the movie, take the test until they passed it, then (initially) have the certificate sent to their email address.

Well, half a day hadn't gone by before we realized there was a real problem – these were guys that were not computer literate, as a matter of fact they were completely illiterate! The number of them that could barely, if at all, READ was incredible. Especially the older, independents.

Now, they had only a couple of months to do this – go in with the certificate – and get their new license.

The first time we got our glimmer of the horror to come, was when more than one asked: “It says enter an email address. I have a post office box, will that do?”

I called the company doing the test and had them change the format so the certificate could be printed and not emailed. (They were flabbergasted that it was necessary!)

Then: we printed out a step by step, with screen shot/photos for the nonreader, instruction sheet that we would hand it out as they came in. (We still had to help some because the test had to be read to them...) One 70 year old man who owned and drove a logging truck said that he lived outside of Savannah and had heard on the CB radio in his truck that if he needed help with the test to go to the Vidalia library – “the girls had it all figured out.” This man couldn’t read and was the sole support of his bed-ridden wife and mentally handicapped adult child.

Most of them offered us money after it was done.

It was a way that our Internet was life changing or rather, supporting. Many of these people (mostly men) would have no longer been able to work, at least with a legal license.

You don’t have to put in that the library’s phone number was written on the bathroom wall of some truck stops!

Oh, and everyone on the staff (so we could do the info sheet) is now certified as a terrorist spotter on the highway.

Or, wonder how these people got a license in the first place if they couldn’t read...

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And then there is the fact that almost every single company now requires job applications to be done online – Ruby Tuesday requires it for their dishwashers for heaven’s sake! And they wonder why people can’t get work. Flash Foods requires an online application for their clerks – because the cash registers are computers and so are the controls for the gas pumps. What are we going to do with these people?

We did a “Computer Class for the Older Patron” here. We advertised it in the paper and on the radio. We had to call the radio and ask them not to broadcast it anymore because we had so many people calling. When we asked in the first class, what do you know about computers – several of them made the comment: I don’t even know how to turn one on. Truth! They didn’t. We had to show them how to find the on button! Most heard comment after the class: NOW I can get an email address and see my grandchildren’s photos!

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Rebecca was out of work, having been laid off suddenly from a job that she had for about 10 years. She was in her 30’s, had some computer skills, but no computer at home. And no money

to invest in one. For months, she came to the library and searched for jobs, worked on her resume, submitted her resume, checked on the progress of her job search. She refined her computer skills by using online tutorials and attending classes at the library. After she learned some “new tricks” she refined her resume and her cover letter. She learned new places to look for available jobs. She would share with the library’s circulation staff each time she was headed to an interview, and the day she got a job she came in and let the staff celebrate with her.

And...the rest of the story....a couple years later, she went to work at the offices for our local community foundation. She is an active library advocate, and it doesn’t hurt to have her on our side when applying for grants through the foundation for the library!”

-Senior citizens that want to renew their Alabama fishing license. They have to do it online and don’t have a computer at home and don’t understand how to navigate the site.

-People filing for bankruptcy that have to go through the Hummingbird Credit Counseling site. (Have you tried navigating that thing?) Try explaining it to someone that has never used a keyboard before. And, no, they don’t have computers at home.

-People applying for jobs at Home Depot, Wal-Mart, grocery stores, K-Mart, Dollar General, Family Dollar, etc., etc. Most don’t have a computer and most have never touched a keyboard. And they have to set up an e-mail and don’t understand what an e-mail is.

Roni L. Tewksbury, Director  
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A Patron came into the library very excited and in desperate need of a scanner. Why? Because she just found out that she got a job and she needed to scan and send documents to her new employer. She told the staff member who was showing her the scanner computer that she has been using the library’s facilities for over a year to apply for jobs! While she was scanning her documents, she received a call from an unknown number. It turns out, she was offered another job!

Jacqueline Elsner  
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We had a homeless gentleman use the Internet daily to look for and apply for jobs. He is now employed!

Karen Odom  
Director  
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On any given day, you can see people using our computers for job applications, online education, and government services. Many times a job seeker will come in with absolutely no knowledge of computers-even fast food places and grocery stores now have all-online hiring processes. In those cases, the staff spends a lot of time guiding and teaching the patron. We have patrons here who have no computer access at home or work who have completed most, if not all, of their entire college degree online at the library.

I could go on all day about this topic! The computer access here in our library means so much to those in our community that have no other way to access the Internet. And just imagine trying to negotiate modern life without it! Jobs, applications, benefits, products and services- so many of these things are accessed through computers now.

Holly Phillips, Director  
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We've helped numerous patrons fill out job applications, fill out government forms, or renew benefits online. More than once the patron has been completely unfamiliar with computers and very intimidated by having to use them. So not only does the library provide the access, we also provide friendly, approachable expertise in using the technology.

Clare Barton  
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I have one student working on her Accounting associate degree through Albany Tech (about 90 miles away). She lives here in Quitman. We have helped her by letting her load her Quick Books CD on one of our computer stations so that she doesn't have to drive an hour and 1/2 each way to complete her homework. She is here just about every day. Every time I walk past the computer area to get back to my office -she thanks me again.

We have a number of Valdosta State and Valdosta Tech students working on assignments here at least 2 -or 3 days a week if not daily. Both schools are about 20 miles and 20 minutes away from Quitman so being able to work at the library is a huge help. Contrary to what many would believe, there are a lot of folks in rural Georgia without home computers so the library is the only option for most folks.

We are helping folks with job applications every day (many folks - usually at least one person - sometimes -6 or 7 folks). We also help people complete food stamp and child support updates,

print pay stubs, print their W-2's, and airline tickets, folks come to us for legal forms because the court house tells them to get the forms off the Southern Judicial site. Online courses, studies, and proctoring for students who need to complete tests online... We also scan paper documents to send to email or save on jump drives. We also provide basic computer instruction and help folks set up email accounts. We hope to again offer more formal computer training in the fall. Folks access Galileo and use these resources for schoolwork and genealogy research. Some folks bring in instructional CD's to learn how to use their new camera, or view a CD with X-rays. We actually have folks come in to watch movies, TV shows or play games. Elementary school students come in and use a site called "Study Island." Word processing and publishing software are big hits for people wanting to design their own invitations, birth announcements and church bulletins. Other folks come in to print coupons and shop online.

We have had Spanish-speaking patrons come in and use online translators. We will be getting a new early literacy station for children to assist with early reading and learning. Some areas in Brooks County still do not have Internet access so folks have to come to the library to connect online. I can name four people who got jobs after completing applications online at the library within the past year (and these are just the folks who have come back to thank us for helping them get the jobs).

There is no Social Security or Labor Department office in Quitman and Family and Children Services send folks to us for computer access. Paper forms and applications are becoming non-existent -every thing is done online now - so folks have to have access and for many, many people that means the library.

Laura Harrison

**BROOKS COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY**

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I teach basic computer classes here at the Madison County Library. One of the patrons that took my classes was able to complete an online job application for Athens Regional Medical Center. All employment applications for the hospital must be done online. After taking my classes Ted was able and confident enough in himself to fill out the online application. Ted came to see me after he was hired and said without the classes and the use of our computers he would have never gotten on at Athens Regional Medical Center. Now he has a full time job with benefits.

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I work in the lab at Northwest Georgia Regional Library, and we pretty regularly see people who come in just before their interviews to grab a last-minute copy of their resumes. We live in an area where many of the people don't have computers at home, so we get teens that come in to do their homework and I recently had one patron who was doing work for an online class. She had to create a resume and I was able to direct her to a site that helped her format it and she was able to submit her assignment on time.

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At our East Athens Resource Center, a mother of twin girls came in and told the manager that she was really worried that her daughters were not going to be able to pass the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade CRCT exams. We had access to practice exams and set the girls up on our computers to try the practice tests and they did abysmally.

The Manager put out the call for tutors, got a couple of volunteers from the university, and they worked with the girls, using the computerized testing throughout to test. The twins passed the exam on all parts.

The beauty of this story is that the computers and the library and the volunteers all worked together to help advance the literacy and test phobias that the twins had. AND Mom recognized that we're there to help! Good news: the girls are now in high school and still come!

East Athens Resource Center is designed as an after-school center for inner city children who cannot visit the main library on a regular basis; we offer afterschool homework help, specialized African American materials, enrichment programming and computer assistance.

We have long offered ESL classes and computer literacy programs at our Pinewoods Biblioteca, a branch library located in the middle of a Hispanic neighborhood of about 2000 people. The library has been open since 2004 and is a partnership with the Lyndon House Arts Center and the Library. This summer, we are offering two six-week family literacy and education programs for parents, children and other community residents in collaboration with the UGA Department of Language and Literacy. We have a couple of targets, but the goal is to educate everyone about safe use of computers, how to best use the library's computers [we have 16 available], and how to interpret the materials found. While not a "flashy" project, we know it is yielding results as more people are learning how to use our equipment in meaningful ways. I will add that buildings all over this mobile home park and the surrounding area are covered in graffiti and have been the subject of crime, but the library has never had the first instance of any problem and I think it's b/c the people really value what we've offered them and appreciate our efforts. People from all over Athens come to use that facility and it's a great example of community building.

We have a partnership with the Regional Development Commission to use their Mobile Computer Labs to offer classes in remote areas of our region. Three days a week, we offer classes in various locations, teaching basic computer skills, digital camera, digital devices such as Nook, Kindle, iPad, and others. Using a basic curriculum for basic skills, we've seen 339 people since the service began in February, and as skills have improved, we expect to offer other classes depending on the needs identified. I want to expand the stops to include assisted living residents and a church group that has requested help, and expect that it's rapidly going to outgrow our abilities to staff the lab! The results are that more people have a better background for computer use; I can't say they've accomplished a huge amount because they are mostly beginners who have to start with "this is called a mouse..."

One of my commissioners, every time I see her, says I can't believe you had over 300,000 people using computers last year. That's a fact they remember. This morning, we had 55 people lined up waiting for us to open the doors so they could get to our "fastest" computers. Believe me, they know! And our classes for various topics are always full with waiting lists. And finally, shortly after opening, the Mayor came over to record a memory program for our digital collection and as she came up the stairs, she saw our 100 second floor computers totally full and asked, "Are you having a class or something?" Well, no, it's like this from the time we open until we close! Computers are a way of life here. (By the way, we don't require a library card to access them. We do have a time management program, but we believe all computers should be barrier free and your history with PINES should not be a limitation; this is probably very different from most libraries. All of our children's computers are heavily filtered, but we wanted children who come over from school to be able to use them freely as well. Young adults are slightly less filtered, but still available to all.)

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When I first started working here, I noticed a man and his son who would come in almost every day. They were regulars through that summer. When school started, the man came alone during the day. He would bring the son in the evening sometimes.

Suddenly, I quit seeing them. A few months went by. I was working a weekend shift and they came in.

"We've missed y'all," I told him.

"Yeah," he said. "I finally got a job at Target. If it hadn't been for this library, I don't know what I would have done. I came in here every day and looked online and applied for everything I could find. I finally got hired."

I go out of my way now to shop at that particular Target because I love running into that guy.

Eddie Whitlock  
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