April 21, 2015

New E-rate, New Challenges and Opportunities

From digital downloads to 3D printing to distance learning, broadband capacity powers most modern library services for our communities today and tomorrow. Thanks to significant reforms in the federal E-rate program, libraries have an historic opportunity to bolster this essential technology infrastructure. We urge you to join us in our goal of doubling E-rate investments in America's libraries.

Our associations came together during the E-rate modernization proceeding at the Federal Communications Commission to provide a library voice to ensure libraries across the country—tribal, rural, suburban, and urban—have access to affordable high-capacity broadband to the building and robust Wi-Fi within the building. The Commission listened to the library community. The program changes adopted by the Commission address these significant technology issues libraries face today. The Commission opened a door for libraries, and it is in our collective best interest to walk through it and demonstrate the positive impact of the additional $1.5 billion in funding and the opportunity provided by the changes.

The American Indian Library Association, the American Library Association, the Association for Rural & Small Libraries, the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, & Museums, the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies, the Public Library Association, and the Urban Libraries Council are committed to helping libraries fully benefit from the program changes.

It is time to radically rethink library broadband networks to make gains toward the broadband speeds we all know are necessary for today's and tomorrow's library services. It is time to think differently about E-rate and use it to help accomplish your connectivity vision.

Start Planning Now

After having been extended in response to stakeholder input, the 2015 application window is now closed. We know many of you have taken the initiative to apply during a time of tremendous change for the program. Thank you for leading the way! Your hard work will pay off by equipping your libraries with the broadband and Wi-Fi services critical to meeting your community's needs. However, it is critical to start planning for 2016 now. Many of the more significant program changes related to increasing broadband capacity take effect in 2016 and we encourage libraries to revisit their plans for 2016 and beyond with the new opportunities in mind.

Collectively we have already produced summaries of the E-rate orders, conducted several webinars, held planning meetings, and convened working groups to develop informational resources and educate libraries of all types on the results of the modernization effort. We will continue these efforts.

Now, in preparation for the 2016 application cycle, our organizations are taking stock of some of the challenges that lie ahead and developing new resources and approaches to help libraries navigate the changes and, most importantly, use them to their advantage.

We encourage you to share your concerns and questions with us so that we are well informed about where issues may be left outstanding or where libraries may need extra supports. We recognize that some of the challenges libraries face are unique or more significant depending on library type. Issues for tribal or rural and small libraries are not necessarily the same as those of their urban or suburban counterparts. In the case of tribal libraries for example, there are statutory barriers to participating in the program that must be addressed. Our strategies will address these differences. We are committed to anticipating needs as much as possible and responding to others as they arise. We will work with our members, the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC, the body that administers the E-rate program), and the Commission to address the needs of the library community.

Looking Ahead

The library community made great strides in setting the E-rate stage for increasing broadband capacity for libraries across the country in 2014, but we cannot be complacent if these steps are to really change the broadband landscape for libraries. Our priorities for libraries and the E-rate program are to increase library participation and increase the funding going to libraries. While our diverse organizations may provide different resources to our respective members, we all agree the needs of our libraries are too important and the opportunity too great to sit idle. We are committed to making the "new E-rate" work.

Respectfully,

American Indian Library Association
American Library Association
Association for Rural & Small Libraries
Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, & Museums
Chief Officers of State Library Agencies
Public Library Association
Urban Libraries Council