TELECOMMUNICATIONS

The goal of assuring equitable access to affordable advanced broadband services for all communities and types of libraries guides ALA’s positions on telecommunications legislation and policy proposals. In reviewing the many new telecommunications bills introduced in Congress in recent months, ALA assesses how a proposal best promotes universal and affordable advanced telecommunications services to support the national goal of broadband deployment for all.

NETWORK NEUTRALITY

The Issue: Network Neutrality (NN) is a new phrase for a characteristic that has been inherent to the Internet since its creation – that ISPs and others that own and control the nation’s telecommunications “pipes” cannot become gatekeepers allowed to block or discriminate against smaller, less popular, or less lucrative content providers. ALA asks for this neutrality to be maintained.

ALA supports the concept of NN, which maintains an open and unregulated Internet where all information providers have equal opportunity to distribute their information products and content on the Internet. ISPs should not be able to give preference to some content providers over others. While subscribers pay different rates for DSL vs. T-1 lines, all are able to comparably access the Internet equally. NN is an issue related to how information providers, including libraries, have access to consumers and users of Internet content.

The Internet and web sources are important to library users because libraries can more easily access and provide digital information, traditional library materials, diverse web sites, and other digital tools to better serve library users - onsite in libraries and remotely through web access.

If the nation’s largest telephone and cable companies are allowed to limit the fastest services to those who can pay their higher tolls, the rest of us — libraries, schools, colleges, non-profit groups, small businesses, information providers, independent publications, and bloggers — could be blocked from digital-age benefits and innovations.

For information about telecommunications issues, including municipal broadband, the DO IT bill, and redlining issues, see the OGR web pages at: www.ala.org or call 800-941-8478.
**The Message:** Network neutrality legislation is civil rights for the Internet. Congress should pass clear NN legislation. Libraries now create and provide information on the Internet as well as provide access to other digital sources for library users. These diverse sources of Internet content should not be marginalized by allowing ISPs to create a tiered system. ISPs should not be able to create fast lanes for wealthy or preferred content providers while others are put in slower lanes. Some content providers could receive preferential access to consumers and library users while denying or slowing down access to other sources of information, especially for public, school, and academic library services or other educational and nonprofit uses. We must assure that all providers and users of information on the Internet have equal access to the diverse sources of information available.

**SENATE:** Support and cosponsor bill S. 2360, the “Internet Non-Discrimination Act of 2006”, introduced by Senator Ron Wyden, (D-OR) and S. 2917, sponsored by Senators Snowe (R-ME) and Dorgan (D-ND).

**HOUSE:** Ask representatives to champion network neutrality in House telecommunications reform legislation. Proposals such as the one sponsored by Rep. Markey (D-MA), in the Commerce Subcommittee on the Internet in the “C.O.P.E.” legislation, should be included in any final legislation.

**E-rate and Universal Service**

**The Issue:** The E-rate telecommunications discounts as well as the entire universal service fund (USF) program are also addressed in some of the current bills before Congress. USF must be modernized to bring in new telecommunications service providers as contributors at a time when demand for hi-cost funds is increasing. [Note: the E-rate is NOT increasing demand on USF because this program is capped at $2.25 billion annually.]

The E-rate is working, but long-term stability must be assured by passing a permanent exemption from compliance with government accounting rules under the Anti-Deficiency Act (ADA.) These requirements forced a freeze in the distribution of E-rate funds for several months in 2004. In 2005, Congress passed a second 12-month exemption from ADA.

**The Message:** Thank you for maintaining the E-rate and other USF programs. Bring stability to the USF by passing S. 241 and H.R. 2533. These bills provide a permanent exemption from the ADA requirements and assure that the funding is not further disrupted causing cash flow problems for libraries and schools and creating the lack of certainty for local long term technology planning and budgeting. S. 2658, Senator Steven’s comprehensive telecommunications reform bill, also includes appropriate USF provisions.

Without the E-rate, public and school libraries could not afford advanced telecommunications service to meet the demands of library users in all types of communities. These discounts have provided over $497 million to public libraries over the eight-year life of the program. A total of over $16.8 billion in discounts have been committed to libraries and public and private schools, including school library media centers.

For those who do not have access at home, work, or school, public libraries are the primary source for Internet access. Today’s need for increased bandwidth to provide access to the needed resources makes the E-rate program even more critical to users today than when the program was first introduced.

**SENATE:** Cosponsor and pass S. 241.

**HOUSE:** Pass H.R. 2533 to provide a permanent ADA exemption. Cosponsor and support H.R. 5072, the Universal Service Reform Act of 2006, sponsored by Reps. Terry and Boucher.

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