

Arkansas Libraries Invited to Participate in a Pilot Program to Improve Internet Connections



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Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation program will help Arkansas State Library and libraries across the state improve and sustain Internet connectivity for communities

Little Rock, AR – Each year, close to 2.8 million Arkansas residents use Internet computers in public libraries to find jobs, take online courses, or obtain important government forms. However, nearly one-third of all Arkansas public libraries and branches do not offer Internet connections fast enough to meet the needs of its patrons, according to a recent survey of all public libraries in the state. To help ensure that every library in Arkansas can provide adequate Internet connections, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invited the Arkansas State Library to participate in its pilot Opportunity Online broadband grant program, which will help libraries in seven states connect to high-speed Internet access.

“Our work with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation over the years has made a huge impact on the technology resources within our libraries,” said State Librarian Carolyn Ashcraft. “This new grant program will allow our libraries to provide patrons with more possibilities thanks to the improved connectivity.”

“The doorway to the local library has always been a doorway to free knowledge of the world,” according to James Winningham, chairman of Arkansas Broadband Council. “With high speed Internet it becomes a doorway to free access to the world, through online education, online job search and applications, online research and procurement, and online relationships with family and friends throughout the world. Arkansas needs libraries equipped with the fastest Internet available.”

Twenty-seven library systems in Arkansas have one or more library branches with broadband connectivity at less than 1.5 Mbps. In today’s digital world, speed is important, and is 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.

“Public libraries have played an important role in closing the digital divide. Unfortunately the speed of connectivity in libraries is often too slow to ensure that people can use computers effectively,” said Jill Nishi, deputy director of U.S. Libraries at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. “If libraries are to remain engines of opportunity, local governments, communities, and library supporters must all work together to help ensure that public libraries provide free, sustainable, high-speed Internet access.”

The Arkansas State Library will receive support through the pilot Opportunity Online broadband grant program to host a summit of library leaders, community partners, and statewide stakeholders to examine the current state of connectivity in Arkansas libraries and raise awareness about the need for increased

connectivity. The grant program will also support the development of a state sustainability strategy for public libraries to help ensure that no community is denied adequate connectivity.

The Arkansas Opportunity Online Summit is scheduled for June 11 and 12, 2009, at the Peabody Hotel in Little Rock. Connected Nation, a national non-profit technology advocacy organization, will produce the summit with the Arkansas State Library. For more information about the Arkansas Opportunity Online Summit, please send an e-mail to arsummit@opportunityonline.org or call 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.

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.

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.