

U.S. Libraries Initiative: Pilot Opportunity Online Broadband Grants

Overview

The Internet is a gateway to economic, educational, and social opportunity, yet millions of low-income Americans don't have reliable or affordable Internet access. Public libraries continue to be at the forefront of bridging this digital divide. As a result of nearly a decade of work by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and many partners, nearly every library in the United States helps people succeed by offering free computer and Internet access, as well as training on how to use these tools.

Unfortunately, despite ever-growing demand for computers and the Internet in public libraries, up to one-third of all libraries do not offer fast-enough Internet connections. In today's digital world, speed is important. For example, it's the difference between taking an interactive, online educational course with streaming video or audio and reading a basic Web site for instructive content. Or downloading lengthy government applications in seconds versus struggling with freezing or intermittent connections to access a basic government Web site.

For people who rely on the public library as their main point of access to online information and opportunities, broadband Internet at the library is an open door to opportunity.

That's why the foundation is piloting a grant program in seven states to help improve and sustain high-speed Internet access in local libraries. The program will start with a rigorous state-level planning period, with grants to follow in late 2009. State libraries can use those grants to implement broadband improvement and sustainability plans they develop.

The goal of the pilot Opportunity Online broadband grant program is to help states create and implement strategies that will increase public library Internet connections to at least 1.5 Mbps, or faster wherever feasible, and continuously improve connection speeds as communities' needs grow.

Pilot Program Eligibility

The pilot program will help Arkansas, California, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, and Virginia upgrade local branches to broadband Internet (a minimum of 1.5 Mbps) so that more people can access opportunity online. These pilot states were selected by the foundation based on the following criteria:

- **Low Connectivity Levels:** The state has a high number of public libraries with Internet speeds of less than 1.5 Mbps.
- **Public Will:** Strong public policy support to increase broadband in public libraries exists within the state.
- **Awareness and Action:** The state library agency has taken steps to increase and sustain quality connectivity in the state and is well-positioned to manage the pilot grant program.

Our Approach

State library agencies in each pilot state will be the foundation's primary partner in this program. Two foundation grantees, Connected Nation and the American Library Association's Office of Information &

Technology Policy (OITP), will support the state grantees. Connected Nation, a nonprofit organization that has led several successful efforts to expand broadband access across the country, will help pilot states conduct outreach to state policymakers and other leaders through state-level broadband summits in each pilot state. OITP, an organization that advocates for effective information technology policy within and for the library field, will serve as a strategic advisor to state library agencies as they plan for ongoing broadband sustainability.

The pilot program is divided into three phases:

Broadband Assessment Project: The foundation is collecting data on library connectivity in all 50 states. The resulting body of research, including information on Internet connection speeds, type, provider, price, and funding source, helps determine which states and libraries are eligible for the grant program, and how much potential grant funding will be made available to those states.

Research & Development: Pilot state library agencies will lead a rigorous planning period to develop strategies to increase and sustain broadband Internet connections in their state, and to raise awareness and support for sustained broadband access in libraries. Connected Nation will help states organize and host broadband summits that will help libraries activate and strengthen relationships with state policymakers and influencers who can help libraries sustain quality Internet access. Pilot states will work with OITP to research and design specific broadband grant proposals based on a framework established by the foundation, and associated broadband sustainability strategies.

Grant funding will be available in the following categories:

- Technical support and training to help libraries overcome technical barriers to upgrading and maintaining quality Internet connection speeds;
- E-rate application support to increase library participation in the federal technology funding program; and
- Bridge funding to help jumpstart and catalyze investments in ongoing connectivity costs.

Grant-Funded Broadband Improvement Work: The states will submit their grant proposals and sustainability plans to the foundation for review and funding consideration. If the states' grant proposals are accepted by the foundation, state library agencies will receive funding to support libraries through the three grant categories identified by the foundation (noted above) and implement their broadband improvement and sustainability strategies.

Increasing Access for All

The foundation hopes the data collected and lessons learned through this pilot program will help libraries in all 50 states. Successful case studies about how libraries can increase and sustain broadband connections will be developed and shared, and the baseline data collected in each state should also serve as a valuable advocacy tool. If the pilot program yields positive results in the selected states, the foundation may expand its support to a limited number of additional states.

To find out more about the U.S. Libraries initiative and the pilot Opportunity Online broadband grant program, please visit www.gatesfoundation.org.