

# Arkansas State Library Hosts Summit to Kickoff Statewide Effort to Improve Internet Access in State's Public Libraries



**Contact: Danny Koonce**  
501-837-6581  
**Kasey McCrary**  
202-340-5776

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*Governor Beebe assembles leaders from across the state to come together to discuss new strategies to improve and sustain high-speed Internet access for communities through public libraries*

**Little Rock, AR:** Today, Governor Mike Beebe addressed more than 100 library leaders, community partners, broadband providers and local and state leaders gathered for the Arkansas Opportunity Online Broadband Summit to take the first steps to improving connectivity in the Arkansas public libraries. Assembled by the Arkansas State Library, the summit participants examined the benefits of high-speed Internet connectivity in Arkansas public libraries and communities and explored new solutions to improve and sustain connectivity.

The summit was sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as part of the Opportunity Online broadband grant program. The grant program is designed to assist and support public libraries as they improve their broadband connectivity. Moreover, the program calls for a sustainability strategy to be developed by the Arkansas State Library to ensure that public libraries continue to improve and maintain adequate connectivity. Libraries across the state will benefit from state-wide planning efforts, supported by the program, to sustain broadband connections for patrons in all public libraries.

The summit included a comprehensive look and analysis of Arkansas' current broadband climate. This included a speech by Speaker Robbie Wills and Governor Mike Beebe that outlined the state's commitment to technology and broadband availability. Governor Beebe also recognized the need for improved connectivity in Arkansas' public libraries especially those in rural areas. Currently, 27 Arkansas public library systems lack Internet connections fast enough to meet the most basic needs of patrons, and many more report speeds that are inadequate to meet the true demand of their community. Ironically, some of these public libraries offer the only technology lifeline to their communities.

“Rural Arkansas depends on its public libraries for access to the Internet to apply for jobs, stay connected with family and friends and take advantage of government resources,” said Carolyn Ashcraft, Arkansas State Librarian. “We have the opportunity to set about change for our public libraries and see them all improve connection speeds.”

Building on dialogue and ideas generated at the summit, the Arkansas State Library will work with an advisory group including library advocates, city/county representatives and state leaders to develop a plan to increase and sustain broadband connections in all Arkansas public libraries.

“The summit highlighted the vital role libraries play in connecting communities to information and knowledge through technology.” said Jill Nishi, deputy director of U.S. Libraries at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “What is needed now, is long-term collaboration among government, business, community and library leaders to ensure that public libraries can continue to provide the high-speed Internet access their patrons need to improve their lives and thrive.”

Guest presenters Claire Bailey of the Arkansas Department of Information Systems, James Winningham, Arkansas Broadband Council, and Sam Walls III, Connect Arkansas, also offered insight into the future of technology in the Arkansas from a state and local perspective. Bob Russell, Senator Mark Pryor’s chief of staff, provided a federal perspective. The Arkansas Opportunity Online Broadband Summit included in-depth discussion about possible connectivity solutions and next steps. For more information about the Arkansas Opportunity Online Summit, please contact [arsummit@opportunityonline.org](mailto:arsummit@opportunityonline.org) or 1-866-882-3081.

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### **About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people’s health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, Washington, the foundation is led by CEO Jeff Raikes and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. Learn more at [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org).

### **About the Arkansas State Library**

The Arkansas State Library provides the resources, services, and leadership necessary to meet the educational, informational and cultural needs of the citizens of Arkansas, and provides guidance and support for the development of local public libraries and library services. For more information about the Arkansas State Library, visit [www.asl.lib.ar.us](http://www.asl.lib.ar.us).

### **About Connected Nation**

Connected Nation is a national non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that expands access to and use of broadband Internet and the related technologies that are enabled when individuals and communities have the opportunity and desire to connect. Connected Nation effectively raises the awareness of the value of broadband and related technologies by developing coalitions of influencers and enablers for technology deployment and adoption. Connected Nation works with community stakeholders, states and technology providers to develop and implement technology expansion programs with core competencies centered around a mission to improve digital inclusion for people and places previously underserved or overlooked. For more information about Connected Nation, Inc., visit [www.connectednation.org](http://www.connectednation.org).