

**OVERVIEW:** LA County Library's *Work Ready* workforce development program provides virtual career skill-building and learning support alongside technological resources—laptop and hotspot loans.

**CHALLENGE:** COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the economy, creating severe downturns, and a record 20% unemployment rate in LA County, the highest in the state. In addition, many areas of LA County which are disproportionately and negatively impacted by the digital divide have also seen some of the most substantial job losses. With several parts of LA County having the lowest broadband subscription rates in the state, the pandemic has also widened the digital divide among households with multiple simultaneous users, requiring additional bandwidth and devices for reliable access. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, an unemployed person who has internet at home will be employed 7 weeks faster and earn more than one who does not. In a job market which is increasingly moving online, those without a device or reliable internet have limited access to the tools and resources necessary to find employment and reach their career goals.

**SOLUTION:** LA County Library developed *Work Ready*, a workforce development program designed for customers looking to build job skills or find new career opportunities, but lacking the device or internet connection to make it happen. The program helps those individuals—especially in communities impacted by high unemployment and with low internet connectivity—by providing technological resources and learning support, enabling them to successfully reenter the workforce. Starting in December 2020, customers could enroll in a 6-week session, with additional sessions continuing throughout 2021. Participants have access to weekly virtual events covering topics ranging from writing cover letters and identifying high growth careers, to workers' rights and entrepreneurship. Up to 200 participants can register and borrow a laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot kit from the Library for the duration of each session. The kit also includes supporting materials (books, a planner, a notebook, and headphones). *Laptop & Hotspot* kit lending at select library locations began earlier in 2020, when staff pivoted quickly to fully enable those negatively impacted by the digital divide. Additional funding allowed the Library to expand the program and earmark 200 kits for *Work Ready*.

**INNOVATION:** After seeing staggering unemployment numbers, the Library worked quickly to provide resources to customers experiencing job losses or seeking new career opportunities. The Library recognized that providing

just virtual workshops and digital information for those looking for a new job in this economy was not enough, and that an integral part of workforce and professional development includes access to both computer devices and broadband internet at the same time. This holistic approach allows customers who historically have experienced barriers to technology resources to become competitive in the workforce, affording them greater opportunities to reach their fullest potential. With each session, staff evaluate surveys and data to make improvements to the following session, with workshops addressing new and diverse topics such as finding a job as an older adult or featuring women entrepreneurs, and marketing campaigns that adapt to reach different communities, such as direct household mailers targeting those with limited internet access. *Work Ready* leverages and strengthens partnerships with subject matter experts and organizations such as LA County Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services and U.S.VETS.

**RESULTS:** To date, *Work Ready* kits have had over 500 circulations, and over 2,200 people have attended a live workshop or viewed pre-recorded content. Participants have expressed how eye-opening the workshops have been and their appreciation for the caliber of presenters, useful information, and job search motivation. Having the volume of laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot kits available ensures continuous connectivity, time to build a resume, and apply to several jobs. One customer that checked out a laptop and hotspot kit communicated to staff that it enabled them to secure job interviews, eventually leading to a job offer.

**REPLICABILITY:** Initial funding was dedicated to workshop presenters, resource materials, and marketing.

However, many resource and workshop offerings were either developed and hosted by staff, or conducted through no-cost partnerships. The program can be tailored to different budget levels based on community needs and the current job market, and paired with any available technology resources.

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** The program website is [LACountyLibrary.org/work-ready](https://LACountyLibrary.org/work-ready). Watch recordings of live events and videos on our [Work & Career YouTube Playlist](#). Press coverage and collateral can be viewed [here](#).