From getting an education and securing employment to filing taxes and keeping up with family, broadband use is essential to daily life. Yet 33 million U.S. households do not access the internet at home, and nearly twice that number have low levels of digital readiness. Digital opportunity gaps disproportionately affect low-income families, rural residents, African-Americans, Latinos, Native-Americans, and people with disabilities.

Libraries, in New Hampshire and 120,000 strong across America, work to: (1) spur home adoption by increasing awareness of and confidence in using online resources and services, (2) provide internet access through the library for those who lack home broadband, and (3) provide digital learning opportunities that empower entrepreneurship, job retraining, and widespread use of emerging technologies.

Providing opportunity for rural areas
For New Hampshire’s rural communities, libraries and the connectivity they provide are essential to bridging the digital divide.

Elaine, a resident of rural Goffstown, N.H. does not have a computer, internet accessibility at home, nor ever had formal computer training. When she began to have long-term health issues, Elaine experienced difficulties getting medical attention due to insurance and medical office requirements for electronic correspondence. She obtained help at the Goffstown Public Library to create an email account and learn how to use it. Elaine has since become a regular library user, attending technology classes.

Takeaways for presidential candidates, local and national public officials, and the media:

- Libraries in New Hampshire and nationally enable access to and use of high-speed broadband.
- Libraries are cost-effective and efficient partners to expand broadband access and digital literacy—and thus should be included in policy proposals.
- Libraries are well-placed to provide technological and economic opportunities to those with few alternatives or resources.
classes and is regularly communicating with her multiple doctor’s offices and the insurance company through library computers.

While library broadband provides important benefits everywhere, people in rural areas have the greatest need for improved connectivity. In Whitefield, N.H. a group of Eastern European summer employees working at the nearby resort needed high-speed internet to connect with their families overseas, usually in the early morning hours due to the time difference. Through a partnership with the Whitefield Public Library, one of these employees installed Wi-Fi equipment in the library at his own expense, while the library agreed to continue to offer Wi-Fi service 24/7 going forward. Many more individuals in the Whitefield community have benefited from continuous accessible Internet access in town.

**Expanding Wi-Fi access**

Wi-Fi exponentially increases the library’s capacity to serve the public beyond its desktops, powering everyone’s devices inside the library and through mobile training labs and pop-up library programs. Sam, a high school freshman in Lebanon, N.H., comes from a low-income family with no access to a computer at home. Sam is a regular patron of the Lebanon Public Library, where he utilizes computers and Wi-Fi to complete schoolwork. Seeing the need for access to technology and the internet for patrons such as Sam, library staff created a program allowing check out of laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots for three-months. As a direct result of having access to a laptop and internet service at home to do school work, Sam has received an award in English and believes “the library helped me succeed in school when everything else in life seemed to be falling apart.”

In Enfield, N.H. a local visiting nurse utilizes the public library’s Wi-Fi to complete tasks between patient appointments. Since her work hours vary, “being able to use the library Wi-Fi and having a space to work makes my job so much easier and allows me to be more efficient and focus on patient care.”

**Upskilling and lifelong learning**

Employers face major skills shortages, and millions of jobs remain unfilled. Those who receive formal digital literacy training are significantly more likely to use the internet to pursue economic opportunities and work-oriented networking. At Somersworth, N.H. Public Library, a woman without internet access at home utilized library computers and Wi-Fi in her job search. Library staff assisted her with navigating websites, learning technology skills and submitting applications online. Subsequently, she became employed at a nearby university. “I am sure that I would not have gotten the job without the library,” she stated.

In 2018, River Center, a nonprofit that assists residents of southwest N.H. with parenting and life skills, asked the Peterborough Town Library to take over career and employment services. The library is now the referral point for nine surrounding towns. They have formalized the process, conducting informational interviews to provide tailored service to individuals. Library services include developing cover letters and resumes, assisting with the online job search process, coordinating mock interviews, and providing career coaching. The library also provides a curriculum for individuals to improve their technology skills.