Press Release

Cook Memorial Library Now Lending Laptops & WiFi Hotspots

(LA GRANDE, OREGON, AUGUST 7, 2020) Public libraries have long been known as places where you can check out and take home books, magazines, audiobooks, CDs and DVDs. Cook Memorial Library is taking the lending concept to an exciting new level by letting library users borrow ChromeKits – a Chromebook laptop and a WiFi hotspot bundled together -- to take home for a week at a time.

This pilot program with two ChromeKits will help determine the actual need for computers and connectivity in La Grande. According to the latest data available from BroadbandNow, La Grande ranks as the 160th most connected city in Oregon with at least 1,000 Union County residents living without home internet access; the majority of those individuals are in La Grande.

Library Director Kip Roberson sees the library's new ChromeKit lending program as a way to give everyone equal access to technology and tools that are often needed for everyday tasks. "This program is perfect for us," Roberson said. "We're all about providing access and taking away barriers."

The ChromeKit program makes Chromebook laptops and internet hotspot devices -- which use cellphone signals to connect to the internet and broadcast a WiFi connection for nearby wireless devices to use -- available for those with library cards to check out and take home for one week at a time. Similar programs have been done in other libraries across the country, Roberson said.

With the library building still closed to the public due to the ongoing pandemic, the ChromeKit program is designed so that the library can continue to provide patrons access to computers

and the internet. In addition to the 1,000 county residents who don't have internet access at home, it is estimated that nearly 20% of county residents don't have a computer in their home.

"During the pandemic closure, the library expanded its digital library offerings; however, that expansion has only benefitted those patrons who have internet access," said Roberson. "We routinely have patrons knocking on our door or calling us asking if they can come inside to use a public computer; these patrons are often desperate to complete an online job application or file an unemployment claim, and it's unfortunate that we've had to turn folks away," he continued.

Providing patrons with a laptop with internet access outside the library will help take away the stress of job hunting or completing an online training, it can give students access at home to complete homework, or it can give access to someone who would rather use a connected laptop from home rather than using their mobile device from their car in our parking lot while connected to the library's WiFi. Maybe someone just wants to stream a movie or TV show using one of the pre-loaded library apps.

Since it's a pilot program, the library will be tracking how often a ChromeKit is borrowed, and how patrons are using them, through a quick survey patrons can answer once they return it, Roberson said. "It will be intriguing to see what people need it for and how they use it.".

The Chromebooks are wiped clean after each use. While there's some worry about the hotspots or Chromebooks being lost, stolen, or broken, "that's the same risk that comes with any other library item," Roberson said.

ChromeKits are available to La Grande resident cardholders age 18 and older whose account is in good standing and has been active for at least 6 months. Patrons must read the lending policy and sign a borrower agreement form accepting financial liability. Kits are available on a first-come, first-served basis; the library will maintain a reservations list. There is no fee to check out one, however, late fees of $5 per day and replacement costs will apply if the ChromeKit is not returned on time. Call the library at 541.962.1339 to reserve a ChromeKit.

For more information about library resources, go to cookmemoriallibrary.org.

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