

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Rediscovering the Library

by Robin Benke

When I visited my local public library in Wise, Virginia, on a recent Saturday, I was not surprised to see so many people taking advantage of the diverse services offered. Historically, when economic times are hard, library use goes up. Statistics show that usage has increased in libraries across the country, and this is no exception for libraries throughout the Commonwealth. Citizens are utilizing their libraries in increasing numbers not only for traditional library services, but also for new and innovative programs and resources designed to meet the needs of local communities.

As families are struggling financially in today's economic environment, patrons are making the most of free Internet connectivity and computer workstations at their local library to find work, prepare resumes and cover letters, apply for jobs online, open and check e-mail accounts, file for unemployment benefits, and research and apply for other government programs. Many libraries have begun to offer programs geared specifically toward the local economy, often providing patrons with career training and workshops, job search resources, and networking opportunities for area businesses. I recently spoke with colleagues Kelly R. McBride and Amy Bond, directors of Russell County Public Library and Lonesome Pine Regional Library respectively, who reported that computer usage has clearly increased this fiscal year and that they are making every effort to provide strong, up-

to-date career related resources to their patrons.

Virginia libraries are addressing the needs of our citizens in other important ways as well. They remain committed to their support of lifelong learning, providing free access for both children and adults to print and electronic reference resources that would otherwise be out of reach for most families. The books, CDs, DVDs, videocassettes, and games that can be checked out provide avenues of free entertainment for the entire family. As it becomes ever more challenging for people to make ends meet, many families are rediscovering the services the library offers in communities throughout the state.

During these difficult economic times, it is essential that Virginia libraries be adequately funded so that they can continue to provide the greatest possible access and highest level of service to the citizens of the Commonwealth. Studies show that significant returns are consistently realized for every dollar invested in library services. Andrew Carnegie once said, "A library outranks any other thing a community can do to benefit its people." I commend each of you, as library professionals, for providing much needed services to our communities. We remain dedicated at VLA to communicating the importance of library services to local government leaders and state legislators so that we can continue to invest in our citizens, our communities, and our future. **VL**