

PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

Project Justification

The North Riverside Public Library's Digital Inclusion Project will upgrade the library's technology offerings by creating a mobile computer lab, upgrading the library's wireless infrastructure, and hiring staff to provide the technology training that has become crucial for those seeking jobs as well as simply what has become necessary to manage one's daily life in our increasingly Internet-dependent age.

The village of North Riverside has a population of 6,672. Public computer usage is a core component of the service that we provide. Unconnected residents in the Village of North Riverside have relied upon our library for more than a decade for their broadband access. Last year, we tallied 6,521 individual public computer use sessions, despite only possessing 7 public computers. In addition, roughly half of our public computer usage comes from non-residents, who live in neighboring communities (either bordering on North Riverside or within a 4-mile radius) with even less broadband access. According to Pew research, 89% of American adults in 2018 used the internet, which contrasts starkly with the lack of broadband access seen in these statistics from the US Census:

- North Riverside: 20.9% of households lack broadband access
- Berwyn: Up to 23.8% of households lack broadband access (in the most limited tract)
- Broadview: 28% of households lack broadband access
- Cicero: Up to 33.8% of households lack broadband access (in the most limited tract)
- Lyons: Up to 27.5% of households lack broadband access (in the most limited tract)
- Maywood: Up to 37.7% of households lack broadband access (in the most limited tract)

We believe that expanding the number of available public computers will dramatically increase access in our area and add tangible value to the lives of our patrons and these other nearby residents.

Access is only half of the equation, however. It is increasingly clear that fluency in using computers and the Internet has become a necessity for almost everyone in 2019. Everything from basic communication to paying bills to renewing your license plate sticker is now reliant on using the Internet. And, in the problem we most frequently observe at our library, one literally cannot apply for most jobs without being able to use the Internet. For this reason, technology training will be critical. The target audiences for this project will be low-income and minority patrons, specifically Hispanics, African-Americans, and senior citizens, all groups that are disproportionately affected by a lack of access to technology and technology training.

Community	Hispanic	African-American	Seniors (Over 65)
North Riverside	23.8%	6.5%	20.3%

Berwyn	59.4%	6.4%	9.4%
Broadview	8.6%	76.2%	12.5%
Cicero	86.6%	3.8%	5.9%
Lyons	38.3%	4.2%	12.2%
Maywood	20.8%	74.4%	11.7%

Project Work Plan

There are three main components of our plan: 1) hiring technology assistants to provide technology training, 2) creating a mobile computer lab, and 3) upgrading the library's wireless infrastructure.

We plan to hire two part-time Technology Assistants, who will fulfill three primary purposes:

- 1) Conducting ongoing computer classes, in areas such as basic computer skills, internet browsing and email, Microsoft Office applications, resume creation, using online job boards and applying to jobs online.
- 2) Presenting informational programs on technology-related topics, such as using online marketplaces, Internet privacy, dealing with "fake news," 3D printing, and more.
- 3) Staffing the library's public computer area during peak usage times, to provide help to patrons as needed.

Next, we would like to purchase 8 laptop computers and a charging station, which will more than double the amount of public computers available for patrons to use within the library. Moreover, this "mobile computer lab" will be able to be reserved by library staff and quickly set up for computer classes.

Lastly, the library's wireless infrastructure is in dire need of an upgrade. The library currently has four wireless access points throughout the building, which consistently only provide between 4 and 9 MBPS download speeds, and leave numerous "dead zones" in the library. Our library consists of two floors. At this time, wireless connectivity has degraded to the point that wi-fi is almost nonexistent on our lower floor. This problem is compounded by local cellular providers also having poor building penetration in our area. Several times a day, we observe patrons who must go outside the building to try to get a cell signal to look at an email on their smartphone. Once we are lending out laptops for patrons to use in the library, reliable wi-fi will be even more critical. This situation has also made it very difficult to conduct technology training or programs in our large Meeting Room typically used for programs, due to the poor connectivity. All of our wireless access points need to be replaced.

This project will be managed by Michael Bradley, our Public Services Manager, and overseen by Library Director Natalie Starosta. All hardware installations for wi-fi can be handled by the library's IT contractor, Versatile Computer Solutions, Inc., at no additional charge. Once funding is received, we anticipate a rapid rollout for the project. We believe that we can have all new equipment up and running within the first month, and two Technology assistants hired and trained within 6 to 8 weeks.

We see no real downsides to this project. We can see in our usage numbers how badly we need more computers, and the need for more regular computer classes is apparent. Due to our current limitations, we can only offer training to inquiring patrons on a one-on-one basis. We have conducted over 60 of these one-on-one sessions in the current fiscal year alone, so we know that it would benefit our patrons greatly to have regular, ongoing classes. We also hear from our patrons daily (and loudly!) about how bad our wi-fi is. This project will ameliorate all of these problems and greatly enhance our ability to serve the people who need us most.

Project Outcomes

With the staffing opportunities afforded by this grant, we believe that we can substantially increase the number of patrons who receive technology training at the library, over the two-year course of the project. A baseline for success for us would be to attain a yearly attendance of 200 people at technology classes and programs, and a 50% increase in the amount of public computer usage at our library. We currently track all of our technology help sessions, all individual computer use sessions, all technology-related questions that we answer, and we take attendance at all technology-related library programs. We will be excited to report the usage of all elements of our Digital Inclusion program.

It is also hoped that the value demonstrated by having dedicated Technology staff will allow us to build this staffing component into our own budget after the funding period ends. In addition, the benefits of upgrading the library's technology will benefit the people of our village and surrounding communities for years to come, even after the project's end.

