

ALA American Library Association

Testimony of

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The National Broadband Plan and Promoting Broadband Adoption

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On Behalf of the

American Library Association

Chairman Boucher, Ranking Member Stearns and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your invitation to testify on behalf of the American Library Association (ALA) on recommendations in the National Broadband Plan for increasing broadband adoption. My name is Rivkah Sass, and I am the Director of the Sacramento Public Library System. I am also a member of the American Library Association, the oldest and largest library association in the world with more than 65,000 members. Our members are primarily school, public and academic librarians and some special librarians, as well as trustees and friends of libraries.

My testimony draws upon my experiences as a professional librarian for more than thirty years and on my current position as director of the fourth largest library system in California serving the public in the city of Sacramento and Sacramento County, as well as the cities of Citrus Heights, Elk Grove, Galt, Isleton and Rancho Cordova. The Sacramento Public Library System operates 27 libraries, has over 200 staff members, houses a collection of more than two million volumes and has an annual budget of \$35 million. More than 600,000 residents have a library card, and over seven million items are circulated each year. The most recent addition to our system is the new North Natomas Library facility, which opened in January 2010. Featuring more than 120 public-access computer stations, a robust collection of books, periodicals, DVDs and CDs containing more than 100,000 items focused on community and student users, our new branch has something to offer everyone in the community.

Libraries, as community anchor institutions, are at the forefront of efforts in our country to improve broadband adoption in the home. The critical role of libraries in helping drive adoption in our communities is demonstrated by the fact that the first sustainable broadband adoption grant awarded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 was to the New Mexico State Library. Specifically, the New Mexico State Library was awarded \$1.5 million by

the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) to increase broadband adoption and promote computer literacy and Internet use among vulnerable populations, Hispanic and Native American users, small businesses and entrepreneurs through training and outreach statewide. The award will support the “Fast Forward New Mexico” initiative, which includes training programs at public and tribal libraries to increase the skills of New Mexico citizens¹.

In addition, some libraries and their communities have also received stimulus funding through BTOP’s Public Computing Center (PCC) program. For example, the Arizona State Library, Archives and Public Records was awarded a \$1.3 million grant to enhance public computing facilities in more than 80 public libraries throughout the state. More than 1,000 computers will be added in a state where more than 90 percent of public libraries reported they do not have enough public computers to meet demand some or all of the time.² Another example is the city of Boston, which will use stimulus funding to expand computer and Internet capacity at the Boston Public Library and its 26 branches.³ Both of these grant awardees will devote a significant portion of their grant funds to training individuals to use computers and the Internet. Once these individuals become more comfortable using computers to access the Internet at the library, they are more likely to subscribe to broadband service at home.

Such examples of one-time infusions of funding will undoubtedly have a significant, positive impact on improving broadband adoption in grant-winning communities. It is important to note that libraries have also sought other collaborative ways to help improve broadband adoption, beyond seeking stimulus funds. For example, state libraries are teaming with other state agencies

¹ The “Fast Forward New Mexico” grant application is available at http://www.nmstatelibrary.org/docs/btop/FFNM_application.pdf

² A Perfect Storm Brewing: Budget Cuts Threaten Public Library Services at Time of Increased Demand. (2010). Available: <http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/issuesbriefs/issuesbrief-perfectstorm.pdf>

³ Ibid.

to cost-effectively train librarians to assist newly unemployed residents. For example, in North Carolina, which has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, the state library collaborated with the Unemployment Security Commission and the Department of Commerce to train librarians, create an online job search toolkit and expand job-related library collections.⁴

However, more must be done to help shrink the digital divide by improving broadband adoption rates in all of our communities. The Federal Communication Commission's National Broadband Plan outlines specific recommendations as next steps. There are many recommendations I believe libraries are well positioned to be at the forefront in shaping and implementing, in particular the recommendation to create a Digital Literacy Corps. I will return to this idea later, but first would like to outline the central role of libraries in improving broadband adoption rates in our communities.

Libraries and the Broadband Ecosystem

While our library system in Sacramento is fortunate to have a supportive city government and library board of directors, as well as vibrant community support, we too are dealing with the challenges facing most libraries across the country today. Without a healthy broadband ecosystem, libraries and other anchor institutions along with our colleagues in community-based organizations, K-12 schools and colleges, universities and community colleges will not be able to continue our work in supporting and improving broadband adoption.

A community's broadband ecosystem is comprised of many components – including but not limited to libraries and other anchor institutions such as educational institutions, community-based organizations, state and local agencies, and the members of the community – all dependent upon sufficient broadband connectivity. To increase broadband adoption rates in our communities, these

⁴ *ibid.*

members must coordinate their efforts to offer services and technology in the most efficient manner possible.

As any librarian will attest, information is useless unless one knows how to access and apply it. Likewise, access to high-speed broadband, by itself, would not guarantee our nation will be equipped to thrive in a global information society. The Federal Communications Commission acknowledged this principle in its National Broadband Plan's chapter on adoption and utilization, noting the importance of digital literacy as "a necessary life skill, much like the ability to read and write." We know that the access to broadband is a basic requirement for social and economic inclusion in our democratic society. The "costs" for those who do not utilize the Internet have increased exponentially by the shift of critical services and life tasks (e.g., filing for unemployment benefits, completing job applications, filing state and federal taxes, receiving information from your child's teacher, etc.) requiring Internet access.

Improving broadband adoption requires the development of basic digital literacy skills – which is central to the mission of libraries. And libraries – school, academic and public – are already present in communities across America. We are viewed as the trusted intermediaries in our communities – whether rural, urban or suburban – and are ideally situated to help shape and lead comprehensive national efforts to foster and increase digital literacy, thus improving adoption.

This mission to develop information literacy, including digital literacy skills, begins in K-12 schools, where school librarians, as instructional leaders in their schools, teach computer technology skills, emphasizing collaboration skills as tools to communicate more effectively, conduct research more efficiently, and increase productivity.⁵ School librarians know the school's

⁵ The term "digital literacy" describes a subset of the larger concept of "information literacy." Information literacy encompasses a full range of capabilities required to successfully navigate analog as well as Internet resources.

curriculum and effective techniques for crossing disciplines, collaborating with teachers and integrating information and technology literacy into core curriculum.

In our more than 3,800 colleges and universities, including community colleges, academic librarians work with students every day to help them develop technical and cognitive skills needed to be information and digitally literate. They also work closely with faculty from all disciplines to develop pedagogies to enhance teaching, learning and research on their campuses. In addition, librarians in academe teach students the importance of creating and caring for their own digital identities and respecting the intellectual property of others.

Beyond the classroom, public libraries serve learners of every age and skill level and are a source for lifelong learning. There are currently 16,543 public library outlets in communities across the nation, and libraries are found in virtually every community in the United States.⁶ Nationwide, 71 percent of all public libraries report they are the only provider of no-fee Internet access in their communities. In rural areas, 79 percent of libraries are the only no-fee Internet access provider.⁷ State library usage statistics for California last year indicates that more than 38 million Internet sessions were conducted on a mere 18,600 public access computers statewide; that literally equates to an Internet session for every resident of the state of California.

Public librarians, in particular, play a key role in shrinking the digital divide by providing formal and informal digital literacy training one-on-one or by offering formal classes – from helping patrons open their first e-mail accounts to teaching Internet search skills and computer applications. The ability of public libraries to reach a large proportion of the nation’s population is commensurate with the goals of the National Broadband Plan to increase individual broadband

⁶ Henderson, E., et al. (2009). *Public Libraries Survey: Fiscal Year 2007* (IMLS-2009–PLS-02). Institute of Museum and Library Services. Washington, DC. Available: http://harvester.census.gov/imls/pubs/Publications/fy2007_pls_report.pdf

⁷ Davis, et al. (2009). *Libraries Connect Communities 3: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study*. Chicago: American Library Association. Available: http://ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2008_2009/index.cfm

adoption rates. In fact, over half of all public libraries provide informal, point-of-need instruction and training. Also, about half of urban libraries and libraries in high poverty communities report they consider offering formal training in computer and Internet skills a critical library service.⁸ However, rural public libraries, in comparison to suburban and urban libraries, face greater challenges offering formal training classes. Only 24 percent of rural libraries offer such classes, compared with 42 percent of suburban and 52 percent of urban libraries.⁹ In Sacramento, for example, our libraries offer regularly scheduled no-fee computer classes open to all members of the community including communication basics (sending e-mails, writing letters, making shopping lists, attaching photos or other documents, etc.), introduction to the Internet, job search workshops, genealogy research online, and how to conduct online research, to name a few.

In addition, some libraries are going beyond formal classes and providing patrons with specialized, highly targeted consulting services. In Omaha, Neb., the Omaha Public Library's Swanson branch has created two programs targeted at teaching digital literacy skills – the “rent-a-librarian” and “rent-a-geek” programs. Both programs are no-fee and available to the public; patrons can sign up for a one-hour session with a librarian or library staff member. The rent-a-librarian program is also marketed to the local business community. The rent-a-geek program has capitalized on the otherwise untapped computer and technology skills of library aides, typically high school students and young adults, to assist patrons with elderly patrons being the biggest population to take advantage of these services. The library branch manager at the Swanson Library explained that these services are very popular. She credits this free, targeted, non-judgmental help as one creative solution to devote the time needed (and required) to provide very basic digital

⁸ Davis, et al. (2009). *Libraries Connect Communities 3: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study*. Chicago: American Library Association. Available: http://ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/2008_2009/index.cfm

⁹ Ibid.

literacy instruction when helping an individual take the first steps to becoming a broadband adopter.

Broadband Connectivity

In my community of Sacramento we have made a real commitment to technology. However, notwithstanding that strong commitment, our current levels of broadband connectivity are being tested by very real-world demands, which are only increasing. For example, our Valley Hi-North Laguna Library opened on August 29, 2009. It serves a diverse community with a portion of the population living below the poverty line. This library receives heavy usage by children and teens and is located across the street from a community college with many students. Because the library offers wireless Internet access, it is not uncommon to have 30 or more people in the building with their own laptops, using the wireless connection. We consider many of these patrons to be “power users” – using the Internet to access media, music, and other high-bandwidth demanding applications. A mere four months after opening the library branch with a 10 megabit connection, at peak times, utilization reached well beyond capacity. Without sufficient broadband connectivity, it is difficult for our staff to provide basic services to our patrons including teaching basic digital literacy.

Unfortunately, our experience in Sacramento is not atypical. Demand already has or will very quickly outpace many libraries’ current broadband capacity. While both urban and rural libraries report increases in connection speeds, they also continue to report that the connection speeds are insufficient to meet patron needs all or some of the time.¹⁰ Without adequate connectivity, a library’s ability to help improve broadband adoption rates is significantly hampered. Data from a recent 2008-2009 ALA study found that more than 80 percent of libraries enforce time limits on computer use and 45 percent of libraries enforce time limits ranging from 31 to 60

¹⁰ Ibid.

minutes.¹¹ Such limited windows of time greatly hinder both a librarian's ability to provide digital literacy instruction and an individual's ability to complete a job application or participate in distance learning courses, for example.

E-rate

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and recognize the critical role that the E-rate program has played in supporting telecommunications and other services for libraries and schools, in many instances helping sustain broadband connectivity. I would like to thank the members of this subcommittee for the creation of and continuing support for the E-rate program. Over the last several years, the E-rate program has provided discounts to public libraries and public and private schools for access to advanced telecommunications and information services. Without such discounts to support ongoing costs associated with telecommunications connectivity, our libraries and schools would be hard-pressed to provide the services they do today.

Libraries and schools depend upon an efficient E-rate program to help them meet their ever-increasing broadband needs, especially in this economic climate. The ALA is on record with the FCC in support of improvements to the E-rate program such as raising the circa-1998 funding cap of \$2.25 billion to meet current needs and identifying ways to simplify the application so that all libraries – big and small – can successfully obtain this critical financial support.¹²

Relevance

Access to broadband alone does not constitute adoption. Several factors come into play – including an individual's comfort with technology, ease of use, and experiencing success at finding, using and creating relevant content. Studies show that it is not having a computer at home, or the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Submission of the ALA to the FCC Concerning NBP Public Notice #15, November 20, 2009. Available: <http://www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/E-Rate-comments.pdf>

ability to have one, that motivates an individual to go online.¹³ There needs to be a culture of adoption through which an individual can internalize the personal and societal benefit to going online. The ALA maintains that for those individuals who have not yet adopted broadband at home (non-adopters), for those whose Internet connection is inadequate for some applications, or for those who at one time subscribed to broadband at home but no longer do so (un-adopters), the public library is the logical space where patrons can realize the benefits of going online. In such a setting, patrons can receive technological support at the point-of-need and are more likely to find the information they seek, be it educational content, a job application, federal assistance forms, or an e-mail from a family member serving in the military overseas. In addition, even those with sufficient broadband at home (adopters) turn to the library for additional technology and advanced digital literacy training and access to information resources, such as databases.

In these tough economic times, perhaps the most powerful examples of what motivates individuals to come to the library seeking digital literacy skills has been to search for employment. I would like to share with you two real-life stories of how librarians and library staff are helping patron in this way. While these examples are from libraries in the Sacramento area, I can assure you that my colleagues across the country can recount similar stories.

- Library staff at the Rancho Cordova Library were delighted to help a job seeker on April 28 of this year. Staff helped the patron update his resume to reflect a new home address, assisted him with using the Internet to go online and locate the correct job application site and assisted him with uploading his resume to the website. Upon calling the prospective employer to share he had successfully submitted his resume online, he was hired on the spot over the phone and directed to report to work doing electrical construction in the city of Folsom the next day. The

¹³ Pew Internet & American Life Project, Home Broadband Adoption 2009, at 3-4 (2009). Available: <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/Home-Broadband-Adoption-2009.pdf> and Stover, Sharon, Chapman, Gary, Waters, Jody. "Beyond Community Networking and CTCs: Access, Development, and Public Policy." *Telecommunications Policy* 28, no. 7/8 (2004): 465-85.

patron explained that he was very grateful for the library staff's help and said he could not have completed the steps necessary to obtain the job without it.

- Another story from the branch supervisor of the South Natomas Library – a young female patron came in to the library to thank the library staff profusely. The patron explained that because the library provided access to computers, she used them to create a resume, apply for a job and was happy to announce she had just been hired. She expressed sincere gratitude to the staff for their help and for the library having computers for her to use.

Our library staff shares a sense of great pride when recounting such stories because they are tangible examples of how their work on the front lines every day with patrons has had a direct, positive impact on individuals' lives, not to mention the economic health of our community.

These employment-related examples demonstrate the importance of people recognizing how using the Internet is relevant to them. My years of professional library experience can attest to the fact that individuals are more likely to be motivated to learn, in this case digital literacy skills, if they have what we librarians call "point-of-need." In addition, new adopters also motivate non-adopters by helping demonstrate to their friends and family how going online is relevant to them. One such example, one of my favorites, is that of a 94-year-old patron who brought her 87-year-old sister in to demonstrate how to access a popular photo website to show her pictures of her grand-nephew. Our desire to stay connected with friends and loved ones, and using broadband and the Internet to do so, is a great motivator for non-adopters.

Cost

The benefits of broadband adoption are undeniable. However, the cost of digital exclusion for non-adopters is increasing and even exacerbated as more and more essential services are available only online. Libraries are experiencing first-hand the impact of federal and state programs switching to online applications for services, job applications, and more students taking

online courses. Regarding government services provided online, 81 percent of libraries report they offer assistance with government forms and more than half provide specific help in accessing E-government services. About one quarter of libraries report they staff one specialist in E-government resources.¹⁴

The stakes for not being online in our society only continue to rise and are highlighted in data relevant to non-adopters:¹⁵

- 54 percent of Americans who sent a letter to the editor, contacted a government agency or official, or signed a petition did so online;¹⁶
- The unemployment rate nationwide continues to hover at nearly 10 percent, with April 2010's rate at 9.9 percent;¹⁷ and
- 62 percent of those currently employed use the Internet as part of work.¹⁸

In addition, the National Broadband Plan reports that 35 percent of Americans (roughly 80 million adults) do not use broadband at home. Also, 22 percent of non-adopters cite digital literacy as the main barrier to broadband adoption.

A recent Social Science Research Council (SSRC) study was commissioned by the FCC to analyze the factors shaping low rates of adoption of home broadband services in low-income and other marginalized communities.¹⁹ Study findings identified that of non-adopters, 22 percent were actually un-adopters. The study also found that libraries and other community organizations fill the gap between low home adoption and high community demand and provide a number of other

¹⁴ U.S. Public Libraries and E-Government Services. (2009). Available:

<http://www.ala.org/ala/research/initiatives/plftas/issuesbriefs/IssuesBrief-Egov.pdf>

¹⁵ Submission of the ALA to the FCC Concerning NBP Public Notice #16, December 2, 2010. Available:

http://www.wo.ala.org/districtdispatch/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/ALA-NBP-Public-Notice-16-12_2_09.pdf

¹⁶ Pew Internet & American Life Project, Home Broadband Adoption 2009, at 3-4 (2009). Available:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/Home-Broadband-Adoption-2009.pdf>

¹⁷ Bureau of Labor Statistics <http://www.bls.gov/>

¹⁸ Pew Internet & American Life Project, Home Broadband Adoption 2009, at 3-4 (2009). Available:

<http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/Home-Broadband-Adoption-2009.pdf>

¹⁹ Broadband Adoption in Low-Income Communities. (2010). Available:

http://webarchive.ssrg.org/pdfs/Broadband_Adoption_v1.1.pdf

critical services, such as training and support. Further, library staff assistance was critical to individuals' gaining the skills that lead to confident, sustainable home broadband adoption.

The SSRC study concludes that librarians are viewed as the trusted intermediaries in our communities. Combined with our expertise in teaching digital literacy skills and providing no-fee access to the Internet, libraries and librarians are perfectly positioned in our communities – whether rural, urban or suburban – to actively help shape and implement local, state and national efforts to improve broadband adoption rates.

Supporting Broadband Adoption

I am pleased to highlight one example of a legislative solution introduced by my congressional representative in California, Congresswoman Matsui. Rep. Matsui introduced a bill last fall, the Broadband Affordability Act of 2009 (H.R. 3646), addressing the very issue of affordability as a barrier to adoption. Her bill would, “establish a broadband lifeline program that enables qualifying low-income customers residing in urban and rural areas to purchase broadband service at reduced charges by reimbursing providers for each such customer served.” Such a bill would complement our work in libraries teaching digital literacy skills by assisting individuals with adopting broadband in the home. The bill would also go a long way to assist un-adopters becoming adopters again.

The National Broadband Plan – Digital Literacy and Looking Ahead

The library community is pleased that the National Broadband Plan recognizes the essential role of libraries in promoting digital literacy and broadband adoption. The ALA supports the recommendations that all Americans develop basic digital literacy skills including launching a National Digital Literacy Program, which creates a Digital Literacy Corps; increasing the capacity

of digital literacy partners with the Institution of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) acting as a lead; and creating an Online Digital Literacy Portal.

The ALA respectfully suggests that this subcommittee introduce and consider legislation that would authorize and support the creation of the Digital Literacy Corps as recommended by the FCC's National Broadband Plan. Libraries are committed to achieving the goals of digital literacy for all Americans; we can really "sink our teeth into" the creation of a Digital Literacy Corps. We could provide invaluable insight and would like to lead the effort collaboratively working with others to help shape and implement such a program. However, the plan rightly identifies that funding will be needed to increase our capacity to carry out the initiative.

Our suggestion comes at a time when libraries, schools and social and support services are experiencing severe cuts in funding. How are we as a nation going to compete in a world in which digital inclusion is essential and being digitally literate is no longer a luxury? The creation of a Digital Literacy Corps would infuse into our communities the much needed resources targeted specifically at developing and improving basic digital literacy skills, thus improving broadband adoption rates. A coordinated initiative at the national level under the NTIA has that potential. Libraries are already well aware of the benefits – and necessity – of being able to access online materials. Developing a digitally literate citizenry will produce 21st century learners and result in a workforce prepared for the challenges of the 21st century market place.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Stearns, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify. Also, on behalf of the American Library Association, my library colleagues and the people we serve, thank you for your leadership and support. Libraries would not be able to provide the services we do today without it.