

Report to the Legislature Required by HB 205 SLA 2020 Section 1 Chapter 8 P11-12

Online with Libraries (OWL) Videoconferencing

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to meet the legislative intent expressed by the Alaska Legislature in HB 205, Chapter 8 SLA 20 enacted on April 6, 2020. The expressed intent read:

It is the intent of the legislature that the Department of Education and Early Development evaluate cost-efficiency measures that preserve access to the Alaska Online with Libraries (OWL) Program; considering the use of alternative equipment or technologies that accommodate equitable access to the video conference system, while saving unrestricted general funds.

It is also the intent of the legislature that the Department of Education and Early Development consult with all users of the Alaska Online with Libraries (OWL) Program to evaluate implications of eliminating the video conference services. The Department of Education and Early Development shall ensure that if the Alaska Online with Libraries (OWL) Program is eliminated, then alternative equipment or technology is provided.

The Department of Education and Early Development shall prepare a report summarizing the results from those consultations and the proposed cost-efficiency measures and submit the report to the Finance co-chairs, and the Legislative Finance Division on or before January 1, 2021, and notify the legislature that the report is available.

This report will discuss the consultation process used, the cost savings achieved for the program, and discuss the status of the video conferencing program.

Consultation process and results

Our primary consultation with libraries was an OWL Consultation Survey done between late May and early June. An invitation was sent to the 103 locations known to have an OWL video endpoint on May 29, 2020. E-mail reminders were sent out on June 8 and June 22, 2020. The department received 57 unduplicated responses, a 55% response rate.

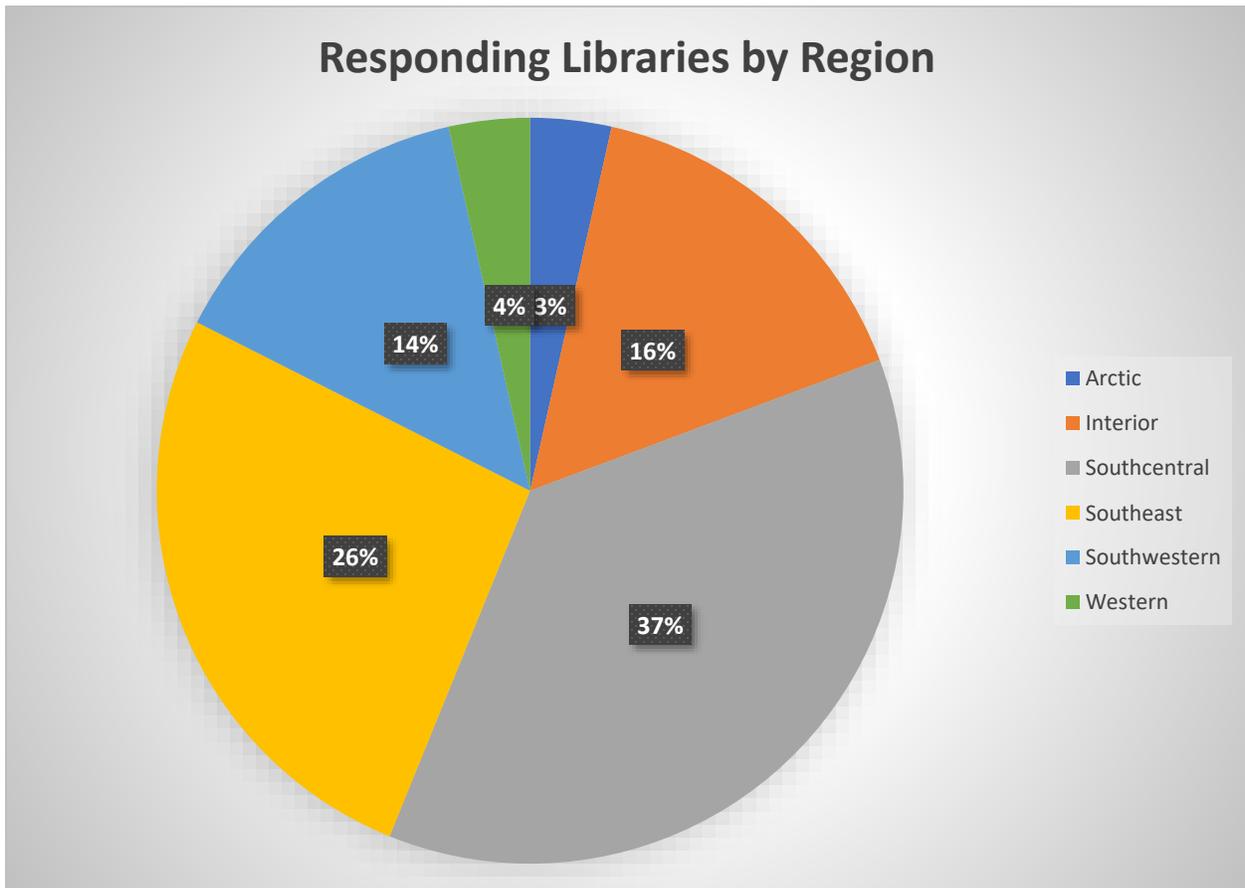
The survey contained five questions:

- Library name
- Region of Alaska
- Do you have any comments or concerns about the OWL Program choice of Zoom as a video conferencing platform in FY2021? (Free text response)

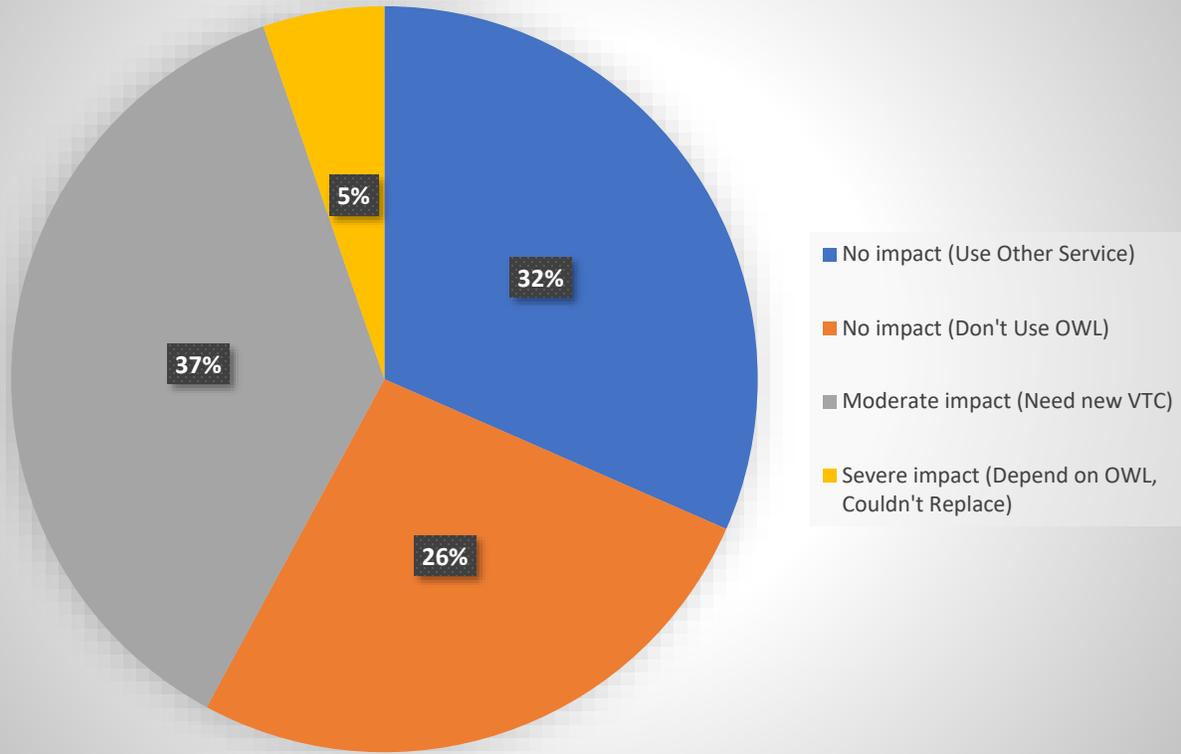
- What's the number one issue that we should work on with respect to providing video conferencing services in FY2021? (Free text response)
- OWL Video conferencing may be discontinued in FY2022 (starting 7/1/2021). Select the answer that best matches the impact that the end of OWL provided video conferencing would have on your library. Respondents could choose from:
 - No impact - We do not use OWL video conferencing.
 - No impact - We would do video conferencing through another service.
 - Moderate impact - We would have to hunt for a solution, but likely manage.
 - Severe impact - We do many key things through OWL video conferencing and don't know how we'd duplicate this service.

Results

Quantitative Results



Impact of No OWL VTC in FY2022



Qualitative Results

The full list of comments to the questions below are available upon request. This report aims to offer representative comments by region to save the reader's time.

Question: Do you have any comments or concerns about the OWL Program choice of Zoom as a video conferencing platform in FY2021?

Arctic (Two responses received)

- No, the library director has been provided a professional membership through our main institution (Ilisagvik College).
- Availability will be an issue when our internet service is poor due to local storms and extra fees added to our phone line accounts to call a non-toll-free number to participate.

Interior (Nine responses received)

- None. I like Zoom meetings for the convenience.
- I have no comment as we have not used OWL conferencing since 2015.
- No. Zoom works best for us.

Southcentral (Twenty-one responses received)

- We like using the Zoom platform through the OWL program. It is especially helpful to have a technician handy for questions and recording.
- No. We have been using Zoom for all library programs since COVID-19 began, and the City Council has also adopted it for official business. Most people seem to have little trouble using it.
- We would welcome a web-based video conferencing platform, though we are concerned about Zoom security issues that have been found.

Southeast (Fifteen responses received)

- None. We are using Zoom with great success. There are other options that are equally viable, but I have no strong preference of brand.
- OWL was great before commercially available platforms became more mainstream and we're happy with using commercially available platforms going forward.
- Zoom seems to be working great during this pandemic - so the benefit would definitely be that most people have used the software at this point, from seniors to small children. Good choice.

Southwestern (Eight responses received)

- The staff that would be hosting the OWL programs are not familiar with Zoom but can learn the process needed to host a Zoom program.
- We are a very small library and are quite new to both OWL and Zoom. The training will be appreciated!
- No, I like using Zoom, especially if safety protocols are followed.

Western (Two responses received)

- We have not yet used Zoom as a video conferencing platform. However, I am confident that the Alaska State Library Technology team will work with me to make any platform viable due to the challenges of Rural Alaska and broadband.
- I use Zoom for my library programs and it generally works really well.

Question: What's the number one issue that we should work on with respect to providing video conferencing services in FY2021?

Arctic (Two responses received)

- Affording better broadband access to support video conferencing.
- Possibly search for a service that has a toll-free number to avoid phone charges for participants in rural areas and/or offer recorded sessions for those who weren't able to connect due to weather. [Author's note. OWL's FY2021 Zoom subscription managed by UA has toll free calling.]

Interior (Nine responses received)

- Training Demonstrating the many uses available.
- That anyone with internet can be included - maybe even by cell phone? [Author's note: People can join an OWL Zoom meeting by cell phone. Data charges may apply.]

Southcentral (Twenty-one responses received)

- Training of small libraries like ours to use Zoom.
- Just happy we will still be able to do video conferencing over the OWL Network.
- That each library knows how Zoom operates. My husband will work with Anchorage Public Library to get it going, so I'll need to pay close attention to what he does.

Southeast (Fifteen responses received)

- Making sure all Alaska libraries have the bandwidth to be able to participate.
- I really like that we have a tech person, Kyle, to help with device connection issues. He has been invaluable to me for troubleshooting many issues from audio problems to bandwidth issues. I would not have been able to solve some of these issues without a person to ask for help. Having someone available while the conference is happening to help if a call is dropped, needs to be reconnected, or a connection tried again to improve the quality is a very important piece of why the process runs so smoothly.
- Usability, owl video equipment was always so labor intensive and often did not work. A stable, easy to use platform would be nice.

Southwestern (Eight responses received)

- Making it EASY PLEASE when it comes to technology.
- Better connection to other sites, the few OWL teleconferences we have tried were hard to see the other participants and the bandwidth or buffering constantly was troublesome.
- Perhaps that our bandwidth is sufficient for it to work.

Western (Two responses received)

- The support from UAF was invaluable. Grant to update equipment.
- My library as well as many other rural libraries have inadequate bandwidth to reliably do video conferencing.

Cost efficiencies developed for FY2021

During the spring of 2020, OWL staff at the Alaska State Library consulted with staff at the University of Alaska (UA) System video services. UA staff rolled out a Zoom network to rural campuses with success and strongly recommended that the State Library use Zoom for OWL services.

Another factor in our discussions was the cost of replacing the legacy CISCO network, which was indicated as costing more than \$250,000 for the equipment, not to mention the annual costs for CISCO licenses and maintenance contracts. The Zoom network costs would be much lower,

especially since people could participate over their computers with the addition of a web camera, in some cases. Newer laptops come with web cameras installed.

A final factor in this decision was the startling national uptake on Zoom meetings after the COVID-19 health pandemic hit. Familiarity with Zoom for family events translated into a fertile ground for library staff to decide that Zoom could meet their video conferencing needs for library events.

The Alaska State Library decided to migrate the OWL video conference network to Zoom, with management, training, and technical support administered through the UA System video services. This switch resulted in savings of 42%.

The cost efficiencies for FY2021 were determined by comparing the current budget for video conferencing services (\$122,642) to what was budgeted for in FY2019 (\$211,154). The FY2020 costs for video conferencing (\$121,426) were disregarded because the network was shut down from July 2019 through mid-January 2020 due to the fact that OWL was initially line-item vetoed, but was subsequently restored to the budget by the Governor.

The usage of OWL video conference services in FY2020 was severely impacted by a break in program funding from the end of June through mid-August. As a result, the video conference program equipment at the University of Alaska was uninstalled, boxed up, and program staff were laid off. It proved difficult to recruit for the video conference position and the new person faced challenges in reassembling equipment, connections, and working with librarians to restore configurations. As a result, the OWL video conference system was only able to resume in February 2020, just in time for the COVID-19 health pandemic.

Despite these challenges, OWL managed a total of 108 video conferences involving 15 endpoints in FY2020, serving 742 participants. For a more normal usage year, in FY2019, OWL had 271 video conferences involving 47 endpoints with 1,537 participants. In both years, 101 video conferencing endpoints were deployed in Alaska's public libraries.

Having decreased the costs of providing video conference services with training and technical support by 42%, the department expects program costs to remain relatively stable if the video conference portion of OWL is funded in FY2022 and into the future.

Current status of OWL video conference program

As of late October 2020, the OWL video conference network has transitioned to Zoom. All libraries with legacy OWL video conference endpoints were contacted and offered Zoom accounts. So far, 59 individuals at 42 libraries have received training. A total of 34 libraries have active Zoom accounts issued by OWL. Three libraries declined OWL Zoom accounts. As of October 2020, 32 libraries have not responded and follow up is planned in fall/winter 2020 to obtain a yes/no answer on whether any of the remaining libraries would like an OWL Zoom account.

Since July 1, 2020, this Zoom-based, UA managed video conference network has held 242 video conferences with 1,092 participants. A few representative video conferences were:

- Talkeetna: Strong Women workout program (Ongoing)
- Tenakee: Dermott O'Toole Memorial Library Workshop (August)
- Kenny Lake: September Book Club discussion
- Soldotna: Small Fry Story Time

Conclusions

Based on the consultations and video conference usage reports, it is the conclusion of the Alaska State Library that a formal video conference program with Alaska-based technical support is useful for a number of smaller libraries that may not have the expertise to run video conferences on their own.

It also appears to be true that the majority of Alaska public libraries would not feel an impact from the loss of the OWL video conference program. It does appear that the loss of the video conference program would affect rural and smaller libraries more.

However, the FY2021 experience shows a strong uptake on the redesigned OWL video conferencing program. As noted above, 42 libraries were onboarded during the initial training period, and from July to October 2020 libraries hosted more video conferences with more participants than in the truncated service period in FY2020. As of October 2020, the new system has averaged 60 meetings a month. If this holds through the rest of FY2021, the Alaska State Library will see 720 video conferences, a 265% increase over FY2019, the last normal year of video conference usage.