

November 30, 2020

Digital Equity and Inclusion through America's Libraries

America's 117,000 libraries are an indispensable thread in the nation's digital safety net and an essential partner in digital equity and inclusion efforts. Affordable, high-capacity broadband enables The E's of Libraries®—education, employment, entrepreneurship, empowerment, and engagement—for *all* people on K-20 campuses and in communities of all sizes. Libraries provide no-fee access to internet-enabled devices and services and spur broadband adoption and use through diverse training and resources.

ALA Priority Issues

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic demand swift and expansive action to leverage the library network and maximize Universal Service Fund investments. As trusted hubs of digital equity for all learners, libraries are uniquely positioned to quickly bridge digital gaps. Additional action also is needed over the longer term to improve broadband access and adoption through libraries.

- **E-rate:** Library services depend on robust broadband networks that increasingly reach beyond the library campus. During the pandemic, libraries have stepped up to address the homework gap and more through hotspot lending and extended WiFi access—but much more is needed. E-rate must allow for increased flexibility in how libraries can use broadband capacity to meet the public's needs.

Immediate actions: allow libraries to use their broadband capacity to provision community WiFi access points at parks or businesses in high traffic areas using WiFi hotspots or other technologies; allow hotspots and other internet capable devices to be E-rate eligible, including the recurring monthly costs.

Near-term actions: enforce rules requiring certain providers receiving high-cost support to offer competitively priced broadband services to E-rate applicants; direct USAC to establish a user advisory group leveraging the expertise of state E-rate coordinators for libraries (and schools) to improve outreach/training and user experience for applicants; allow necessary cybersecurity expenditures to be E-rate eligible.

See: [Libraries and E-rate: Leveraging Broadband to Provide Opportunity Across the Nation](#); see also: [Libraries Respond to COVID-19](#).

- **Broadband in Indian Country through tribal libraries:** More needs to be done to ensure tribal libraries and the communities they serve, some of the least connected in the U.S., benefit from the E-rate program and broadband initiatives.

Immediate action: reconcile the definition of a library with the language in the 2018 reauthorization of the Museum and Library Services Act, which amends the definition of a tribal library.

Near-term actions: establish a rotating USAC Board position for tribal libraries and schools; initiate an NOI to ascertain the state of broadband access and capacity among tribal libraries, thus informing specific Commission actions to improve both; coordinate with the Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) on data collection related to tribal libraries.

Longer term: raise the profile of ONAP to report directly to the Commission.

See [Built by E-rate: A Case Study of Two Tribally-Owned Fiber Networks and the Role of Libraries in Making It Happen](#) and ([Executive summary](#)).

- **Universal Service Fund:** Libraries promote digital equity and inclusion and are strong allies for the Lifeline, Connect America Fund, and the Rural Health Care programs.

Immediate action: leverage USF programs to address affordability and adoption barriers; allow shared networks constructed or supported by USF funding without penalty to applicants.

Near term actions: within the FCC, improve coordination of programs and policies that address unserved or underserved populations; coordinate across federal agencies providing internet access and/or adoption funding (e.g., IMLS, NTIA, and RUS) to streamline and align programs and definitions; include anchor institutions in broadband mapping and data collection.

See [Digital Empowerment and American's Libraries](#); see also https://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/american_library_association_boc.pdf and <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/events/2020/08/workshop-examining-role-libraries-broadband-adoption-and-literacy>.

- **Network Neutrality:** Libraries collect, create, and disseminate essential information to the public over the internet. Net neutrality is essential for libraries to meet our public mission and is an expression of our professional values.

Immediate action: restore protections and bright-line rules outlined in the 2015 Open Internet order.

See <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/net-neutrality>

The American Library Association actively pursues policies that promote and sustain broadband infrastructure and adoption investments at the federal, state, and local levels to enable equitable access for all to online information and resources.

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