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IMLS April 17 Public Hearing: “Libraries and Broadband: Urgency and Impact”

It is an honor to speak before the National Museum and Library Services Board, and I want to thank the Institute of Museum and Library Services Director Susan H. Hildreth for inviting me to speak on behalf of our nation’s cities on the critical issue of broadband access in libraries.

Everyone in this room has a story or a reason for why you're here and why you're committed to libraries and their impact on communities.

My story began when I was a migrant kid in Florida, during a time that my family traveled all over America working in the fields.

We were placed in the Florida Glades, in a town called Belle Glade. We grew up in a community that did not have a stationery library, so as an eight- to nine-year-old kid, I had a choice to make: when our town’s mobile library drove up to the neighborhood park, I could either stay on the playground, or go into that mobile library for the two hours that it was there. Most often, the playground won.

But eventually I found my way to the library. Fifteen years later I ran for public office, in the city and community where I grew up. I had to deal with a number of issues—crime, drugs, housing—but I knew that when I came back to my community from grad school, that one of the priorities I was going to advocate and fight for was to get a standing library in our community.

I spoke to legislators and the county commission for five years using the same speech. In the fifth year, a staffer of the state legislative committee pulled out my speech, read it out loud and said, “Will you guys please get this mayor a library!”

My persistence paid off. Three years after that, I was very blessed and honored that the library was named the “Clarence E. Anthony Library” in South Bay, Florida.

So why am I here? Because this issue is very important to me personally, and to cities across the nation. Libraries made a huge difference in my life. I would not be here if it was not for that institution—that building, even that mobile library—that was there for me to read about the places I could travel and the things that I could do, as a migrant kid.

Times have changed, but libraries are still critically important. One fact that has not changed: education is the equalizer in America. This includes the ability to connect to the Internet and use computers in libraries and homes.

The National League of Cities understands that fact, and our national political leaders have made a commitment to education by advocating for legislation that will extend and

expand the E-rate program and increase its funding. We want to streamline the program and make sure that it is able to provide access to the Internet and computers for every American.

We've also partnered with the Urban Libraries Council to assist and ensure that any E-rate reform includes a financial commitment that enables us to deliver connectivity to everyone, especially those who are too-often left behind.

Chairman Wheeler quoted the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, and I will as well: "A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert."

Digital literacy is no longer a choice in American cities. High-speed Internet is essential for residents to do everything from finding work to gaining access to health coverage. We must recognize that if we're going to bridge the real economic and educational opportunities in America, people must have access to the Internet and computers.

It is also important to note, minority and low-income communities are hurting most in the race for digital literacy. City leaders recognize that in minority communities, access is seriously lacking and the result is that populations are being left behind in today's 21st century economy.

Our policymakers and national leaders are failing. I'm calling for action. We know the importance of E-rate. We like to say that cities are where the action is. We are making things happen. We want to partner with you to make things happen.

The National League of Cities is committed to working with the FCC, Urban Libraries Council, Congress, the White House and IMLS to address this issue. Talk is easy, but action is more important.

Let's take the time to get E-Rate modernization right. Let's be creative and bold in our thinking to make sure that our libraries have the technology infrastructure that they need to support a strong local community that contributes to a strong national economy.

My kids would be embarrassed to hear me quote the R&B artist Drake, "I started from the bottom and now I am here." And for me, I have to thank libraries for giving me the opportunity to achieve.