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**IMLS Public Hearing: "Libraries and Broadband: Urgency and Impact"**  
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I want to thank the Institute of Museum and Library services (IMLS) and the Board members present for this opportunity. I will first provide a bit of background on ALA's E-rate Task Force and State E-rate coordinators.

**BACKGROUND ON ALA E-RATE TASK FORCE AND STATE E-RATE COORDINATORS**

The American Library Association has advocated for high-capacity broadband in libraries since the beginning of the E-rate program. I am always so proud to mention that my former Senator Olympia Snowe and current Senate Commerce Chairman Jay Rockefeller were critical in getting this program into the American Telecommunications legislation of 1996.

- ALA showed an early recognition of the importance of E-rate for libraries by establishing an official E-rate task force (ERTF) that closely monitors and responds to FCC proceedings. This task force is comprised of state E-rate coordinators from around the country.
- E-rate has transformed the way libraries and schools function to better serve the needs of patrons and students. From my perspective, it's been a tremendously successful program. However, after nearly 20 years, even a successful program should be assessed to make sure it is focused on meeting today's connectivity needs. ALA supports "fine-tuning" the program and creating efficiencies where possible. However, I caution that in the changes being contemplated, we should "first do no harm".
- In March the FCC released a Public Notice, and I'll share a few details from the ALA responses. First, ALA believes its proposals address some of the greatest challenges our libraries have in reaching the kinds of broadband speeds they need for today's (and tomorrow's) library services. ALA wants to focus on places where high-capacity broadband is not available to libraries and where, if it is available, it may not be affordable. ALA also wants to set a high bar for library broadband targets. We believe this should occur with scalable technology instead of continually investing in incremental improvements. We envision all libraries at 1 gig by 2018 if not sooner.

As an aside, in Maine our goal for 2015 is 1 gig to 99% of Maine's libraries and K12 schools.

**Our public libraries are the only place for free Internet access in 77 % of Maine's communities.**

This is critical access for our citizens who don't have or can't afford broadband at home.

Nationally, my colleagues say increasing bandwidth is a number one priority.

- 29% of state libraries say that a majority of their libraries lack adequate bandwidth now.
- 92% say most of their libraries will need more bandwidth within 3 years.

(A survey of Maine libraries asking what would you do with more broadband? Responses included teach bigger classes, and eliminate video latency). I received 55 responses within hours. And I heard from libraries I never hear from.

Because broadband is so critical to libraries, ALA recommends using a portion of the \$2 billion dollar "down payment" to immediately increase library broadband.

## **ALA has three main proposals:**

1. The first is called a **Scalable technologies deployment program**  
This would apply to libraries in close proximity to providers who can offer speeds of at least 100Mbps up to our 1 Gbps goal. ALA thinks this project could identify ways to keep ongoing costs affordable and might be the catalyst for providers to expand into areas where there is little competition.
2. The second proposal would promote **School-library WAN partnerships**  
This program would “hook up” a school with high-capacity broadband to a nearby library without equal broadband. In numerous instances it would be more cost-effective for the nearby library to leverage the school’s broadband capacity than for the library to obtain its own broadband capacity.
3. The third and final project calls for **Network diagnostics and technical support**  
ALA believes this project will maximize the cost efficient use of E-rate funds and help our smallest libraries. This could include bulk purchasing and would rely on support from state libraries with trained E-rate coordinators who have a state-wide perspective on the status and connectivity needs of their libraries.

(I want to thank IMLS for allowing LSTA funds to be allocated to continuing education, including digital literacy. This support is critical).

## **ALA ALSO COMMENTED ON LONG STANDING ISSUES**

Streamline processes: (e.g. follow state purchasing requirements, develop an evergreen form for multi-year contracts, direct payment to the applicant) - ALA has long advocated for a simpler application process.

Increase overall program funding after all efficiencies have been identified and put into place

Misc. Concerns:

Phasing out support for voice services has been a somewhat contentious issue for the ERTF, and for many libraries across the country- particularly for our small and rural libraries. Some of the issues we have weighed include what to do in cases of emergency or in areas where alternatives to phone may not be reliable or affordable. I did a quick survey on this issue for public libraries in my own state, and they are split right down the middle on this issue. One librarian from a library that receives significant POTS (plain old telephone service) funding, indicated that losing funding for POTS would hurt her library but that she is very concerned about other libraries that critically need more bandwidth. She ponders that that might be a fair trade off.

As libraries move to gigabit connectivity, priority two E-rate funding for international connections will become critical for many. Broadband to the external wall will be huge, but if the library can’t afford the internal wiring and equipment to maximize use of this connectivity, much of it will be wasted.

However, ALA supports a very gradual phase out of voice services

## **WHY THIS MATTERS**

Finally, I’d like to bring this all back to WHY this matters.

- Many residential consumers still do not have access to broadband or the skills to use the Internet, and they rely on public libraries to provide computers, Internet access, training, and services that will improve their quality of life. Libraries touch all aspects of life - from education to employment and entrepreneurship, to empowering people in all stages and from all walks of life. When people can't apply for a job or access government services without broadband, public libraries must be there for them. We would have small schools and libraries unconnected to this day were it not for the E-rate program.
- Dozens of stories on the Maine State Library web site give specific examples of how library access has supported small businesses, job seekers, and provided training and continuing education ([maine.gov/msl/](http://maine.gov/msl/))

Maine is a state that depends on tourist dollars and we are a state of small businesses. Libraries are a critical component of keeping our small towns and rural areas vibrant. Small businesses, tourists and summer residents use libraries and libraries' Wi-Fi during and after hours.

We are talking about the lives of tens of thousands of individual people whose lives are being enriched by access to broadband in our public libraries. This is the key point I want to leave you with. We are not just talking abstractions, policy and goals – we are talking about people's lives.

**Adequate** broadband is not good enough for libraries to provide today's services. Library services today and tomorrow depend on High-capacity broadband if we are to carry out the mission of the library to help educate and support our communities; we must build for the future today. As the gatekeepers, the innovators, and the service providers, we must stay ahead of technology so our communities and our citizens can prosper.

The final point is that we do not know what the next "New Thing" will be that transforms the digital world. Whatever it is, it will involve bandwidth, and our library patrons will expect that we be ready to provide it and that it works well at the library. We cannot allow inadequate bandwidth to limit the services that libraries can provide their communities.