Libraries serve the community
through digital literacy programs

Public libraries are where people come to enhance their education, develop digital literacy, and build skills to thrive academically, professionally, and socially. They serve as a fourth place beyond home, school, and work, where residents of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds can congregate and build community. With a wide range of populations including students, seniors, veterans, and immigrants, libraries bring together diverse communities and provide access to services and programs for those who need them.

In the heart of Houston, Texas, the Harris County Public Library (HCPL) serves approximately 4.7 million people in the greater Houston area. It's a giant space, encompassing 1,700 square miles and is one of the most diverse areas in the state with 145 spoken languages. There are 26 HCPL branches located throughout the county that serve as community pillars and incubators of innovation to provide the necessary tools that inspire creativity, expand education, and promote digital citizenship.

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Bridging the digital divide

Libraries offer a wide assortment of digital materials for those living in areas where high-speed home internet is difficult to access. It's an unfortunate reality for too many community members that there's a divide in digital literacy and access to reliable, high-speed internet. In Harris County, almost 200,000 households don't have home internet.

To encourage technology literacy and help close the digital divide, Harris County Public Library partnered with T-Mobile for Education to create HCPL Connected, a program that brings the community access to technology tools and educational platforms by offering 5G hotspots
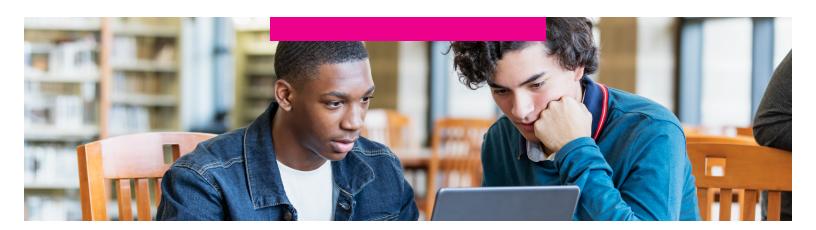

and borrowed laptops. Included in the program is the Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF), which is designed to increase broadband internet access in the community. Schools and libraries across the country were invited to submit proposals for the grants, of which the Harris County Public Library received approximately $30 million, the largest awarded to a library system.

The program is intended to supply digital resources that bolster community engagement, fuel innovation, and expand educational opportunities. "We hope that the HCPL Connected participants think of us as their online library home. We believe this program serves as a gateway to all of the wonderful benefits that citizens can reap from their library without even walking through the door of it", said Megan LeMaster, Division Director of Research and Development at Harris County Public Library.

The digital divide represents a gap between the connected and unconnected. As technology continues to advance, that gap becomes wider and more challenging for vulnerable populations to catch up. That's one of the reasons why the HCPL Connected program is so important—it provides access to reliable internet service that can benefit all residents of Harris County.

Community members of every stripe are uplifted when libraries provide resources that support career readiness, workforce development, telehealth services, employment transition, STEM programs, and financial and digital literacy—all of which collectively expand educational opportunities for learners of any age.

1 Texas Tribune   2 T-Mobile Investors

Expanding education through reliable connectivity

When it comes to education, T-Mobile understands that libraries play a crucial role in making knowledge accessible, empowering a mindset for discovery, and enriching lives of community members. We know that access to digital classes can be a useful method for sharpening skills in a difficult subject or learning and exploring a new skill. Through our partnership with HCPL, we're connecting residents to digital platforms, including a way for senior citizens to get online. Because according to the Pew Research Center, only 64% of adults over 65 have a home internet connection. For many people, a regular trip to the local library is the easiest way to catch up on emails, access telehealth services, or pay bills online.

Public libraries are community-learning centers that supply students, teachers, and families with more than just access to books, research material, and a place to work, study, and collaborate. They also act as a catalyst in coordinating educational initiatives with schools and community organizations, providing ESL programs and internet access for those who have trouble getting online at home. In fact, libraries are one of the most reliable sources for access to high-speed internet.

In recent years, demand for online learning and access to digital classrooms has increased exponentially. And there's a plethora of benefits to e-learning that offer significant improvements over traditional learning methods.

Access to online education enables learners of every level to set their own pace for learning and allows for a better balance of schoolwork and study time. Because learning happens inside and outside of the classroom, a more holistic approach to education is one where students can use educational apps when homework gets tough. Giving students access to digital tools that can supplement traditional teaching and provide opportunity to practice is a differentiator. Not only will digital platforms empower students to learn and absorb materials independently, but technology is also giving valuable hours back to educators who must prep curricula, grade papers, and spend more one-on-one time with students who need extra support. Teachers can even create chat rooms that empower students to collaborate after hours.

It's clear that public libraries are a resource that can supplement traditional learning environments, hone critical thinking skills, and promote creative development.

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Cultivating creativity for all

Creativity is the foundation in educational development. Harnessing creativity not only optimizes academic success, but is critical for social-emotional development, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Establishing a creative mindset enables original thought and enhances one's ability to see solutions where others don't. It's a fundamental skill that can be developed at any age. Creativity is essential for preparing students—and society—for scholastic success and job readiness. Especially in a rapidly changing, digital-first world, cultivating creative development is one of the most impactful investments to close the opportunity gap and bridge the digital divide.

Creativity comes from communal work inspired by the ideas and creations of everyday citizens. It's only natural for libraries to include tools and resources that promote creative thought in the minds of their community. Public libraries have always been a place to get creative juices flowing. Now students and families are seeing the library as a creative place to connect, learn, grow, and discover.

Continued learning at the library

Libraries reflect the community they serve. Changing the perception of what a public library can offer is a core value for the Harris County Public Library. The HCPL Connected program levels the playing field by giving people access to digital learning experiences.

For Megan LeMaster, success for the program happens when more people have access to technology tools and classes to help them excel how they need.

"Building people's digital literacy skills, upscaling them so they're able to fully participate in new waves of technology, I see that as our role in filling the gap that exists in the digital divide. Our role and HCPL Connected are vitally important to the community and every effort will be made to ensure that this program continues to get funded and expands to bridge the digital divide many more citizens"

- Megan LeMaster, Research and Development Director at Harris County Public Library

T-Mobile for Education is committed to providing reliable connectivity for public libraries and the communities they serve. Discover how T-Mobile can be a trusted partner to build a mobile hotspot and device checkout program for your patrons. **Visit T-Mobile.com/libraries to get started today.**

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