

ACORN Stakeholder Development Report



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Executive Summary

California's rural counties, vital to its economy, face escalating challenges ranging from public health to economic development. In response, county leaders and stakeholders have fostered collaborations with various county departments and local nonprofits, leveraging libraries as central hubs for diverse community services. The Stakeholder Development Framework, a result of the Advocating for California's Ongoing Rural Needs (ACORN) Initiative in Sutter, Colusa and Placer counties, underscores the importance of such partnerships, emphasizing the need for increased programmatic investment and improved digital broadband infrastructure to enhance interdepartmental collaboration and expand services across counties. This expanded resourcing of County Libraries is crucial in addressing ongoing budget pressures **and** integrating essential innovations in rural areas to impact education, healthcare, public safety and small businesses.

As California moves forward in its post-pandemic recovery under the weight of persistent inflation, the role of rural county libraries is increasingly significant. Rural libraries serve as vital spaces for community engagement, providing educational, recreational, and essential services, including mental health support and public safety initiatives. Despite limited resources, librarians and staff members consistently sustain and innovate their programming and services and are primed for further investment. The Stakeholder Development Framework aims to maximize libraries' roles as anchor institutions with high performing teams, connecting key resources and bridging the gap between current needs and future solutions, ensuring opportunity for rural Californians. As California prepares to allocate its funding as part of the federal funding from the Digital Equity Act¹ there is an immediate opportunity to secure the critical capital necessary for ongoing success.

¹ <https://www.internetforall.gov/program/state-digital-equity-capacity-grant-program>

Key Findings

Collaboration

Rural libraries provide a platform for County leaders and departments to share resources and develop innovations in services for the community. This is driven by the diversity of the communities served by libraries and the trust the public has in them.

Creativity

Libraries have demonstrated exceptional agility in responding to the ongoing economic pressures while integrating new programming and technology that meets the needs of constituents.

Community

The strength of rural communities is reflected in rural libraries where people find what they need to enrich and invest in the places they live, learn and work.

Consistency

Rural libraries need sustained funding to meet their mission and core County funding is essential to ensure equitable access for every community member. The ability of libraries to attract external funding should never compromise funding from the general fund of rural counties.

Connectivity

Rural communities are essential to California's present and future. Libraries have historically provided the place and people to serve all community members with resources to choose their own paths. The rise of technology has many benefits which require libraries to protect communities' access to them.

Introduction

The true strength of California is embodied in its rural counties, which are the backbone of the state's vital agricultural economy, central to both the state and its people. These counties are as complex as the state itself, with some bordering high-density urban hubs and others nestled in remote landscapes. Each has its own distinctive history and characteristics, yet they share a set of challenges that impact the opportunities available to their residents. These issues range from public health to economic development and are often generational in nature.

County leaders and community stakeholders have done extraordinarily creative work to respond to these interconnected challenges by building collaborations across departments and with nonprofit organizations to deliver programming and resources to frontline communities. This has resulted in rural counties emerging as a unique laboratory for developing solutions to some of the most acute challenges confronting California. At the center of this dynamic are the talented staff at the county libraries and the platform they provide for services that are as diverse as the people they serve.

As this project continues to evolve, stakeholders have major opportunities to invest in scaling and adapting the solutions being forged inside of rural county libraries. The findings of this report validate safeguarding the vital services of rural libraries during economic challenges, as this enhances budgetary efficiency while protecting the communities that rely on them.

The Stakes

The Stakeholder Development initiative emerged from the ongoing partnership of the ACORN Collaborative in Sutter, Colusa and Placer Counties. Librarians in Sutter and surrounding counties have been meeting regularly for several years and sharing best practices while discussing the challenges facing rural library services. These continuing talks led to the formation of ACORN: Advocating for California's Ongoing Rural Needs. This comprehensive process has surfaced consistent themes of programmatic partnership within each county as leadership has worked to maximize resources in a constrained environment. As key findings confirmed, there is an important layer of shared support that individual county departments are providing which would benefit greatly from more robust investment and strategic partnerships. In addition to supporting the ongoing impact of interdepartmental collaboration, next generation broadband infrastructure and Digital Equity programming with potential funding from new Digital Equity Act² state and federal grant opportunities would allow scalable solutions to reach other departments and counties.

Within the larger macroeconomic trends, we are navigating an era of unprecedented disruption.

As technology continues to permeate every aspect of our society, the rise of Artificial Intelligence poses novel risks, raising additional challenges for communities unprepared to navigate them equitably. The Digital Divide has been a major policy concern since the mid-nineties, and many rural counties are still struggling with basic connectivity. This suppresses

² <https://www.internetforall.gov/program/digital-equity-act-programs>

the adoption of critical innovations and technologies necessary to unlock regional development. While technology has continued to grow and expand, budgets have not kept pace. When adjusted for inflation, the budget for Sutter County libraries is flat from 2011 to 2024 and General Fund staff positions are down from 14 to 9.35 FTE.

Major aspects of everyday life in rural counties are affected by broadband, digital infrastructure and access. In education, it is well understood that the achievement gap impacts low income, diverse and rural communities disproportionately. Access to health care is also a major challenge, as many providers struggle to recruit and retain doctors and nurses. Specialists are even harder to attract for rural providers. This leaves communities left out of critical care due to challenges in accessing better-resourced providers and facilities. At the core of these challenges lies restricted access to investment capital and aging infrastructure, dampening economic opportunities for small businesses and startups. With the massive shift to online shopping, main street retail has also been swallowed up in its own digital divide, unable to compete against the online retail giants. Occurring alongside a dramatic rise in Behavioral Health issues, such as opioid and methamphetamine addiction, less viable environments for business and investment put a strain on revenue for counties at a time when demands on limited budgets are going up. The future prosperity of rural counties depends on their ability to leverage the solutions for community service and connectivity being incubated at rural libraries.

A New Rural California

Digital disruption is changing the timeline for investment necessary to protect the livelihoods and prosperity of millions of rural Californians. The rise of automation and AI will change every sector, including agriculture and transportation.

As California continues to grapple with the impact of an uneven post-pandemic recovery, it is more urgent than ever to provide the necessary infrastructure and training to ensure that every Californian can succeed in the digital economy. In every rural county there is one constant that has grown and evolved alongside the communities themselves - the libraries. One of the last true public squares, libraries exist at the intersection of many major channels within a community. They provide education and recreation for all, while also delivering programming that is customized to the needs of discrete segments of the population. Often, rural libraries are a resource that serves as a window on the world and possibly even a lifeline for residents, especially those dealing with a lack of reliable transportation. They also bridge services that otherwise would operate in isolation and silos. This encompasses collaborative initiatives with Behavioral Health to attend to the mental health needs of communities. Additionally, direct

engagement with Public Safety involves partnering with local law enforcement to prepare individuals transitioning from incarceration, offering support through literacy programs implemented in County jails. On the other end of the spectrum, libraries prepare new community arrivals for successful integration by providing language classes and other services. An example of this important work can be seen with immigrants arriving from Afghanistan who had served as allies to U.S. forces.

The Stakeholder Development Framework is designed to maximize the potential of libraries as anchor institutions capable of connecting critical resources in rural communities. It reflects a strong record of success in program design, capacity building, and collaboration that has served rural counties for decades. As California continues to map its larger broadband future, it has a trusted partner in its rural libraries who have sophistication and credibility in the communities they serve to bridge between urgent needs and next generation solutions required to achieve the prosperous future Californians deserve.

What we Learned

A new generation of parents and community members are deeply engaged in their library services and demand is growing. To meet this demand, leadership and staff have driven extraordinary efficiency and made the most with limited resources. The spirit of service and collaboration have engaged the public in diverse programming which runs throughout the day. In particular, the intersection of health and libraries is profound with everything from resources for parents of school aged children to healthy eating classes from county partners at Blue Zones. For a generation raised on the internet, there are remarkable signs that the space and services of the library hold special value for a new generation of community members choosing to live and raise families in these counties. The effectiveness of the teams shields many of the patrons from a deeper appreciation of the budgetary challenges, but also suggests further engagement strategies to raise their voices.

Voices from the Community

As demonstrated by the extensive list of interviews cited at the conclusion of this report, we heard from numerous voices from each county's diverse community, each sharing their unique experiences and underscoring the vital role the library plays in their lives. From an Air Force veteran to an incarcerated adult learner, from elected officials to a workforce of dedicated library staff, one resounding theme emerged: libraries are indispensable, especially in rural communities.

The community's adaptability, embracing new services while contributing innovative ideas for gathering and learning, showcases a trusted and symbiotic relationship. Community members recognize libraries

as a central hub for engagement and a neutral convening space where they can access essential information.

Framework

The Stakeholder Development Framework is designed to provide investment strategies, broadband infrastructure, training and capacity building for County Libraries and key County Departments to support programmatic collaboration addressing the needs of underserved communities. Operating both horizontally and vertically, the Framework supports the resourcing of existing and emerging solutions, fostering scalable innovation among participating partners. This vertical approach will support adoption of programming and leveraging existing resources, as new capacity and training is provided to drive engagement. The project is also designed to expand horizontally by inviting additional rural counties to adopt the Framework and implement solutions originating from the launch partners. As the network expands, new infrastructure and programming solutions will provide a menu of options for rural libraries to participate in.

Framework Features:

- Program Innovation Database and Exchange-Knowledge Graph for Libraries
- Investment Circles for co-funding channels
- Broadband Network Infrastructure, Technology, and Equipment
- Staff Training
- Program and Curriculum Development
- Community Engagement and Outreach
- Evaluation and Research

The Framework is designed to support a wide range of stakeholders in rural counties. This includes ongoing engagement with elected officials and other leaders to provide a steady stream of learning to help support positive outcomes for communities. It can be managed by a working group of County Librarians with a rotating position for project lead and administrator. There are also opportunities to reimagine the vital support organizations, such as Friends of the Library, which have a long history of providing economic and organizational support for rural libraries.

Affected Communities + Program Innovations

The range of community cohorts currently accessing services and programming in rural libraries is diverse and highly representative of the community. The diverse segments of the public create a 'Comprehensive Lifecycle' framework, engaging community members through major life events and transitions.

Delving deeper, the following focus areas form the core of the proposed framework. They reflect a commitment to serve marginalized and at-risk populations which are defined as covered populations in the larger movement to address Digital Equity in rural communities. As such, they are prime areas of focus for applying to both upcoming California Department of Technology and NTIA Digital Equity funding.

Education and Continuums of Connectivity

Students and their parents are the bedrock of any community. The journey they take provides a roadmap of the challenges and opportunities that will impact their well being and success in the classroom. Libraries are at the center of this path, alongside schools themselves, providing resources and partnership for parents, teachers and childcare providers. Importantly, grandparents and other family members are also key contributors to caring for and educating young people. The research for this report surfaced numerous examples of multigenerational families accessing library programming and resources across the spectrum of learning from formal to informal.

K12

County Libraries could partner with County Departments of Education to establish *continuums of connectivity* for students and families. This approach would provide access to County Library resources by embedding in as many points of contact as possible. Initial steps would include establishing County Library points of presence inside each of the County Public High Schools where students and faculty can access County Library resources. There are long standing relationships that can be leveraged to accelerate programmatic adoption as broadband infrastructure is installed and upgraded to create points of presence accessible to all learners. Persistent and reliable access to information and resources unlocks new resources for addressing the achievement gap. Furthermore, community colleges will be recruited as partners to provide opportunities for students to participate in advanced learning opportunities remotely from their local campuses.

English Language Learners

English Language Learners require digital resources to be accessible on mobile networks. A key component of the Collaborative's collaboration with K12 will be developing broadband resources and curriculum optimized for mobile networks. This includes developing curriculum

units that bridge between traditional classroom environments with community and at home settings. Nonprofit partners contracted for County Services may also provide points of presence for student interaction.

Higher Education: Sac State; Chico + Community Colleges

Strengthening pathways to higher education for rural students is one of the most important opportunities to leverage next generation broadband infrastructure and tools. Students working in more rural communities deserve the right to access all of the resources that students in urban centers have access to. This includes advanced library resources and hybrid learning environments. It is also critical to ensure that community college students develop a digital readiness that supports their success in completing their coursework and matriculating to a four year institution. The Collaborative will support community college partners in establishing programmatic connections powered by broadband infrastructure, including workforce development projects that serve broader constituencies.

Lifelong Learners + Senior Care Providers

As new generations exit the workforce and move into their senior years, they will continue to have needs that require access to broadband technologies. This includes everything from health care to accessing government services. As technology outpaces the skill level of the aging population, the need for continuing education becomes increasingly evident. Care providers also have important responsibilities for maintaining communication with families and other important relationships. Preparing these important stakeholders for next generation technologies is critical. New community points of presence could be established in county locations and participating community-based partners, including senior centers and health care centers. This will provide capacity for accessing specialists and telehealth services while helping service providers balance costs associated with technology adoption.

Adult Literacy and New Americans

Rural counties are home to a wide range of immigrant communities who provide important contributions to local communities and economies. They set down roots and raise new generations of Californians who will continue to make rural California their home. As this unique American cycle continues into the future it is essential to address key issues in their journey in the community. This includes Adult Literacy and English language proficiency. Rural libraries have been leading this work for many years and in the new broadband environment there is an opportunity to increase services while also providing skills training which will serve multiple purposes. Extending these programs with new broadband modules and learning

opportunities will enable libraries and other county departments to accelerate outcomes and manage costs in future years.

Sutter County Library Literacy currently offers small group classes for students working at a similar level, and one-on-one instruction for those who would benefit or requested individual instruction. Examples include Adult Basic Education tutoring for those seeking support in learning to read and/or write in English, High School Equivalency tutoring for those interested in studying for the HiSET Exam, Citizenship Preparation tutoring for those studying for the citizenship interview, and basic computer classes. 100% of participating students mastered at least one goal in the 2022-2023 program year. The opportunity to connect Virtual Instructors and Tutors with participants would transform both the scale and success of offerings.

Tutoring for Incarcerated Individuals

County libraries in the Collaborative currently provide tutoring, literacy education, and books to incarcerated individuals in county facilities. These services are a lifeline that aid in reentry and support reduced recidivism rates. The resources committed to this can be enhanced and expanded by providing specialized access to additional library services in partnership with Sheriff offices and other agencies. Addressing the unique needs of public safety officials is a critical opportunity for libraries to expand on their vital role in communities.

Public Health

Counties bear incredible responsibility for caring for the most at risk in rural counties. This generates incredible pressure on budgets to balance the overlapping issues many face, from access to affordable housing to mental health services. Rural county leaders have leveraged libraries on a number of fronts to not only reach the public, but also design and implement solutions for accessing services.

The integration of broadband in rural libraries has become a pivotal factor in enhancing community resilience and information access, highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. These libraries emerged as crucial conduits for trusted information and institutional support. With high-speed internet connections, they provided up-to-date health guidelines, news, and scientific research, empowering rural communities with the knowledge needed to navigate the pandemic effectively. This was particularly significant in areas where personal internet access was scarce, ensuring equitable access to critical information for all community members.

One example is the platform Sutter County Libraries provides for the overall County partnership with the Blue Zones movement to share healthy lifestyle and diet lessons and activities with

community members. Launched on Juneteenth 2023, there have been multiple sessions over 12 months.

Additionally, broadband in rural libraries is essential in coordinating and communicating during emergencies. In these events, libraries transform into local ad hoc coordination centers, offering a platform for emergency services, real-time updates, and a means for residents to maintain contact with family and friends. This role can be especially vital in remote areas, where alternative means of communication and information are limited, thereby bridging the gap in emergency response and community connectivity.

Furthermore, rural libraries play a significant role in the navigation of health resources and education. They provided valuable educational content and interactive sessions on health topics, accessible to all, irrespective of socio-economic status. Equally important is the role of these libraries in providing access to mental and behavioral health resources. In rural areas, where access to mental health services can be hindered by distance or stigma, libraries often provide discreet and accessible navigation, underscoring their vital role in fostering health awareness and equitable access to essential services in rural communities.

All these established relationships within Rural Counties require expanded broadband infrastructure to keep pace with changes in programming and services. One of the most profound learnings from the stakeholder engagement process to date has been the highly creative and effective partnerships that counties are building within their departments to address some of the most pressing challenges, including strong ties between Behavioral Health and libraries.

Memory Health as Part of Mental Health

Seniors in every community have distinct needs which libraries have been on the cutting edge of addressing. Beyond providing space, this report identified numerous examples of libraries providing volunteer and engagement opportunities to support active community participation for rural seniors. Many examples were also shared of Seniors providing leadership on library projects, including funding writing programs and other enrichment activities. As the Baby Boomer generation continues to mature, many programs in other parts of the country are beginning to develop Memory Care programming, including Memory Cafes, which provide important resources for seniors and families experiencing dementia and Alzheimer's.

Economic Development and Workforce Readiness

Rural libraries are engines for small business and community members developing their employment skills. As the economy continues to evolve through technology the needs for retraining unemployed and underemployed people will only increase. Libraries require investment to pace with these changes in the overall economy.

Through expanded broadband infrastructure and programming, libraries could become pivotal in supporting local workforce and economic development, evolving into resource hubs not only for individuals but also for small businesses. As small business resource centers, libraries could offer a wealth of tools and information crucial for both retention and expansion of local enterprises. Libraries could address this gap by conducting outreach programs and workshops, informing business owners and entrepreneurs about various support mechanisms, ranging from financial assistance to digital marketing strategies. Local libraries, as highlighted by one member of a county Board of Supervisors, are not just repositories of information but active participants in nurturing the local business ecosystem. In fact, As many professionals have shifted to remote work, libraries have seen an increased use/demand for spaces equipped with WiFi, study rooms, meeting rooms, power charging stations - which previously were standard in urban libraries, and are now in demand in rural libraries.

Libraries provide tailored services such as market research databases, legal and patent advice, and networking opportunities, essential for the sustenance and growth of small businesses in the community. As Artificial Intelligence supercharges the digital economy, rural communities will need new and innovative channels for gaining the skills and resources necessary to be competitive.

In parallel, libraries using the Framework could expand their roles by working with community colleges to establish Collaborative Virtual Workforce Training Centers. These centers would be designed to equip the local workforce with necessary skills and training, catering to the evolving demands of the job market. By offering virtual courses and certifications in partnership with community colleges, libraries could make education and skill development more accessible, especially to those who might not have the means or the opportunity to attend traditional classes. This initiative not only helps in upskilling the existing workforce but also attracts new talent to the region, thereby contributing to the overall economic development. The synergy between libraries and community colleges in providing virtual workforce training exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to local economic empowerment, ensuring that community

members are well-equipped to meet the challenges and opportunities of the broadband economy.

Public Safety and Natural Disasters

California has experienced some of the most profound natural disasters in the country over the last ten years. None have been more devastating than the slate of wildfires that have pushed communities to the brink and threatened lives. In these events, rural libraries are on the frontlines of providing information and support for local families. While this will always be a service for libraries, there are other upstream opportunities to help engage and educate communities in the risks associated with natural disasters and other threats to our ecosystems. Rural counties are the core of our agricultural economy in California and are already developing mitigation strategies and solutions for responding to the emerging trends. By connecting stakeholders with information and resources in a trusted venue, Libraries can bring leading edge broadband applications to the foreground as communities leverage technology to respond and build resilience.

Recommendations

County

1. Develop database and User Guide of programming collaborations
2. Measure economic impact of collaborations, including cost savings and efficiencies
3. Engage elected, business, and philanthropic stakeholders in partnership opportunities, including preliminary exploration of potential Joint Powers Authority to pursue funding and operational opportunities.

Region

1. Expand ACORN initiative to include neighboring counties.
2. Develop co-funding opportunities for regional programming.
3. Launch Higher Education Hub to partner with Higher Education with a focus on Sacramento State University, Chico State University, and regional Community Colleges.

State

1. Develop and launch advocacy campaign to educate elected and agency leaders on impact of Rural libraries in communities with a focus on collaborative strengths.
2. Co-Design Higher Education pathways in partnership with CSU and Community Colleges
3. Introduce policy solutions for incentivizing library investment and funding

Research Activities

Interviews

Patty Wong: City Librarian, Santa Clara City Library

Veronda Pitchford: Assistant Director, Califa

Danis Kreimeier: Retired Library Director, Napa County

Sandy Capell: Former Barber Branch (Live Oak) Librarian

Susana Bautista: Technician, Sutter County Library

Linda Baker: President, Friends of Sutter County Library

Karm Bains: Chair, County Supervisor, District 4, Sutter County

Ashley Hernandez: Then Councilmember, current Mayor, City of Live Oak

Pamela DaGrossa: Literacy Coordinator, Colusa Library

MaryBeth Massa: Princeton Branch Librarian

Nancy Newlin: President, Friends of the Colusa County Library

Brendan Farrell: District Attorney, County of Colusa

Wendy Tyler: CAO, County of Colusa

Denise Carter: former BOS, County of Colusa

Tony Hobson: Director of Behavioral Health, County of Colusa

Daniel Seitz: incarcerated adult learner, County of Colusa

Sophie Bruno: Assistant Director of Library Services, Placer County

Michael Romero, MPH: Deputy Director of Health and Human Services, Public Health Division, Placer County

Janice King and grandson, Sutter County Library patrons

Alexandria Mazerolle, Engagement Lead, Blue Zones Yuba Sutter

James Ochsner, Director of Library Services, Sutter County Library

Ayla Elkins, Literacy Services Coordinator, Sutter County Library

Narinder Sufi, Development Officer, Sutter County Library

Stacey Costello, Colusa County Free Library Director

Mary George, Director of Library Services, Placer County

Chalese Eggleston, Children's Services Coordinator, Sutter County Library

Jessica Hubbard, Philanthropic Services Manager, Placer County Library

Dave Atkinson, [Assistant Director, Placer County Office of Emergency Services](#)

Terri Wyatt, Live Oak librarian

County of Colusa Friends of the Library meeting

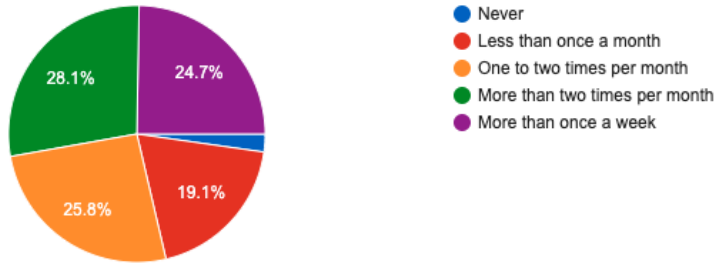
Several dozen working group discussions with the ACORN group

Surveys

[Sutter County Library](#)

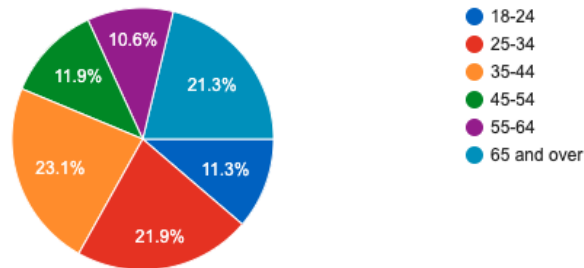
How often do you visit the library?

178 responses



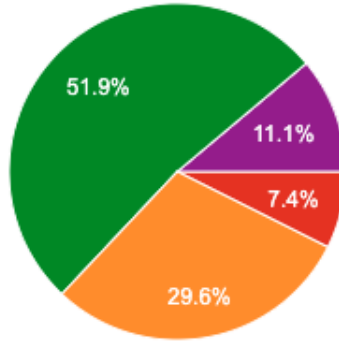
What age range do you fall within? (optional)

160 responses



How often do you visit the library?

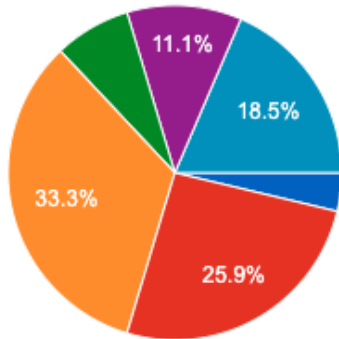
27 responses



- Never
- Less than once a month
- One to two times per month
- More than two times per month
- More than once a week

What age range do you fall within? (optional)

27 responses



- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and over

Appendix

Acknowledgements

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- Mary George, Director of Library Services, Placer County
- Sutter County Friends of the Library
- Colusa County Friends of the Library