

**Chris Jowaisas**  
**Senior Program Officer**  
**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**  
**“Libraries and Broadband: Urgency and Impact” Public Hearing**

Testimony Delivered to IMLS Director Susan H. Hildreth, and The National Museum and Library Services Board (NMLSB) at the Public Hearing “Libraries and Broadband: Urgency and Impact”

Thank you to Director Hildreth and the National Museum & Library Services Board for holding this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about the experience that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has had with ensuring access to technology through public libraries and our vision of how libraries can utilize broadband to drive personal and community development.

Today, the Gates Foundation is composed of many programs and initiatives, from fighting diseases such as polio, malaria and tuberculosis to helping farmers in Africa strengthen their crops to improving the educational system in the United States. But it all started in 1997 with the Gates Library Foundation. Back then, only about 25 percent of public libraries offered public access to the Internet, and many inside the library community were not sure this was a service libraries needed to offer.

Bill, Melinda and Bill Gates, Sr. believed that access to information and technology was absolutely essential to allowing people to live healthy, productive lives, and they felt that public libraries were the best places to provide such services. This is because public libraries are free and open to the public, they have support within the community, and, most importantly, they have knowledgeable staff who are able to provide guidance and training to library visitors.

The foundation set an ambitious goal: If you can reach a public library, you can reach the Internet. By 2004, that goal was met. After investing \$240 million, the U.S. Libraries program, in conjunction with partners at the federal, state, and local level, helped connect 99 percent of all U.S. public libraries to the Internet. Our continued funding supporting public libraries in the US reflects the belief that investments in the public library benefit the community at large by ensuring that all people continue to have the opportunity to lead productive lives.

While the original vision of the foundation has been realized and all people now have access to technology through their library, it is time to turn our attention to a new vision - ensuring that people have access to all of the opportunities that technology has to offer and that the “opportunity divide” does not increase.

The foundation believes that public libraries are key components in meeting this new vision, but face challenges in doing so. According to the 2011-2012 Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study, public computer and Wi-Fi use increased in the previous year at more than 60 percent of libraries. But it also found that more than 65 percent of libraries report that they don’t have enough public computers to meet the demand, and **41 percent report** that their Internet connection speeds are insufficient. Meanwhile, many public libraries are dealing

with decreased or inadequate budgets. Twenty-three states reported cuts in state funding for public libraries in 2012, and more than 40 percent of states reported decreased public library support for three years in a row. Clearly, libraries have stepped in to address this new divide and people are looking to libraries to do just that. However, libraries do not have adequate resources to meet people's expanding needs.

Despite these continuing challenges related to funding, libraries move forward in addressing community development in many areas, from economic development to education to civic engagement to health and wellness. They do this through a variety of services, such as helping people prepare resumes and apply for jobs, equipping them with digital literacy skills, showing them how to take action through e-government services, and helping them find information that improves their health. And people's needs and expectations keep on growing. As the opportunities evolve, libraries will continue to strive to close the opportunity divide – whether it is addressing the needs of immigrant communities, expanding learning opportunities for adults, or supporting students through the provision of additional electronic resources.

To be in a position to accomplish this vision, public libraries must have the bandwidth to provide such services in an efficient and effective manner. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and continues to be a challenge in many communities, even after substantial and ongoing investments from local, state, and federal programs to address getting robust connectivity to every library.

Before libraries can explore new services, they have to know that their connectivity infrastructure is sufficient to handle experimentation and exploration without negatively impacting the access that people depend on. As online services evolve to include more video or other interactive media to deliver content, public libraries struggle to provide the quality of service needed by their community when it comes to connectivity. Libraries often face this demand with consumer grade connectivity infrastructure that does not easily scale and offers little to no quality of service guarantees. Essentially, libraries are often operating with one arm tied behind their back when it comes to connectivity.

Broadband connectivity is the underlying bedrock for building a full suite of services for community and personal development. With a robust and reliable broadband connection, libraries and communities can move into more areas of exploration and innovation. People can go beyond being passive consumers of content to creating their own content, which is where the great personal and economic opportunity lies.

As the foundation assists the public library field through continued investments in meeting this vision, we hope to see more partners realize the power of the public library to assist personal and community development. The foundation hopes that the network of supporters of this vision grows because we have seen and learned firsthand from investments in public libraries that they are key organizations for growing opportunity at the personal and community level.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony.