

Bree Drapa - Director, Westford Public Library

I wrote this in my facilities testimony and was told to bring it up again in the discussion on technology:

“One other “building” area I would like to talk about is our digital infrastructure. I know that technology is another part of this testimony, but I see our digital infrastructure suffering from some of the same problems as our physical infrastructure. It is not accessible to all our patrons. It needs regular maintenance. It suffers from looking dated and out of touch, just like carpet and furniture. I also have the same problems with being able to “fix” it - I lack the TIME, MONEY, and EXPERTISE. I would like to see digital infrastructure included as part of the library’s facilities.”

In addition to our digital library, The Westford Public Library has had many technology triumphs and tribulations.

Triumphs:

With a grant from PLA and some help from VTRural Development, we were able to expand the library’s wifi signal throughout the entire Westford Common. We were able to do this in April 2020 – greatly aiding our community as they navigated working from home, social distancing, telemedicine and on-line schooling. We saw the need when our small, three space parking lot was jammed with people trying to use our free, 24/7, high speed internet. We have had consistent usage since then, averaging almost 1000 unique users per month. Our town only has a population of 2000!

We also used our ARPA TECH grant to allow printing from anywhere on our network, including the parking lot. Due to changes we made years ago, we allow patrons to print up to ten pages for free per day. Printing is very popular at tax time and for boarding passes and Amazon return labels. Patrons have been pleased they can now print from their own devices, allowing for greater privacy than using a public access terminal. (which are also new – thank you ARPA!)

I’ve gotten very good at trouble shooting Libby over the phone with patrons and helping my older patrons in person. They’ve gotten very good too – go them!

Tribulations:

Keeping up with technology! Whether it is ereaders for Libby or troubleshooting why the computer isn’t working, it is a struggle to be the tech hub for the town with no formal training. Good thing I have a growth mindset and am willing to try stuff!

It is also hard to assess what is next in tech and what is being phased out. I am no longer buying audiobooks on CD, relying solely on Libby for that part of our collection. I think DVDs might be the next thing to go, but they are still pretty popular with certain segments of our library population. But, my budget does not allow for physical and streaming movies, so I feel I am missing out on a segment that would use streaming.

Knowing what to buy takes so much time! Sometimes I have more money than time!

Sometimes I do not have the answers and that stinks. It can be frustrating when a community member is relying on you to print or help them access very important documents (taxes, real estate transactions, travel documents, etc.) and you just can't.

I think the pandemic has made more and more people aware of the role of technology in our lives and the digital divide that libraries have been talking about for years.

Solutions:

Not sure there is one, but it would be nice if Josh, as the tech consultant, got to travel around to libraries like the other consultants did pre-covid. It would also be nice to have a tech help line like some school districts or large companies have.