

Gates Foundation Awards \$6.9M for Library Broadband.

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The evolution of libraries from public houses for books to public houses for information took another step forward Thursday as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced a \$6.9 million award for a pilot initiative to improve public access to broadband Internet.

The award was made to Connected Nation, a nonprofit that promotes broadband Internet, and to the American Library Association's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) to improve connectivity speeds for public libraries in Arkansas, California, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Texas and Virginia.



A Broadband Summit

Jill Nishi, deputy director of U.S. libraries for the foundation, said "public libraries across the country have played an integral role in closing the digital divide," but local governments, communities and library supporters must do more.

About \$6.1 million will go to Connected Nation to help the seven pilot states organize and to host a broadband summit of library leaders, state and local officials, and others to help build support for broadband Internet in libraries.

About \$851,000 will go to OITP for research and expertise to help state agencies create strategies to "ensure library broadband connections are sustainable." As part of that effort, OITP will create and distribute case studies showing examples of how public libraries have successfully maintained broadband connectivity.

Laura DiDio, an analyst with Information Technology Intelligence Corps, said broadband connections allow libraries to play vital roles in their communities, even if other parts of their budgets are cut.

"Books aren't going away," she said, "but libraries with broadband become a portal to all that information on the Net" for underprivileged adults and children.

Slow Access in a Third

A recent report from the American Library Association found that nearly three-quarters of public libraries are the only source of free, public access to the Internet in their communities. But that access is slow in many libraries. Although there is a large demand for technology services, about a third of all public libraries have slow Internet connections.

The Gates foundation initiative is intended to establish connections in all libraries in the pilot states with speeds of 1.5 Mbps or faster. At this speed, access to multimedia content on the Web, including streaming audio and video, becomes feasible.

The foundation has indicated it will be continue to be in this field for some time. In addition to the initial round of nearly \$7 million in funding, it has invited the pilot states to submit proposals to "support the increased cost and implementation of faster Internet connections."

So far, the foundation has awarded \$325 million in grants and other support for computers in libraries and for training library staff. Its programs have reached all U.S. states and territories.

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