The recession has driven new users to libraries. It's taken a toll, and it's inspired new capacity
By Charles London

Most mornings, Terry Ann Lawler arrives at the Palo Verde Library, a branch of Phoenix Public Library, to find a line of over 50 adults waiting for the building to open. She and her staff want to help them all search for benefits or employment or just figure out how to use the computer, but they simply lack the time. This scene repeats itself at many libraries across the country. There is a surging need for services, placing high demands on staff time just as staff time and resources are shrinking. The increased demand coupled with decreased resources puts stress on those on the front lines and on administrators, many of whom are themselves suffering the same financial anxieties as their patrons.

Nationwide, public library circulation increased six percent in 2009, according to LJ’s budget survey (see p. 44), with patrons borrowing more free books and media than ever. Yet, hit by the recession and rising unemployment, libraries have faced massive budget cuts, with hiring freezes, reduced hours, and layoffs becoming the norm. This paradox strains the system, and the strain is adversely affecting libraries from Connecticut to California.

Major media outlets from the New York Times to the Today Show have trumpeted the spike in library use, especially as job services have become a priority, but they miss the story of how public libraries deliver services in spite of budget cuts and the impact on those who deliver them. Nevertheless, for some library systems, for some librarians, this crisis has been an opportunity. On a personal level, many library employees have been reminded of how essential their work is, and, on the systemic level, some institutions are finding ways to rise to the current crisis, through collaboration, outreach, and innovation.

High-stakes interactions
Though the unemployed have long come to the public library for help, the implications of this boom in use for library staff and administration are just becoming clear. The challenges are
ATTENDING TO THEIR NEEDS (clockwise from top left) Finding employment is the first order of business for many Ohioans. Columbus Metropolitan Library created job help centers in 20 branches, where staffers assist with online applications and résumé writing. California’s Palo Verde Library patrons access its job search web sites; North Carolina took the issue statewide with the state library’s inaugural Job Search Workshop to help librarians cope; San Francisco PL brought in social worker Leah Esguerra “as a resource...when users are in need.”

Institutional and emotional, and training is needed to handle the new roles that librarians find themselves playing. Cheryl Sheehan at the Westfall Branch of the San Antonio Public Library provides a telling example: “A lot of people were coming in to the branch to escape the heat this summer,” she explains. One young family was spending all day at the library and drew her attention. She learned that the parents and their infant were living in their car in the nearby Walmart parking lot. “The husband had lost his job, and they were new to the area,” says Sheehan. “They didn’t know what resources were available.” Library staff guided the family to social services, which provided temporary housing and diapers. The librarians helped the father apply for jobs, and, a few weeks later, he told them he had found one. “Through the library,” Sheehan adds, “the family met another young couple, the man also out of work. They had begun to forge an important social connection when they were feeling very isolated and alone.”

Far from thinking that such interventions are outside her job description, Sheehan says that this is why she became a librarian in the first place. “This moment is an opportunity for us as a profession,” she says. “The library has become a refuge of last resort. The crisis is bringing people back [to the library] who haven’t been [here] since childhood.”

Sheehan’s story is typical of interactions occurring every day in public libraries. “The staff has trouble knowing when to draw the line,” says Niki Ehlers, director of the Humboldt Public Library, Hartford Public Library, CT. “Fortunately, I work with a wonderful group of people, so we laugh a lot, vent to one another about work and difficult patrons, and try to take the long view while we wait out the recession and battered budgets.”

Kenton Oliver, executive director of the Stark County District Library, Canton, OH, which was one of five libraries to win the 2009 National Medal for Museum and Library Service, observed that strategic planning is the key to balancing institutional survival with community needs. “Whether times are good or times are bad,” Oliver says, “you need to consider why you are doing what you are doing. What is the value to your community? The budget challenges have given us a chance to stand back and see what is important and what makes a difference.”

Sharing solutions
When Linda Carlisle, North Carolina’s Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources, read a few of the articles about how public libraries were being inundated with people looking for work, she wanted to know if there was something more the state library could do. It was clear that half-hour computer sessions were not enough to help someone find and apply for a job, especially if they didn’t know how to use a computer. And library staff are often ill equipped to handle the influx of need. North Carolina State Librarian Mary Boone asked Jennifer Pratt, the chief of library development, for ideas.
"I thought we could put together a workshop on helping public libraries cope with people who are somewhere in the unemployment cycle and take it to all the public libraries in the state," Pratt says. "Public librarians are not workforce development experts; they're not unemployment experts, but the public is coming to us."

To create a useful resource for all public librarians in the state, she partnered with the Department of Commerce and the Employment Security Commission. "I was amazed that professional workforce development people hadn't thought of libraries as partners before," Pratt adds. "They do now."

The state library selected nine North Carolina public library locations that were in areas with high unemployment rates and then convened daylong workshops for roughly 300 public librarians. The workshops included panel discussions by state and local workforce development staff. The participants joined to create a wiki that curated available resources.

"We came up with the concept of the job-loss cycle," Pratt explains. "People who come to the library are in different places in the cycle, from just having lost jobs to looking for a new job or retraining to applying or going for interviews. One of our first challenges was teaching front-line stuff to recognize where people are in the cycle so they can direct them to the right resources. The wiki answers question like, 'How do I get Social Security and unemployment benefits when I just lost my job?'; 'How do I find vacant positions?'; and 'How do I make a résumé or write a cover letter?'"

**Beyond state borders**

Since the resource came online, librarians across the state have used it in different ways. Davidson County Public Library joined Davidsonworks.org, a public-private workforce development partnership. Charlotte is getting ready to open a new job center. Durham Public Library held a job fair.

"We're seeing a lot of innovation," says Pratt. "By learning what others are doing, we are more apt to be active...this is a service we can provide without any more resources...because we certainly haven't got any more resources to do it."

Working with WebJunction and a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), the State Library of North Carolina is taking its model to a national audience with Project Compass, a one-year initiative to support public libraries' efforts to meet the needs of the unemployed and to share ideas and best practices at a much lower cost than traveling to conferences around the country.

"We hear about libraries opening half an hour earlier for résumé help, or putting teen volunteers with people who need help on the computer," says Pratt. "We want people to share these ideas. We certainly didn't reach everyone we needed with our first workshop, and we are working on what the next steps should be. How do we address communities where there are no jobs, where the jobs aren't coming back? Do we start to focus on small businesses and entrepreneurship? We're grappling with these questions now. The good part [of this crisis] is that no one is saying 'This isn't my job.'"

In Iowa, the state library and Iowa Workforce Development (IWD) have initiated a similar program. The partnership kicked off with closed-circuit TV presentations by State Librarian Mary Wegner and IWD director Elisabeth Buck in which two public librarians share their experiences on serving unemployed Iowans. The entire session is available for download through the state library web site.

Internet and communication technology is allowing libraries to do much more with much less. Even in Reading, PA, where three branches were scheduled to be closed but now may remain open with reduced hours, librarians are turning to the Internet for resources. Reference librarian Carl Long used the free web development tools available through Google to build a web site with direct links to job-help resources and local employer job application sites. He calls it Berks Online Job Search.

"The amount of shareware, freeware, and open source software available these days is literally astounding," Long says. "[The key is to] be proactive, take the initiative, and go for it. If you don't have the materials you need, find a free way to do it, find volunteers, find grants, find a way or make it. You'd be amazed at the amount of free help and advice people will offer you if you simply ask them."

In addition to creating digital resources, some libraries are creating dedicated job centers and holding job fairs to meet the needs of the unemployed.

Last January, the New York Public Library, working with Vault.com, hosted a job fair for the public including 'speed coaching' sessions from Vault.com career professionals.

**Responding on the fly**

"The library has always been a place where people have come for career assistance," says Steven Hipes, team leader in Columbus Metropolitan Library's (CML) Science, Business, and News Division, OH. "As the economy started to tank, we noticed we were getting more and more people coming in who didn't have the technical skills to conduct a modern job hunt, meaning online applications, email correspondence, even just getting on some of the sites. That was taking a lot of staff time."

In January 2009, CML opened job help centers at each of its 20 branches, which have since gotten over 25,000 visitors. The job help centers consist of a dedicated computer for job search and a cart of relevant books. CML had just absorbed an $8.5 million budget reduction. It couldn't spend a lot of money, but librarians knew that the community needed these services.

"The main expense is staff time," Hipes says. "We had to do all this on next to no budget."

Once the centers were up and running, other systems in central Ohio took notice. They were facing the same demands, and the librarians and administrators started talking to one another. As a result, five central Ohio systems launched Job Help
Day to highlight the programs and resources available. By partnering with charitable organizations, local companies, workforce development agencies, and volunteer HR specialists, they were able to put the event together quickly and inexpensively. As Hipes says, “We really flew by the seat of our pants.”

The September 24 Job Help Day attracted over 1000 people to 28 locations throughout the Greater Columbus area and generated a flurry of media attention. Yet the project had other, less tangible benefits. “One letter [from an attendee] explained how the program helped her with the logistics of searching for a job but, even more importantly, how it gave her an emotional boost,” Hipes says. “She saw that there were other people in the same boat.”

Hipes notes that this recession is different from any previous downturn, largely because technology makes collaboration easier at the same time that it limits human contact during the job and benefit application process. “You apply for a job, and maybe you get an email back. The human connection is just not there,” he says. “Everyone at the Job Help Day seemed really excited to find that human connection that had been missing.”

The day also helped the staff. Hipes says he heard over and over from co-workers how good it felt when they were helping customers with a résumé or an online search for the first time. “It’s that kick that we need, and I think this is now a key part of our core mission.”

Patrons in crisis
The economic crisis can make service interactions emotional. West Hartford’s Eisenberg notes that “more patrons are exhibiting increased stress due to the economic downturn and unemployment.”

In San Francisco, the library has taken a one-of-a-kind step to address the needs of patrons in crisis. SFPL is not facing as severe a financial collapse as other city agencies, thanks to a forward-thinking ballot initiative that guarantees a portion of property tax revenue to the library and was renewed for 15 years in 2007, right before the economic downturn. The San Francisco Department of Public Health, however, does not have such budget protection, and its services have been dramatically reduced. As the economic crisis worsened, the two agencies collaborated to place a professional social worker in the main library downtown. Leah Esguerra is on the payroll of the public library and handles referrals to social services for the chronically homeless, mentally ill, and those struggling with substance abuse who find their way to the library. She has also worked with a number of the “newly homeless, who have never dealt with the shelter system before.” She sees herself as a resource for librarians to consult when library users are in need.

As in Cheryl Sheehan’s branch in San Antonio, SFPL has seen an increase in new library users who have lost their jobs and come to the city looking for work. “They end up homeless and find their way to the main library, and we’re here to connect them to resources. They see the library as a safe place, but they may not be ready to relate to city services,” says Esguerra. “I consult with the librarians, and we decide together if we’ll approach. We have fliers posted, and we make sure that people are aware of what help is available. In most cases, if people want help, they will ask.”

A two-way street
Libraries everywhere, from small rural ones to large urban systems, need a little help, too. Those libraries that are meeting or exceeding their community’s expectations even in the face of declining resources are the ones that are using available tools, including technology, to discover partners, ideas, and support. They are integrating library services into the larger framework of community services.

On November 18, American Library Association president Camila Alire issued a statement on the closure of the public libraries in Colton, CA, which read in part: “Libraries are the key to getting Americans back on their feet by serving the needs of a growing number of job seekers.” The statement included a call for help from the citizens of Colton. Since then, the library has reopened with fewer hours, but the local response reinforces how central libraries have become to the notion of community recovery.

As the public looks to libraries not only for the resources they offer but for that “human connection,” it is important to remember the human burdens that librarians shoulder, too. There has perhaps never been a better time to lean on one another and to find partners who can help carry the individual and the institutional load libraries are struggling to bear.