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IMLS Public Hearing: “Libraries and Broadband: Urgency and Impact”

Thank you, IMLS Director Susan Hildreth and the National Museum and Library Services Board for bringing us together to discuss the broadband-enabled future of libraries and our communities. It is an honor to share the stage this morning with Chairman Wheeler and so many other distinguished speakers.

The American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world, serving more than 57,000 members, and the ALA Office for Information Technology Policy works to secure national policies that ensure access to electronic resources as a means of upholding the public’s right to a free and open information society. Happy National Library Week from all of us!

This morning I will draw on more than 20 years of research from John Bertot and the [Public Libraries and the Internet](#) survey, University of Washington’s [Opportunity for All](#) study, and [ALA Office for Research & Statistics](#) and [IMLS](#) data. I’d like to thank all of these researchers—and funders like IMLS and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—for their many contributions.

Technology snapshot

First—I’d like to share a snapshot of public libraries. There are more than 16,400 public library buildings—more than the number of McDonald’s in the United States. Together they host more than 1.5 billion in-person visits annually. MANY of these visits include computer and internet use—both wired and wireless.

Ensuring libraries have sufficient advanced broadband capacity is essential for completing education, and jump-starting employment and entrepreneurship for residents throughout the country. In addition, the sufficiently connected library greatly fosters community engagement and individual empowerment.

To support these uses, we’ve seen ongoing improvement in library internet speeds over the past decade. In 2004, for example, only 20% of libraries reported speeds greater than 1.5 megabits per second. By 2012 we had nearly flipped this statistic.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, **fewer than 10%** of libraries reported speeds of 100 megabits per second or faster. Preliminary findings (not yet released) from the 2014 [Digital Inclusion Survey](#) show we’ve only added a few percentage points. About half of our nation’s libraries still report speeds of 10 megabits per second – similar to average home broadband speeds. Rural and small libraries are particularly lagging.

Most libraries lack the capacity needed to adequately support:

- An average of 10 public computers in rural libraries and 41 in city libraries;

- Nearly ubiquitous free public WiFi and an exploding number of patron-owned devices (when I was in my hometown library recently, I saw a woman with her laptop, tablet and smartphone spread out in front of her);
- Downloadable, streaming and interactive digital collections ranging from e-books to practice tests to instructional videos; and
- Videoconferencing applications that support legal advice, job interviews and connections with overseas military families—to name just a few.

In fact, even as speeds improve, library staff *continue* to report their bandwidth is inadequate to meet patron needs. A substantial majority of libraries report this is true today, and 88 percent of state library agencies say that a majority of libraries will need bandwidth upgrades this year or next. Libraries aren't standing still, but too many are falling behind.

Need for speed

This need for speed is driven by modern library services and the unique role libraries have as the one place for all. Nearly two-thirds of libraries report they are the only provider of free access to computers and the Internet in their communities. In one year, libraries posted more than [341 million computer uses](#), which does *not* include WiFi.

Libraries leverage internet access to empower library users and support education, employment and entrepreneurship. I think John will talk a little more about public use, so I'll simply add a few examples here from the [Opportunity for All](#) Study:

- In one year, roughly 30 million people used a library's computer or internet access for employment or career purposes
- About 32.5 million used library technology to achieve educational goals, including taking online classes, completing schoolwork or researching college programs.
- And 26 million people used library connections to access government information, services and officials.

Underlying many of these uses is the need for many people to increase digital literacy skills. Nearly all libraries provide formal or informal assistance learning everything from setting up an email account to uploading job applications to using new ebook readers and tablets.

Data limitations

So... we have a lot of data to understand the library technology landscape. But we also have gaps—such as the number of people using library WiFi each year and information about the quality of internet access they experience. We are just now beginning to gather library internet speed data through the Digital Inclusion Survey.

We also lack nationwide information on remote use of library resources—including library website visits, time spent online and with what types of library resources.

Most glaringly, though, we have a wealth of data from USAC that remains largely locked away from us. I'm thrilled [IMLS has begun to drill down](#) into this rich vein of information, but the information should be publicly available. ALA continues to call for more data transparency—including Block 4 data.

Future focus

In closing, though, I would like to say that data is useful as a rearview mirror—but not a crystal ball. In a focus group FIVE YEARS AGO an Indiana librarian put it this way: "At one time, we would have said a T1 line was just the world, but it just changes too fast. We went from a T1 to two T1s to three T1s to now 15 megabits of fiber."

We hear from [today's gigabit libraries](#) that abundant bandwidth can be a mighty library service that enables robust simultaneous use of recording studios AND 3D modeling camps; new community partnerships AND co-working spaces; telehealth, access to electronic health records and global connections.

Bandwidth should not limit what's possible through our libraries. We need to bring more gigabit libraries to our communities.

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Relevant Addenda:

- Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study
www.ala.org/plinternetfunding
- Digital Inclusion Survey
<http://digitalinclusion.umd.edu/>
- Public Libraries in the United States Survey
http://www.ims.gov/research/pls_publications.aspx
- Opportunity for All
<http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/assetmanager/opportunityforall.pdf>
- Inclusive Gigabit Libraries
<http://publish.illinois.edu/inclusivegiglibraries/>
- U.S. Public Libraries and the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program
<http://www.districtdispatch.org/2013/05/libraries-and-btop-strengthen-communities/>
- Library Services in the Digital Age
<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/01/22/library-services/>

- ALA E-rate filings

<http://www.ala.org/offices/oitp/publications/officialfilings/officialfilings>