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National Library Week Highlights Continued Popularity and Importance of Public Libraries

During an average day in Oklahoma, almost 37,000 adults and children visit their local public library. They borrow more than 64,000 items, ask more than 5,000 reference questions, attend 124 library programs, book more than 9,000 internet sessions on library computers, and log almost 13,000 wireless internet sessions with their personal devices.

For an institution that had been placed on “deathwatch” during the dawn of the internet, National Library Week is an opportunity to highlight the continued vitality, popularity and importance of libraries. This year’s celebration, April 7-13, features the theme “Libraries = Strong Communities.”

The most recent published statistics from the Oklahoma Department of Libraries (ODL) illustrate that important connection between communities and local public libraries with some upward trends from the previous year, according to State Librarian Melody Kellogg. The statistics reflect activity at Oklahoma’s more than 210 public library sites in 2017.

“Circulation, program attendance, visits, and use of electronic library resources are all up,” Kellogg said. “Almost 2 million Oklahomans have a library card, and that’s up about 100,000 from the previous year.”

Kellogg said there are a number of reasons to explain the continued popularity of public libraries in Oklahoma.

“Historically, libraries have always been able to evolve with the times, integrating new media and technology along the way in order to serve the public,” she said. “In smaller communities, libraries are often the first to bring these new technologies to the public. Last century, they may have had the first public fax machine in town. Today, they may have the fastest internet connection.”

Kellogg said federal and statewide efforts have brought greater capabilities to local libraries, as well. “ODL helps libraries use the federal E-rate program so they can improve and upgrade their internet and computer networks without breaking their budget.”

“The Department of Libraries also uses federal funds to purchase a statewide license to a host of online information and reference sources for all libraries,” she said. “Oklahoma library users now have access to millions of articles from magazines, newspapers, encyclopedias, and professional journals. They can access these in the library or from home, school, or office.

The statewide resources also help local library budgets, Kellogg said. “Since the most recent reference resources are available online, this can free up local library funds to purchase materials and services to meet other needs in the community.”

Meeting those local needs is another reason public libraries remain so popular according to Kellogg. “Most public library funding comes from local taxpayers, so these libraries have a connection to their public and are accountable to them. The library’s job is to know the community and provide the resources and tools people need to succeed.”

Kellogg said Oklahoma’s public libraries are welcoming to all and do their best to serve the people who walk in the door. “It may be an adult needing to access a job application online, a student seeking homework help, a patron researching a health condition, or parents looking for educational resources or entertainment for their children.”

Programming at a library also reflects the community’s interests and needs. Offerings at Oklahoma public libraries around the state include adult literacy programs, health and wellness activities, citizenship classes, coding for children and teens, storytimes, book clubs, computer training, and much more.

“Occasionally we meet people who are visiting a library for the first time in years, and they’re amazed at the variety of services beyond books,” Kellogg said. “The children’s area is filled with activity, and the old card catalog is now online.”

Kellogg said it’s important to remind them that the mission of the public library remains the same: to provide free and open access to services and information resources, and to foster lifelong learning. “That’s what we continue to do. It just may be accompanied with more bells and whistles today.”