

# Turning Texas TEAL

Texas libraries joined forces to combat the digital divide. It's working.

By Lynne Margolis ■ *Texas State Library and Archives Commission*

In a world so saturated with technology that even greeting cards have computer chips, digital literacy is no longer a luxury. It's an imperative, and any community that hopes to survive and thrive has to offer its residents the empowerment that computer and Internet access provide.

Public libraries have always been on the forefront of the crusade for literacy, and digital literacy is no different. In Texas, libraries are stepping to the front lines of a battle that may seem to have overwhelming odds. The statistics are grim. With a population of 25 million, Texas has

- The lowest high-school graduation rate in the nation
- An unemployment rate hovering at 8.2 percent
- A poverty rate of 17.2 percent
- About 8 million people for whom English is not the first language.

The state's most disadvantaged residents need reliable Internet access and digital literacy training – and the enhanced educational and economic opportunities they provide – before the digital divide that separates them from more productive, prosperous and ultimately, fulfilling lives becomes an insurmountable chasm. As community anchor institutions and the only sources of free Internet access for 67 percent of Texans, libraries have been doing their best to help patrons build computer skills.

However, high hopes and good intentions aren't always sufficient, as anyone who's tried to move the proverbial rubber tree plant knows.

When the National Telecommunications and Information Administration turned down Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) applications from Texas in the first round,

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*Librarians saw themselves as providing computer access and reference help. In fact, they also impart educational and job skills.*

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officials of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) realized that collaboration needed to be a much stronger component of any second-round applications. So TSLAC stepped in to lead the charge. In the process, it recognized an opportunity to create innovative partnerships and pilot programs and practices that can be scaled for Texas communities of any size.

## YES, LIBRARIES DO THAT

Chris Jowaisas, who led the team that formulated the Technology Expertise, Access and Learning for all Texans (TEAL) plan for TSLAC, recalls that one of his initial challenges was helping libraries and their governing bodies realize they could meet the criteria to apply for BTOP grants.

The main focus of second-round BTOP funding is training, so participants had to commit to providing disadvantaged and underserved populations with educational and job skills development, English as a second language (ESL) classes and other life-enhancing digital pursuits.

“The thing that we heard from libraries again and again [was], ‘Well,

we don't do any of that,’” Jowaisas says. “But when we talked to them, we found out they did. They helped people set up email accounts. They helped people create and upload their résumés. They would help them fill out online applications. But in the librarians' minds, that wasn't helping someone find a job; it wasn't teaching them how to use the computer. ... But that's what a lot of those librarians do. They sit with somebody who's never used a mouse or never used a computer before, and they walk them through, introducing them to the Internet, teaching them keyboarding skills, teaching them how to use a word-processing program and the Web and actually go and submit a résumé.”

Most librarians saw those services as simply providing basic computer access or reference help, explains Jowaisas, now the Texas Library Association's information technology specialist. They didn't regard what they were doing as aiding workforce development. Jowaisas had to convince them that what libraries considered business as usual – no big deal – in fact contributed to improved state-wide employment and that BTOP grant money could enhance their efforts.

## About the Author

*Lynne Margolis is the acting communications officer for the Texas State Library and Archives Commission. You can reach her at 512-463-5514 or by email at [lmargolis@tsl.state.tx.us](mailto:lmargolis@tsl.state.tx.us).*

# BROADBAND ADOPTION

Ultimately, 38 libraries and library systems, ranging from the vast Houston Public Library System, which serves more than 2 million users, to the tiny Valley Mills Public Library, which serves just under 1,400, partnered with TSLAC to apply for funding. In August 2010, they secured a grant of nearly \$8 million, which they augmented with \$3.7 million in matching funds.

Each partner had to overcome another, even bigger hurdle: raising matching funds for at least 20 percent of its grant request. In most cases, municipalities provided funding; in others, library auxiliaries pitched in. Houston obtained funds from the city, from Houston Community College and from the Houston Area Library Automation Network. The Library at Cedar Creek Lake in Seven Points even got individual donations for equipment.

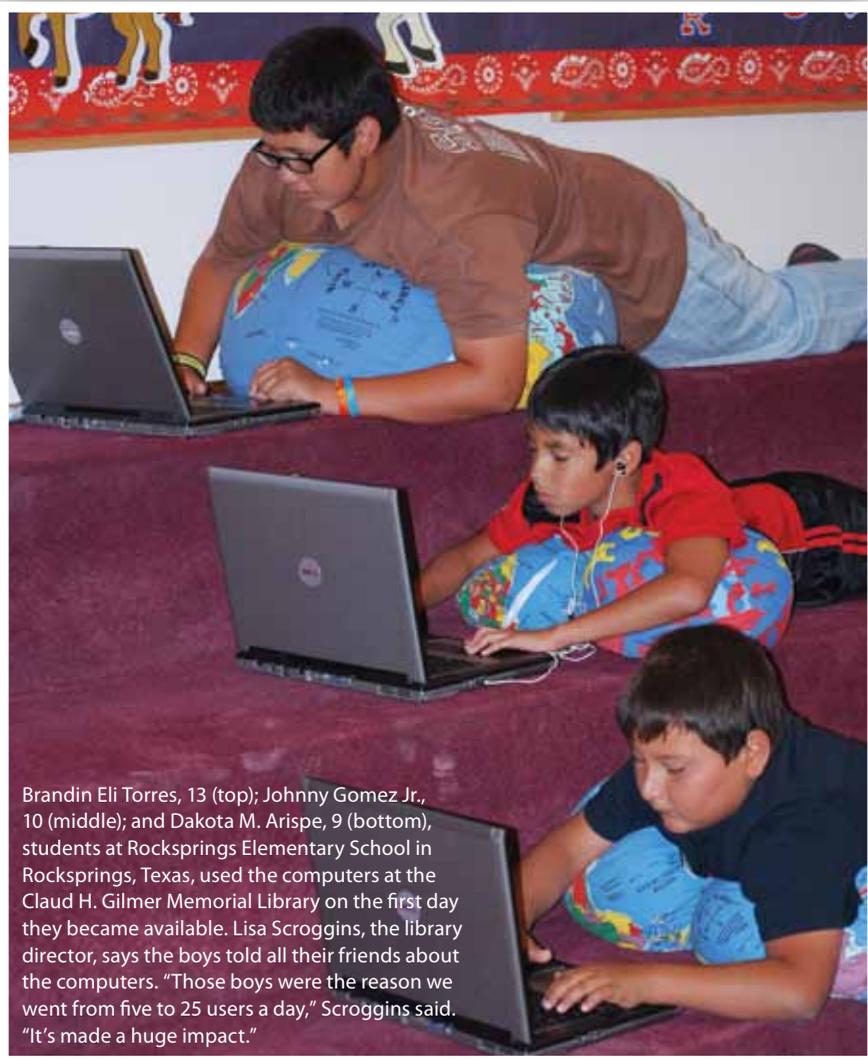
San Antonio made sure every city department that possibly could be impacted took advantage of the opportunity, according to Jowaisas. City agencies, including public safety departments, piggybacked on the library's already-established infrastructure and a wireless mesh network that operated the city's traffic light system.

## HOUSTON: READY FOR TAKEOFF

In Houston, a \$3.7 million BTOP grant, supplemented by \$2.2 million from program partners, is funding 23 new public computing centers and upgrades at 60 existing centers in 17 high-need neighborhoods; 60 part-time and five full-time workers, including trainers, technicians and a project manager; and up to 10 new computer workstations, plus portable broadband devices, per site.

Among those sites, in addition to Houston Public and Houston Community College library branches, are recreational and health centers, none of which has offered computer access in the past. Of the 60 existing centers, 26 will get broadband access for the first time.

"It just makes sense to include city facilities because they're located in the communities where they're needed," says Nicole H. Robinson, director of Houston's Digital Inclusion Initiative, which oversees the program. "If there is



Brandin Eli Torres, 13 (top); Johnny Gomez Jr., 10 (middle); and Dakota M. Arispe, 9 (bottom), students at Rocksprings Elementary School in Rocksprings, Texas, used the computers at the Claud H. Gilmer Memorial Library on the first day they became available. Lisa Scroggins, the library director, says the boys told all their friends about the computers. "Those boys were the reason we went from five to 25 users a day," Scroggins said. "It's made a huge impact."

no library, people are near the community center or the multiservice center. ... We are all serving the same people. We're trying to empower our community, and through the implementation of this initiative, we're empowering the organizations that are working with the community as well. We all have an end goal of improving the quality of life. It makes sense to have each of those types of entities at the table."

Houston expects to reach 296,000 new users with its new and upgraded computing centers and training programs, a 23 percent increase over current usage.

Statewide, BTOP/TEAL grant recipients aim to create, expand or upgrade more than 150 public-access computing sites, add more than 2,000 public computer workstations and create more than

100 jobs. The project also includes three mobile computer labs that can reach any library in Texas in need of computing and training resources.

"These mobile computer labs will extend our training reach into every corner of Texas," says Peggy D. Rudd, TSLAC's director and state librarian. "No community will be too remote or isolated to benefit."

## EARLY MISSIONS ACCOMPLISHED

A new study by the Institute of Museum and Library Services defies the conventional wisdom that only those who can't afford computers and home Internet access use library computers. The study found that one-third of all Americans used a library computer in 2009 and that 86 percent of library computer users said they had regular access to an

# BROADBAND ADOPTION



Clockwise from left: Tonya MacIntyre; Rigoberto Carrizales, 8; his mother, Naomi Carrizales; Tyronza Jones; and Josh Hargrave visit the Smithville Public Library often to use the computers for email, employment and social networking, games and school-related activities.

Internet-connected computer elsewhere. Some come to get assistance; others seek a quiet place to work or a faster connection; still others give priority on the home computer to their kids' school assignments. Some like the social environment of the library more than the isolation of working at home.

Judy Bergeron, director of the Smithville Public Library, reports that students who participate in distance-learning classes go to libraries to take tests. Librarians, it turns out, make sharp exam proctors.

With five new and six upgraded computers, the Smithville library could retire two computers, one of them from 1997 – Flintstones-era in computer years. In addition, it is sending three still-useful

units to a food pantry, a parent resource center and a new library/community center in a subsidized housing complex.

Smithville has hired part-time instructors for ESL classes and for Tech Tip Tuesdays, an open-lab setup where people ask questions and seek advice.

Bergeron happily notes one great side effect of the increased traffic. “When they come in to use the computers,” she says, “they leave with books in their hands.”

Computer literacy trainer Diane Berger, a BTOP/TEAL hire at Sam Fore Jr. Wilson County Public Library in Floresville, has a 60-person waiting list for computer classes. Her beginners' classes have included several senior citizens who admitted they didn't even know how to turn on a computer.

“At least three of those ladies – in their 60s and 70s – have actually gone out and purchased their own computers,” she reports proudly.

Singletary Memorial Library in Rusk replaced four old computers that frequently froze up and added two new computers. “The community is taking us more seriously now,” says library representative Cristin Ross. “[They're saying.] ‘Wow, you can actually go to the library and get stuff done!’”

## MOVING OBSTACLES

Patrons of the Atlanta Public Library in northeastern Texas haven't been quite so lucky. The library's DSL line is supposed to provide 3 to 6 Mbps, but library director Jackie Icenhower reports they often slow down to .09 Mbps – and that's with wireless access disabled.

She has a mobile lab with 20 new laptops, a projector and screen all ready to go, but she laments, “I can't start classes when I don't know if we're going to have [Internet] access.”

The library's carrier, she says, has been unresponsive, and she has not been able to get a serious estimate for the cost of laying more fiber. With 30-minute limits on use of public-access computers and frequent complaints from laptop-owning patrons about unavailable wireless connections, she says, “At this point, I would be willing to buy a horse if it would carry the signal.”

Jowaisas says that's another reason partnerships are important: leverage. If a lone librarian can't get a utility's attention, the mayor might be able to. (Icenhower says Atlanta's city manager, whose mother was a librarian, waited in line to use a library computer when he applied for his job.)

“You have to develop a relationship,” Jowaisas says. “That's not necessarily something that librarians always feel comfortable with, but they need to reach out to somebody who does feel comfortable who can do it for them because, ultimately, it's going to benefit a lot of people.”

He says librarians frequently tell him stories like Berger's about patrons who get comfortable with computers and then purchase their own, along with home Internet subscriptions. So library

## TEAL PROJECT RESOURCES

**Grant coordinator's blog:** [www.tsl.state.tx.us/teal](http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/teal)

**Archive of best-practices webinars:**  
[www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/workshops/webinars/archived.html](http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/workshops/webinars/archived.html)

**Statewide broadband inventory map:**  
[ftp://ftp.connectedtx.org/CTXPublic/Connected\\_Texas\\_Mapping/Statewide\\_Maps/TX\\_Statewide\\_Broadband.pdf](ftp://ftp.connectedtx.org/CTXPublic/Connected_Texas_Mapping/Statewide_Maps/TX_Statewide_Broadband.pdf)

**TSLAC broadband stimulus legislative report:** [www.tsl.state.tx.us/pubs/docs/TLSAC-LegReport\\_BroadbandStimulus-2011.pdf](http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/pubs/docs/TLSAC-LegReport_BroadbandStimulus-2011.pdf)

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access should be regarded by providers as a marketing tool, and bad service isn't good marketing.

Jowaisas suggests the library tell its provider, "We're going to put signs up everywhere: *Service provided by [XYZ].*" Well, if that service is crappy, that's not what anybody wants."

## THE DIGITAL CONTINUUM

Don Means of Digital Village Associates, who initiated the three-year-old Fiber to the Library campaign, regards Atlanta's situation as illustrative of a bigger problem.

"The digital divide issue is one that is perplexing because we have adopted the notion that it's bridgeable if we just get every place connected," Means says. "That's laudable but shortsighted."

In some ways, he says, governments actually widen the divide by creating applications that are available only online. Because governments must ensure access to all public services, they place the burden on libraries to provide that access – and to provide help applying for government services and jobs – just as their budgets are being slashed dramatically. TSLAC, for example, lost 64 percent of its state funding for 2012 and 2013, forcing layoffs and a systemwide reorganization. It also lost state funding for a grant program that provided public libraries throughout Texas with discretionary funds.

"Public officials should be held accountable and called to task," he says. "We would say that cutting library budgets, staff and technology budgets is the very last thing to do when you're trying to shrink public services generally. It's the last line of service."

Means says the rapidly accelerating "technology tsunami" is challenging every institution and individual to keep up. "Forget the digital divide," he says. "It's a continuum where some people are very far ahead and others are very far behind."

Faced with absorbing more and more public-service responsibilities, municipalities, according to Means, should use libraries as a focal point for civic engagement and a "natural community laboratory" for their information needs.

*"Library access should be regarded by providers as a marketing tool, and bad service isn't good marketing."*

## SPREADING THE WORD (AND THE SKILLS)

Libraries' collaboration in the TEAL project extends to sharing knowledge and information about subjects that range from writing training curricula to deciding which software to buy.

Denise Hendlmyer, TSLAC's BTOP public computer center grant coordinator, conducts skill-building webinars for library trainers; they're open to anyone, not just grant partners.

"The webinars have a huge impact," she says. "They're free, archived and accessible – and they're reaching out even beyond subrecipients." Forty percent of the nearly 700 participants in the 10 webinars she's conducted so far have been from out of state, Hendlmyer reports. That doesn't include viewers who watched archived webinars.

Subjects have included workforce development training, outreach to seniors and disability awareness. Another webinar will involve outreach to Hispanic populations.

Jeannie Lively, adult and young adult services librarian for the Salado Public Library System, knows a little something about that.

When Salado began offering free classes, she noticed that members of the small city's Hispanic community were not showing up. She also knew many of them would benefit enormously from digital literacy training. So she went to two churches and offered to take the training to them. Using seven laptops the library purchased to loan to patrons, she teaches everything from the most basic computer functions to ESL and citizenship test preparation.

"We just weren't getting a big response in the library, so I approached these two locations, and they did the work," Lively says. "They went out into their communities and told people about

it, and we had pretty good response. I've found that they're comfortable at the locations we go to. They're not always that comfortable at the library. I think it's because we're more of an 'official' location. And that makes a difference."

That kind of outreach is essential to the project's success, Hendlmyer says. She thinks Lively's approach undoubtedly will work in other communities. It's the sort of information Hendlmyer eagerly shares on her blog, which she updates regularly.

## ARE WE THERE YET?

"The BTOP opportunity is an important catalyst for a community to prepare not only for adoption but for sustainability," says Mark McElroy, chief strategy officer for Connected Nation, the nonprofit research and advocacy group charged with mapping the nation's connectivity. "We want to help communities address this challenge by planning for the ongoing evolutionary nature of technology."

Don Means notes that goal number four of the Federal Communications Commission's national broadband plan calls for anchor institutions in every community to have "affordable access to at least 1 Gbps broadband service."

"That goal will be achieved when the last library gets that connection," he says. "I don't see a point where whatever we have is fast enough. Any program that is sober about addressing technology application and adoption has to factor in this reality that this is going to be a continual cycle."

But according to Rudd, "No matter how much technology changes, no matter how fast transmission of all those bits and bytes becomes, librarians will continue to use the tools at their disposal to do what they have always done – linking people to materials and information that improve lives and communities." ♦