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### Hard economic times a boon for libraries

**STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

- People are taking courses, programs, searching for jobs as well as reading books
- In addition to a jump in patronage, many libraries are seeing volunteers increase
- Most libraries are the only free Internet source in their communities

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By Kristina Yates  
CNN

TEXT SIZE

(CNN) -- Rebecca Hodges, who's been unemployed for a year, sat down at a computer in a public library in New York.



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Spurred by free services, people are heading to libraries, such as this one in Chicago, Illinois, in record numbers.

Hodges is not an avid reader, but said going to the library is a way to look up job openings and use the Internet for free.

"It helps me research the different companies and how the different industries work, and what's all involved with different industries in terms of what jobs there are," she said.

In times of recession, people take advantage of free services, and going to the library is among the most popular.

"I think people are just realizing how much information there is and they didn't think about going to their local libraries before," Hodges said.

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In the past year, libraries across the country have seen dramatic increases in the use of their services, which in addition to free Internet access can include resume workshops and foreclosure seminars.

"Whenever you have tough economic times, public libraries are a place people go because they have no other alternatives or because they know they are going to get the kind of powerful information that will make

a difference in their lives," said Kristin McDonough, director of the Science, Industry and Business Library in New York City.

The Buffalo and Erie County public library system in Buffalo, New York, had a 50 percent increase in the use of free public computers in the first half of 2008, according to the American Library Association.

In Broward County, Florida, almost 10.5 million people used the public libraries in 2008 -- up about a half million since 2007.

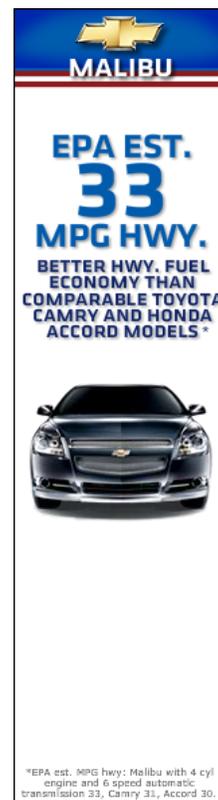
There are 30 smaller libraries in Broward and seven regional centers, which the librarians say sometimes get as much as 1,000 or 2,000 people each morning.

In addition to more patrons, the number of volunteers is increasing in the county's libraries. In 2008, 96,000 hours were volunteered, up 7,000 from 2007.

One of the [Broward County](#) Library's biggest responses to the demands of patrons is an improvement to its Web site. There, as in other libraries across the country, patrons can go online to access event schedules and monitor the status of books, movies and CDs.

And the libraries' programming appeals to a wide range of people -- from senior citizens learning how to set up e-mail accounts, to seniors in high school taking practice SAT tests, said Maria Gebhardt of the Broward County system.

A report released by the [ALA](#) said 73 percent of libraries nationwide report they are the only provider of free Internet access in their communities. It's not all about finding a job though -- patrons are checking out books, CDs and DVDs instead of buying and renting them.



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In Detroit, Michigan's public libraries, patrons are lining up to learn how to file their taxes. Classes are offered at four branches several times a week, some with room enough for as many as 70 people. "We're seeing programs fill to capacity," said Conrad Welsing, media relations specialist for Detroit Public Library.

In Los Angeles, California's public libraries, the circulation of personal finance materials has increased 11 percent since July 2007, said Peter Persic, public relations and marketing director for the library system.

Jon Donato, a stock trader, said he uses New York City's Science, Industry and Business Library every week. "They have a lot of great financial resources," he said. "These are very valuable resources that are useful for researching companies and looking for data on the market and the economy."

The Science, Industry and Business Library reported it served almost 400,000 people in 2008, almost a 4 percent increase over 2007.

In Georgia, the Atlanta-Fulton County Public Library System also reports a significant increase in circulation -- up 13 percent in 2008.

Visits increased 7 percent in 2008 and computer use increased 9 percent, said Kelly Ronson, public relations and marketing director for the library system.

Many libraries also are offering help to business owners.

The Topeka And Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas, for example, provides business development classes for business startups and gives instruction on business resources.

The public library in Lebanon, Indiana, has a separate business collection and provides reference services for patrons interested in starting, growing and maintaining businesses. It also offers basic business classes in partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce.

And one of the Detroit Public Library's main initiatives is improving the city's literacy. It offers free tutoring and partners with literacy agencies in the city to improve people's reading skills.

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CNN's Robyn Sidersky contributed to this story.

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