

**OVERVIEW:** LA County Library’s *Laptop & Hotspot Loans* include a Chromebook and mobile hotspot, and can be borrowed for 3 weeks, mobilizing access to technology.

**CHALLENGE:** In 2019, more than 1 in 10 Californians did not have a computing device at home, and access was especially limited in certain communities such as low-income households. LA County’s digital divide reflects the state’s statistics, with several parts of the county having the lowest broadband subscription rates in the state. Among certain LA County communities, roughly 40% of households are without internet. Even in areas with high rates of connection, more than 10% of residents do not have highspeed broadband, and roughly 1-in-4 households with school-aged children lack access to both broadband internet and a computing device. The pandemic has also widened the digital divide among households with multiple simultaneous users, requiring additional bandwidth for reliable access. When all 85 LA County Library locations had to close to the public due to the pandemic, those who typically relied on the Library to use a computer or connect to the internet were left without this vital resource. The Library needed to find a way to make technology accessible outside its walls.

**SOLUTION:** At the beginning of 2020, the Library was in the process of implementing entirely self-service shared laptop kiosks for in-library use and acquired a fleet of Chromebook laptops. With libraries closed to the public, and several Chromebooks going unused, the Library repurposed these laptops along with wireless hotspots, mice, and laptop bags already in stock to create *Laptop & Hotspot Loan* kits that could immediately be borrowed through the Library’s Sidewalk Service. Chromebooks are ideal since they are cloud-based, giving users the ability to download apps from the Chrome Web Store and use what they need. When the laptop is returned, the computer is wiped back to its original state for the next user to tailor to their needs. Because of limited stock on-hand at the time and the new workflow process, 60 take-home kits were piloted in September 2020 at 10 libraries in communities with the lowest household internet subscription rates. Reserved for cardholders 18 and up, kits can be borrowed for 3 weeks—just like a book—with the opportunity to renew up to 3 times if there are no holds. Within the first week, all 60 kits were borrowed, with over 300 holds placed, indicating a greater need than that inventory could meet. Seeing the success of the pilot, the Library worked with the LA County Board of

Supervisors to expand the program and procure more devices to provide digital support to individuals and communities disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. With their support, and additional funding sources, the Library was able to increase stock to 560 kits available to borrow at all open locations and Bookmobiles.

**INNOVATION:** While many libraries nationwide offered hotspot loans and various tech checkouts when stay-at-home orders were issued, LA County Library was among the first in the LA area to offer a take-home kit that includes a laptop along with the mobile hotspot, a pairing that fully enables those who may not have access to one or both essential technologies. By only requiring a library card and implementing *Laptop & Hotspot Loans* with the same familiar process as checking out a book, the program removes cumbersome and complicated barriers that other tech checkouts may have and is easily accessible to customers. Repurposing existing in-house inventory allowed the Library to maximize the impact of these technology investments and create a cost-effective solution to help bridge the digital divide. These efforts have also laid the groundwork for more technology checkout programs in the future, with the goal to bring connectivity to as many in need as possible.

**RESULTS:** Since launch, *Laptop & Hotspot Loans* have circulated over 3,390 times. Survey results show that 35% of participants use the kit to stay connected to information, 17% for school, 20% to apply for work, and 28% for other reasons such as finding housing, using telehealth services, completing their taxes, and skill building. Survey comments show how imperative these services have been with customers remarking how it “saved them” because they do not have reliable computer or internet access.

**REPLICABILITY:** The Library leveraged resources available in-house for the pilot of the project, keeping costs minimal. Staff resources were utilized for prepping materials, developing workflow, and marketing to communities with low connectivity rates. Expansion of the program was supported by the LA County Board of Supervisors. Similar programs can be tailored for different budgets, capacities, and customer needs.

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** The program website is [LACountyLibrary.org/laptop](https://LACountyLibrary.org/laptop) and see additional media [here](#).