

Testimony of
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Arkansas Public Libraries

to the
United State Senate
Committee on Commerce, Science, and
Transportation

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Senator Pryor, Commissioners, I am honored to come before you today and appreciate this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Public Libraries in Arkansas.

My name is Dave Burdick; I am the Director of the Pine Bluff/Jefferson County Library System. Pine Bluff is located 45 miles southeast of Little Rock, where the Pine Trees end and the Delta Farm Land begins. We have five public libraries serving a population of nearly 82,000 people. Fifty five percent of our population is Black; twenty percent of the population is below the poverty line.

Although nearly all Public Libraries in Arkansas are connected to the Internet, there are many of our small rural libraries where this connection is through dial-up, a dedicated 56k line, a DSL line, or a connection through the local cable television company.

Today, Public Libraries are a technological center for many of our citizens who either cannot afford to own a computer, or afford to pay for a high speed connection to the Internet.

The Pine Bluff Libraries are typical of many of the Public Libraries in Arkansas. One in three people who walk through our doors use a Public Computer Workstation. The important thing is this...the Public Library is their gateway to the world. We offer this gateway to everyone.

Yet in many cases, we are letting our citizens down by not offering a fast and reliable connection to meet their needs. In our two smaller branches, both located in towns of approximately a thousand people, we have a 56k connection for the 3 public workstations and 2 staff workstations. This is not adequate, and unfortunately is typical of small, rural libraries throughout Arkansas.

In Pine Bluff the infrastructure is such that many citizens cannot get DSL. Numerous times in the past few years the Internet connection at one of our Libraries has gone down simply because the phone company plugged another new user into antiquated equipment which was not intended to carry the load.

Pine Bluff is an impoverished community compared to other major cities in Arkansas, and the payback to the investment in the infrastructure is just not there as it is in other markets. It is like this throughout the rural areas of Arkansas, especially in the Delta Region. It is my belief that the government must step in and offer incentives to help improve the infrastructure in these poor and rural areas.

I envision the day when every Public Library throughout the state is connected to the Internet at a speed which will provide **all** of our citizens access to video conferences, live on-line educational programs, live classroom instruction, and other resources which take a great deal of bandwidth. Internet sessions should be dependent on

the current speed of the Internet, and not the speed of the network which connects our citizens to the Internet.

When we talk broadband as it pertains to Public Libraries, we should be talking about speeds which can reach 100 Mbps (megabits per second). We need to move away from frame relay, and move towards a long-distance Ethernet or fiber optics network so that our citizens can have quick access to our educational institutions.

You are here today because we all recognize that Arkansas is far behind the rest of the country in broadband services. Let's just be sure that everyone agrees that the Public Libraries of Arkansas must be included in all discussions, and that solutions are found to bring Arkansas and Arkansas Public Libraries up to speed.

Thank you.