

Westmoreland County Public Libraries and Technology

Over the years we have all lived through dramatic changes in technology. Public libraries in the Westmoreland Library Network™ (WLN) have been among the institutions championing these changes. They began in the 1990's by switching from the traditional, cumbersome, 3"by 5" card catalogue files in drawers to computerized systems in which patrons could access home-library information quickly. With the Internet, patrons were then able to access this information 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world. In 2008 the WLN merged the data of each participating library's collection, providing access to books from all of them at once. The WLN Polaris Integrated Library System was born. Technology has become so prevalent in our libraries that currently one, Greensburg/Hempfield Area Library, has 50 computers.

In the last few years the WLN has made a concerted effort to keep up with technology changes to better serve the residents of Westmoreland County. In fact we have raised about \$1,350,000 for this purpose from a variety of sources for a variety of projects. The generous funders include the R. K. Mellon Foundation, the Allegheny Foundation, The Community Foundation of Westmoreland County, the Federal E-rate discounted program for schools and libraries, Westmoreland County, and the Office of Commonwealth Libraries.

One of the major projects involved reconfiguring all 25 WLN library buildings. This involved many things. One very important example is that we rewired all our buildings for the most up-to-date standards for the Internet. Many WLN libraries were wired in the 1990's when the standard was category 5 wiring, which only allowed 100 megabits per second (Mbps) of information flow. Others had category 5e wiring, which allowed 1000 Mbps. The standard is now category 6, which allows 10,000 Mbps. By rewiring all our library buildings to category 6, we have positioned them for some time into the future.

We also upgraded technology such as switches in each building. And, prior to embarking on this path in 2008, most of the technology maintenance in each library was the responsibility of that library. To help each library and save on costs, we hired a second technology person, working from WLN headquarters. Thus, in conjunction with other changes, the WLN supports each library's technology maintenance needs. In addition, we reconfigured the technology network setup in each library to make it more efficient for the WLN to be able to take care of much of the maintenance online from the WLN headquarters.

With the technology infrastructure upgrade completed in each building, we were able to concentrate on other initiatives. In 2019, we were able to bring high-speed fiber Internet to 16 of our library sites. We have now raised the money to be able to bring high-speed fiber to our other nine sites, eight of which should be up and running by the end of the year. The plan is to have the ninth on board by early next year. This is very important because it positions all of our buildings for future technology growth.

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We have also taken steps to deal with cybersecurity. While there is no 100% guarantee of cybersecurity safety, we have tried to minimize the possibilities. Some of our libraries have instituted other technology measures that improve services to patrons. Partially because of the COVID-19 crisis, some now have self-checkout stations. Within the last few years, some have added a technology product called Princh. Princh enables a patron to print from a device such as a smartphone, a laptop or a tablet.

The latest initiative, thanks to the generosity of the County Commissioners special funding from COVID-19 Federal funding, will extend Wi-Fi at most of the libraries, so that people will be better able to access the Internet outside of the libraries, even when the library is closed.

All the above have been done in order to bring better and improved services to our patrons. Since our libraries have limited funding, we have raised the funds for most of these projects from funders mentioned above. We extend our deepest gratitude to them and you for investing in our libraries — your essential community resource!

Cesare Muccari

Executive Director

Westmoreland County Federated Library System