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## A new twist on old story

Economic downturn sends job seekers to library in search of help

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ALBANY — In these tough economic times, with record numbers of layoffs, librarians are being called upon to add a new duty not taught in library school: unemployment counseling.

Computers in public reading areas once dominated by online catalog searches are now booked by laid-off workers filing unemployment claims, completing resumes and applying electronically for local jobs.

With the ranks of the unemployed swelling each month, the library's resources and its staff are becoming strained. The waiting time to get onto a computer is increasing and the rising demand limits the ability of librarians to provide time-consuming, one-on-one assistance, particularly with adults who have never navigated the Internet.

"People who've lost their jobs are anxious and worried," said Rebecca Lubin, librarian at the Albany Public Library's Delaware Avenue branch.

A year ago, she had perhaps one patron a week asking for help applying for a job online. Now, she might work with five or more laid-off workers a day, monopolizing the small branch's eight computers.

"They teach us how to find information for people in library school, but this is a whole new level of customer service," Lubin said. "It's really tough out there. We're trying to help people going through hard times as much as possible."

Public libraries have seen a significant spike in traffic historically in times of economic recession, and this downturn is no different.

At the main branch of the Albany Public Library, the number of patrons climbed from 34,697 in November 2007 to 40,966 in November 2008. Circulation increased from 614,600 in 2007 to 672,331 in 2008. Computer usage jumped to 77,971 in 2008, compared to 71,737 sessions in 2007 and 1,000 more people applied for library cards in 2008 compared to 2007.

"There's so much activity, our librarians can't do as much one-on-one work as we'd like to do," said Tim Burke, interim director of the Albany library.

What's driving so many unemployed to the library is the fact that large local employers with entry-level positions such as Price Chopper, hospitals and big-box retail stores require online job applications.

"I get a lot of people without any computer skills and it takes a lot of time to try to help them through the online application process," said Scott Jarzombek, librarian at the Howe branch in Albany's South End.

The Howe branch, undergoing renovations as part of a far-reaching library construction project, is temporarily located in the Albany Housing Authority headquarters on South Pearl Street. It has just five computers compared to 12 before.

"It has added to the stress and we're seeing lines of people trying to get on a computer," Jarzombek said. "We're doing everything we can do to help them find a job. It's really tough being out of work

during the holidays."

By training and inclination, librarians are fierce defenders of the privacy of their patrons, but working so closely with the unemployed has created some new ethical dilemmas.

For instance, Jarzombek worked with an unemployed person who had never used the Internet. Desperate for money to buy Christmas presents, the patron filled out an online application for a high-interest credit card that seemed like a predatory lender scam.

"It's a fine line," Jarzombek said. He will point out the fact that a Web site or credit card company has claims against it and will let the patron make his or her own decision.

To meet rising demand, the library added computer training courses and is awaiting a decision on its application for a \$50,000 federal grant to teach financial literacy.

In the meantime, librarians are excited about the initiatives of President-elect Barack Obama, who tells a story of how he landed a job as a Chicago community organizer because of a visit to the New York Public Library.

Burke was encouraged by an e-mail from officials at the American Library Association, who will meet with Obama's transition team. They'll discuss additional funding in Obama's economic stimulus package for public libraries to extend hours and to add retraining services for the unemployed.

"We think President-elect Obama will bring a lot more sensitivity to the new and expanded role of public libraries," Burke said.

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