

## U.S. Libraries Initiative: Pilot Opportunity Online Broadband Grants

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### Overview

Today, the Internet is a portal to vital information of all kinds. But almost 40 percent of Americans, often those with lower incomes and lower levels of education, still don't have online access at home. For many of these people, their public library is *the* place to get connected. Today, millions of Americans use computers and the Internet at public libraries to find jobs, earn long-distance learning degrees, start and grow small businesses, learn English, get e-government information, and more. In fact, 70 percent of people who use computers and the Internet at libraries say it is their primary source of access to these technology tools.

Despite the public's ever-growing demand for online access at libraries, up to one-third of all libraries do not offer Internet connections that are fast enough to serve their patrons' needs. But in today's digital world, speed and reliability mean everything. Broadband Internet at the library is an open door to opportunity, equity, and hope.

That's why the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is piloting a grant program to help improve Internet connections for public libraries in Arkansas, California, Kansas, Massachusetts, New York, Texas, and Virginia. These pilot states were selected by the foundation based on the following research-based criteria:

- **Low Connectivity Levels:** A high number of public libraries in the state with an Internet speed of less than 1.5 Mbps.
- **Public Will:** Strong public policy support to increase broadband in public libraries within the state.
- **Awareness and Action:** A state library agency with the vision and capacity to manage the pilot grant program.

### Approach

Two foundation grantees, Connected Nation and the American Library Association's Office of Information & Technology Policy (OITP), will support the state library agency in each of the pilot states. Connected Nation will help these library agencies host state-level broadband summits to convene community leaders and policymakers who can help form solutions to help sustain broadband in libraries. OITP will serve as a strategic advisor to the state library agencies as they develop broadband sustainability plans that will guide ongoing investments in connectivity for libraries.

The pilot program is divided into three phases:

**Broadband Assessment Project:** The foundation conducted a census study of library connectivity in all 50 states to determine Internet speeds, costs, and other local connectivity information. This data will help guide the foundation's investments and will provide states with baseline information on the status of Internet connectivity in each of their libraries.

**Research & Development:** State library agencies in each pilot state will raise awareness and support for sustained broadband access in libraries and will work with local partners to develop strategies to increase and sustain broadband Internet connections in their state.

**Grant-Funded Broadband Improvement Work:** In late 2009, each pilot state will submit a formal grant proposal and broadband sustainability plan to the Gates Foundation for review and funding consideration. Upon approval, state library agencies will receive a grant to support broadband connections in libraries based on a limited set of funding opportunities:

- Technical support and training to help libraries overcome technical barriers to upgrading and maintaining quality Internet connection speeds;
- E-rate application support to increase library participation in the federal technology funding program; and
- Bridge funding to help jumpstart and catalyze investments in ongoing connectivity costs.

### **Increasing Access for All**

The foundation hopes the lessons learned through this pilot program will help libraries across the country. The foundation will share what it learns with others and, based on the results of the pilot program, may expand its support to a limited number of additional states.

**To find out more about the U.S. Libraries program and the pilot Opportunity Online broadband grant program, please visit [www.gatesfoundation.org](http://www.gatesfoundation.org).**