

ALA American Library Association

Public Policy and Advocacy Office 1615 New Hampshire Ave. NW Washington, DC 20009

The Hon. Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Hon. Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
2463 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

December 11, 2020

Dear Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of America's 117,000 libraries and the communities they serve, we write in support of essential broadband funding to close the connectivity gap as laid out in the Bipartisan Emergency COVID Relief Act of 2020. The framework recognizes that \$200 million emergency funding for boosting Wi-Fi and mobile internet access through libraries is the most efficient route to serve as many as 42 million Americans – particularly those in hard-hit rural, tribal, and low-income communities.

This desperate need to connect is constantly visible to our members, from the Utah worker who kept her job by working daily using library Wi-Fi from the parking lot to the Montana pastor who borrowed a library hotspot to conduct COVID-related funerals. Libraries are an indispensable strand in a tattered digital safety net. This has never been more apparent as libraries stepped up when health and safety restrictions shut down schools, businesses, places of worship, and even healthcare facilities.

Demand for broadband access through libraries continues to exceed our reach. From California where libraries report record numbers of Wi-Fi sessions and long waitlists to check out a hotspot, to rural Virginia where a library equipped two outreach vans with hotspots, parking them across the region at food distribution sites, dollar stores, and schools to reach further into the community – libraries are bridging digital gaps daily.

As libraries themselves were forced to close their doors to the public, more than 90% of respondents to a March 2020 survey kept their Wi-Fi networks open. In addition, 44% moved routers to improve Wi-Fi access, and more than one in five loaned internet hotspots to community members in need. Additional emergency funding for library hotspots and technology to boost library Wi-Fi will ensure K-20 students complete assignments, remote workers upskill and connect to jobs, and seniors can safely consult with healthcare providers from home.

Libraries report that the demand for library Wi-Fi—in the building and on the grounds, in nearby public spaces, via mobile vans, and at home with internet hotspots—has not yet been met. Further, libraries know from previous recessions that demand for library services skyrocket while communities struggle to rebound. Broadband funding with the flexibility for libraries to determine and address local priorities, **as well as separate emergency stabilization funding** needed for safe re-opening and access to physical collections and in-person programs, will ensure libraries are ready to meet these demands in the difficult days of recovery ahead.

Leveraging and extending library broadband will *immediately* serve those most in need of a digital lifeline to learn, work, and connect with socially distant family. We call for you to include this critical safety net to connect those most in need through America's libraries in relief funding.

Sincerely,

Kathi Komer
Associate Executive Director,
Public Policy and Advocacy, American Library Association

Cc

The Honorable Joe Manchin
The Honorable Susan Collins
The Honorable Mark Warner
The Honorable Bill Cassidy
The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Angus King
The Honorable Mitt Romney
The Honorable Maggie Hassan

The Honorable Josh Gottheimer
The Honorable Tom Reed
The Honorable Anthony Gonzalez
The Honorable Dusty Johnson
The Honorable Dean Phillips
The Honorable Abigail Spanberger
The Honorable Fred Upton