

Bossard Memorial Library bridges the rural technology gap with AT&T hot spots



- **Business needs** - The library was looking for an affordable way to deliver connectivity to rural library patrons who lack, or have limited, home internet access.
- **Networking solution** - Bossard lends out up to 15 AT&T Wi-Fi hot spot devices that provide connectivity for residents.
- **Business value** - The ability for patrons to work remotely, attend school virtually, or enjoy movies, games, and other entertainment.
- **Industry focus** - Public library
- **Size** - \$1.95 million annual budget (approximate 2020 budget)

About the Bossard Memorial Library

The Bossard Memorial Library was founded as the Gallipolis Public Library in 1898 by the Thursday Club—a group of women who gathered to study and review literature. In the 1970's, the library changed its name to honor Dr. Samuel L. Bossard. The Bossard family provided a bequest that enabled the library to relocate to its current location. Since then, the library has expanded several times to better serve the needs of its community.

The situation

Bossard Memorial Library is known for its commitment to the people of Gallia County, Ohio. This is a county where nearly 1 in 5 live below the poverty level. Over the years, Bossard has introduced many initiatives to break down the economic and geographic barriers its patrons face. This includes broadband internet, to which rural Gallia County residents have limited access. The library wanted to find a way to help families that lacked high-speed connectivity.



Solution

Recognizing that mobility and connectivity could open many doors, library officials created a lending program that enables patrons to borrow AT&T Wi-Fi hot spots at no charge for up to 2 weeks. The advanced wireless devices deliver free high-speed internet access almost anywhere library patrons need it.

Unique and compelling programs

Bossard Memorial Library in rural Gallipolis, Ohio, offers a range of useful services for the residents of Gallia County. Library staff work hard to create programs that engage the county's 30,000 residents. In addition to story time, book clubs, and other activities that most libraries offer, staff have developed many unique and compelling programs that attract people across Ohio and the tristate area.

Popular options include outstanding traveling exhibits, “make and take” craft kits, adult coloring days, a bicycle lending program, and even a fitness pass lending program that enables eligible patrons to borrow a membership pass to one of several local gyms.

In addition, the staff has expanded the library's offerings with digital content that can be downloaded to a computer, tablet, phone, or e-reader. As the pandemic spread through the Midwest, patrons were happy to be able to access e-books, digital music, movies, comics, and periodicals without having to physically go into the library. Digital library cards allow Bossard patrons to access this content remotely any time they wish.

Enhanced quality of life

Debbie Saunders, Bossard Memorial Library Director, said she and her colleagues work to provide opportunities that are often not available to residents of small-town America. This has included the Bodies Revealed exhibition. This human anatomy exhibit features specimens preserved and displayed in unique ways to demonstrate the amazing functions of the human body.

“In 2016 we were the first library in the world to host Bodies Revealed,” she said. “Many people told us they traveled to Las Vegas and paid a lot to see the exhibit. They were amazed to be able to see it in their hometown at no direct cost.” There were indirect costs, she pointed out, since the library is funded by Gallia County and Ohio taxpayers.



Bossard Library welcomed more than 20,000 visitors to the Bodies Revealed exhibition, including many who traveled for hours to attend. Many of the visitors were unlikely to be able to travel to a metro area to see such an exhibit, according to Saunders.

The library also hosted the NASA-themed exhibition, “Space: A Journey to Our Future,” and welcomed former astronaut Dr. Garrett Reisman, who delivered inspiring presentations at area schools.

Bossard has also provided enriching programs, such as animals from the Columbus Zoo and fish and reptiles from the Newport, Kentucky, Aquarium.

These and other intriguing events attract hundreds—and in the case of the exhibitions, thousands. “We know the library belongs to the community,” Saunders said. “We want to give our constituents programs that enhance their quality of life with educational and entertainment value.”

A good return on the community’s investment

Saunders, who shelved books at the library while she was in high school, remains deeply invested in its success. She earned a bachelor’s degree in accounting but yearned to continue in library work. She completed her master’s degree in Library and Information Science and continued to work at Bossard. Today she oversees a staff of 22.

She is keenly aware of the disadvantages that prevent many in Gallia County from expanding their horizons. “Sometimes there’s a geographic barrier that prevents people from experiencing some of these opportunities,” she said. “Sometimes it’s an economic barrier. We try to break down those barriers. We receive tax dollars, so we always strive to give our citizens their money’s worth. Our philosophy is to make sure that people are getting a good return on their investment when they pay their tax dollars for library services.”

Bridging the county's technology gap

While many libraries provide free internet access for the public, Bossard takes this a step further. It keeps its network open most hours of the day. People can access the internet from the library parking lot. "One person shared with us that she was unable to attend the funeral of her mother, who had died several states away," Saunders said. "She came to our parking lot, after hours, and was able to use our internet connection to watch the livestream of the funeral."

The library staff understand that many in their small community are struggling. The median household income in the county is below the national average, and, as in so many rural areas, broadband internet service is not widely available.

Information is power, Saunders said. "We believe in access to information," she said. "We offer a wealth of online resources that people can access from home. Broadband is not as prevalent here due to lack of infrastructure. For some, it's also an economic issue. Through this program, the library board and staff have helped bridge the technological gap that exists in our county."

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Debbie Saunders

Director/Fiscal Officer, Bossard Memorial Library

Connectivity to go

Bossard Memorial Library created a Wi-Fi to Go program to provide high-speed, highly reliable connectivity to patrons that don't have internet access. The library initially purchased 20 AT&T 4G LTE hot spot devices, which provide affordable connectivity with the bandwidth its patrons desire.

"On the day we launched the program, we actually had people waiting by the door before we opened," Saunders said. "That was a good indicator that the program was going to take off. It's only grown from there."

Library patrons can borrow the devices at no charge for 2 weeks. The devices can provide connectivity for up to 15 devices, which means that families can simultaneously connect their computers, tablets, phones, and other technology. Upon returning the device, patrons can immediately sign up to borrow a device again.

A positive impact on lives

Wi-Fi to Go was an immediate hit with Bossard patrons. The library board continues to support the addition of hot spots: there is a waiting list to borrow the library's devices.

On top of that, demand for the hot spots exploded as the COVID-19 pandemic spread. Suddenly, individuals working and learning from home needed higher speed internet service. Library officials helped several community agencies by approving long-term hot spot loans to enable their staff to work remotely.

“We want to be a strong community partner and assist where we can,” Saunders said.

The connectivity through the hotspots helps the community in various ways. To that end, the library allowed a homebound person to borrow a hot spot for a longer term. The hot spot let the homebound person have telehealth visits with his medical team, since his doctors did not want him leaving the house during the pandemic.

Some patrons borrow hot spots to use when they travel. Others request them when relatives are visiting so adults can work and children can be entertained. “A grandmother called me to thank us, because it gave her grandchildren something to do,” Saunders said. “We like hearing those stories. They let us know what an impact the program has made on people’s lives.”

AT&T Premier streamlines management

COVID has led the library to change some processes. Books and library materials are quarantined for several days after they are returned. Because of the high demand for hot spots, however, staff sanitize each device and carrying case as soon as they are returned, so they can quickly be checked out to the next person on the waiting list.

The AT&T Premier portal streamlines management of the devices, making it easy for staff to quickly get the hot spots to people on the waiting list. Staff can log on and see every hot spot and its cell phone number.

“If a patron doesn’t bring the hotspot back within 24 hours of the time it was due back, we can suspend the service,” Saunders said. “That’s been a very helpful tool—especially when we’re circulating many devices.”

The ability to shut down overdue devices has minimized the loss rate. Suspended devices are of no use to patrons, so most bring them back promptly to avoid late fees.

An obligation to its community

Several connectivity vendors were available in Gallia County, but Bossard chose AT&T Business to launch its Wi-Fi to Go program. AT&T has the nation’s best and also fastest wireless network¹ “which was the main driver,” Saunders said. Customer service has also been excellent, which Saunders considers paramount.

In addition, she added, “We’ve just been satisfied with the service, and the AT&T Premier portal is easy to use to manage, suspend, and reactivate devices.”

The library’s obligation to its community is always top of mind for the library staff. “Since the library is funded by taxpayer dollars, we have an obligation to make the best use of the funds,” Saunders said. “We continue to seek ways to provide these unique services, while making the best use of these taxpayer dollars.”

¹ Best based on GWS OneScore, September 2020.