Answering Tough Questions

Why should I lend support to my local library? Isn't that the Government's responsibility?

Everyone should support their local library. Only a small portion of public library funding (0.5%) comes from the federal government, yet public libraries have important social roles and responsibilities to American society, especially in tough economic times.

Libraries are part of the solution when a community is struggling economically. From free access to books and online resources for families to library business centers that help support entrepreneurship and retraining, libraries support lifelong learning.

Hasn't library use declined due to the Internet?

No, not at all, Americans go to school, public and academic libraries 50 percent more often than they go to the movies. Library use continues to climb. Sixty-three percent of adults in the U.S. have public library cards.

Nationally, the average user takes out more than seven books a year . . . but users turn to their libraries for more than books: to borrow DVDs, to learn new computer skills, to conduct job searches, and to participate in the activities of local and community organizations.

Also, libraries offer the expertise of librarians in helping teach people how to use the Internet and find the information they need quickly. While Google can give you 50,000 responses to your inquiry, your librarian can help you find the one answer you need.

How are libraries helping get American's back on their feet?

As more and more Americans look for employment, libraries are helping level the playing field for job seekers. Only 44 percent of the top 100 U.S. retailers accept in-store paper applications last year - down from 68 percent in 2004. Library staff reported that many patrons were turning to library computers and Internet access to find work, apply for jobs online, type resumes and cover letters and open email accounts.

Many libraries throughout the nation design and offer programs tailored to meet local community economic needs, providing residents with guidance (including sessions with career advisers), training and workshops in resume writing and interviewing, job-search resources, and connections with outside agencies that offer training and job placement.

How are libraries saving American's money?

During times of economic downturn, libraries see more users because people cut back on entertainment. People are able to rent movies for free and check out CDs, use databases and download audio books.

Is there a library funding crisis?

Yes, when the economy is down, library use is up. Unfortunately, at the same time, tight city and state budgets are closing library doors and reducing access when it's needed most. Increased foreclosures rates and fewer home sales are pulling down local property-tax revenues, which many public library systems depend on to pay for significant portions of their budgets.

The National League of Cities released its annual report on local fiscal conditions, finding that a 3.6 percent decline in property tax revenues is likely to affect city budgets until 2010. The report also cited an expected decline in sales tax receipts and income tax revenues.

To make up for budget shortfalls, libraries are forced to cut back on hours or close neighborhood

branches.

The ALA understands that shrinking budgets demand a lot of hard choices be made. When it comes time to make those decisions, we just ask elected officials and the public to think about how many people turn to us for job searches, free Internet access, health care information and for free resources for education and career development.

Are libraries a good investment?

Libraries are among the most effective of all public services, serving more than 2/3 of the public with less than 2 percent of all tax dollars.

Public libraries are a bargain. Nationally, the average cost to the taxpayer for access to this wide range of public-library resources is $31 a year, about the cost of one hardcover book.

Examples:
- Seattle, WA – Visits to the new public library have increased King County tourism. Increased tourism of one - percent yields $1 billion in new economic activity statewide over 25 years.

- In Maryland, 90 percent of the state's citizens say public libraries are "a good investment." More than 40 percent of the citizens think of public libraries as an economic anchor, potentially attracting "good businesses" to their area.

- In Florida, for every dollar of public support spent on public libraries, income or wages increases by $12.66, and returned $6.54 for every dollar invested.

- In South Carolina, the total direct and indirect return on investment for every $1 spent on the state's public libraries by South Carolina state and local governments is $4.48 - nearly 350 percent.

Is the American Library Association asking for stimulus funding?

Yes, America's public libraries will need Congress to provide stimulus funding to continue to assist America's working families during this economic crisis.

Funding for libraries included in an economic stimulus package could help ensure our libraries are able to sustain current activities and even expand critical efforts to help people from every walk of life deal with our current economic situation.

Public libraries need an infusion of funding to continue these vital services in communities across the nation. Policymakers must re-think federal support to public libraries in these tough economic times.

How will stimulus funding be allocated?

While it is up to Congress to decide how the funding will be used and distributed, ALA is suggesting that the funding be used to keep libraries open during the hours when people need them most as well as to keep libraries staffed with employees who can help the public learn how to use the Internet to look for work by aiding them with searching and applying for jobs online, building their resumes, and developing the skills needed to a get a 21st century job.

Also, the ALA is suggesting that Congress distribute the funding following the LSTA formula, which gives money from the federal treasury to IMLS, which then distributes the money to states starting with a base amount per state then distributes the remaining funding to states based on their populations.