

Testimony of Margaret Conroy  
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Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation  
**“Why Broadband Matters”**  
September 16, 2008

Chairman Inouye, Ranking Member Hutchison, Members of the Committee, it is with great pleasure that I submit this testimony on behalf of the American Library Association (ALA). My name is Margaret Conroy, and I am the State Librarian for the Great State of Missouri. I am also a member of the American Library Association (ALA), the oldest and largest library association in the world with 66,000 members who are primarily school, public, academic and some special librarians, as well as trustees, publishers and friends of libraries.

I am here to share with you how the residents of the “Show-Me” state are using broadband (and too-often slower connectivity) through our public libraries. You will see that our experiences in Missouri track closely with research findings in the report, *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007-2008*,<sup>1</sup> released just two weeks ago by the American Library Association and the Information Institute at the College of Information at Florida State University. This report assesses public access to computers, the Internet and Internet-related services in public libraries across the United States, and gauges the impact of library funding changes on connectivity, technology deployment and sustainability. Chairman Inouye, I request that the Executive Summary of this report be submitted into the record.

Broadband technologies play an increasingly vital role in enabling public libraries to provide essential services to all, especially important for the “have-nots.” Because so many people do

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<sup>1</sup>Bertot, John Carlo, et al. *Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007-2008*. American Library Association. September, 2008.

not have broadband, libraries are trying to meet all of the new demands that our patrons need because we are the only institution that they can come to for access and information.

Some naysayers predicted that the rise of the Internet would lead to the demise of the public library. But as Missouri native Mark Twain wrote, “reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” Libraries are now very lively places and at the forefront of the “Information Age.” By providing Internet access to the general public, public libraries have become the social and economic hubs of their communities, often times providing the only Internet access for many low-income and elderly people, students, job seekers, immigrants, travelers, and many others.

A Pew Foundation study on how Americans search for information released in December 2007 shows that people who used the Internet were more likely to use the library than people who do not use the Internet.<sup>2</sup> This was true regardless of income. This study also revealed significant new information on who is using our libraries. Traditionally, the profile of the library user was a middle-aged female. This study shows a dramatic shift in that profile to young people ages 18 to 30. This shift indicates two current realities about our libraries: 1) libraries are successful in offering technology that attracts younger users; and, 2) it charges libraries with keeping pace with emerging technologies to continue to support the information needs of young people as they grow into adulthood.

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<sup>2</sup> Leigh Estabrook, Evans Witt, and Lee Rainee, *Information Searches That Solve Problems: How people use the Internet, libraries, and government agencies when they need help*. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, December 30, 2007). Available on the Internet at [http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/231/report\\_display.asp](http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/231/report_display.asp).

Libraries offer technology to link communities around the country and provide users access to information through state, regional, national and international networks. Librarians can also share with you the many stories about how libraries are increasingly involved with emergency preparedness and disaster response in conjunction with local governments and other organizations. Many libraries are part of statewide networks that provides enriched content databases and open access to resources, and services that our local libraries just cannot afford on their own.

However, while computer use has increased substantially in the United States, many American households still do not have computers or Internet access in their homes. Libraries are working to close this “digital divide” in many of our nation’s distressed communities by providing no-fee, public access to computers and the Internet. Nationwide, 73% of all public libraries report they are the only provider of free Internet access in their communities. In rural areas, the role of the library is even more critical as 83% of libraries are the only no-fee Internet provider.

To demonstrate the pervasiveness of public libraries in America, let me present this comparison: There are more public libraries in the U.S. than McDonald’s restaurants - a total of 16,549 public libraries, including branches. Statistics also show that 63% of adults in the U.S. have public library cards.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, nationwide, there are now 1.3 billion visits per year to our nation’s public libraries. Over 2 billion items were checked out in 2006, when ALA conducted a poll that found that 92% of respondents expect libraries to be needed in the future, despite the increased availability of information on the Internet.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> American Library Association. *@ your library: Attitudes Toward Public Libraries Survey 2006*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

Why have libraries remained so essential? Part of the answer is that public libraries across the country have installed thousands of computers for the general public - some with help from organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and also with major investment from local governments and creative budgeting by library administrators. The federal “E-rate” program, which originated in this very Committee and for which libraries and library patrons are enormously grateful, has played a tremendous role in expanding the ability of public libraries to connect patrons to the Internet connections. Public librarians provide training to educate users on how to use computer applications and the Internet. Furthermore, our studies show 98.9% of public libraries now provide Internet public access at no-fee, and 65.9% of public libraries also provide wireless Internet access for those patrons who bring their own laptop computers.<sup>5</sup>

Library access is especially important in rural areas and for low-income families. Approximately 38% of rural households have broadband. The percentages are higher in urban and suburban: 57% and 60% respectively. Among households with incomes over \$100,000, 85% have broadband access. Among households with incomes \$20,000 and under, only 25% have broadband service.<sup>6</sup>

The ALA-Florida State report found that America’s 16,543 public libraries are leveraging technology to help students of all ages succeed in school and support lifelong learning. More than 83% of libraries now offer online homework resources, including live tutors and collections of reliable Web sources – an increase of 15% in one year. Libraries also reported significant

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<sup>5</sup> Bertot et al, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Communications Workers of America, *Speed Matters: A Report on the Internet Speeds in All 50 States*, August 2008, p. 3.

increases in the number of audiobooks and podcasts (33% increase), videos (32% increase), e-books (13.5% increase) and digitized special collections (13% increase). As Americans are changing the ways they meet their educational, entrepreneurial and entertainment needs, libraries are changing with them and ensuring access for patrons in our libraries as well as for remote access users.

How do our patrons use the Internet? The research shows:

- 78% of the libraries reported that education resources and databases purchased for K-12 students are their most important service. Since over 90% of school districts are assigning homework that involves Internet usage and school library media centers are closing across the country, this priority is not surprising.
- 62.2 % reported job-hunting as another high priority. Given our challenged economy, and knowing that the majority of the top-100 retailers only accept electronic and online job applications, you can see why this is so important. Libraries offer access to databases with job listings, training for resume development and interviewing techniques -- all necessary 21<sup>st</sup> century skills to get that new job.
- 55% of libraries reported that access to government information has become another high priority.<sup>7</sup> We know that, at every level of government, agencies increasingly require online-only interactions with residents for information, applications, appointments, and more.

Note also the increasing use of media services over the Internet. Libraries report a 30% growth in both video and audio content over the last year.<sup>8</sup> Also, libraries are increasingly using two-

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<sup>7</sup> Bertot et al, p. 10.

way videoconferencing for their staff to reduce costs. More and more students are relying on videostreaming for class lectures from their college or university for distance learning and media content dissemination. Some state and local governments now require video training, for example to obtain a driver's license. More and more Web sites employ Web 2.0 applications that involve greater interaction with the user. Health care providers and businesses are integrating streaming video into standard components of their Web sites.

While this research is extraordinarily important, perhaps more memorable are the reports I received from my libraries in Missouri. In preparation for this hearing, I asked my libraries to send me examples of how their Internet access has benefited their communities. Here are a few of these examples.

**From a librarian in Nevada, MO:**

I have been moved when I helped a wife who needed to IM her husband in Iraq, or a grandmother who, for the first time, saw a grandchild on the Internet, or a child who needed to find a Martin Luther King, Jr. speech. None of these people have their own computers at home. This is like the whole Carnegie movement for books, i.e., it tried to provide information to the people who could not afford books. Now, the challenge that we face is that people cannot afford computers or Internet. This is especially true in rural America. These individuals might have computers, but getting access to an Internet connection is difficult if not impossible. I've seen all these examples and more and they always make me think that what we do is worth it.

**From a librarian in the McDonald County Library, Pineville MO:**

The little Noel branch library has a small computer lab, and during a 3-hour period last week, ...I encountered 5 different languages at one time, helped Somali refugees fill out citizenship forms, watched a toddler in a diaper handle the mouse on the children's computer like a pro, observed online college courses being taken, helped an older gentleman send an e-mail to his son in Japan in the military - the only way he could afford to communicate with him. Our little computer lab provided access to job searching and a way to "escape" this small rural impoverished town with our high-speed connection.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

**From a librarian in Wright County, MO:**

In our rural community the only public access to broadband IS the library. Business people come in to order and research products because it takes them less time to do these tasks if they use our computers rather than use the slower ones they have at their places of business. We are an impoverished community and we have a lot of patrons that are going to college two days a week, they come into the library and download their lessons, talk to their professors, do some of their assignments on-line and then send in their homework on-line. They often compliment us on having such a fast connection.

We do our cataloging through the Internet because we do not have the money in our budget to hire a professional catalog employee. This helps our library budget out tremendously since I do not know where we could find the money for this position. I believe that this is one of the best things that the State helps us with -- the fast Internet connections we have at all branches.

**From a librarian in Oregon County, MO:**

What Internet access means to the Oregon County Library District and our patrons? It means that a 90-year-old great grandma can come into the library and read her e-mail, see a picture of a great granddaughter in Texas on her first day of kindergarten and print out the picture to show everyone. It means that our local college students can work on-line, communicate with their professors, e-mail their assignments, take on-line classes and compete on a level playing field with students from metropolitan areas. It means local citizens who can't afford personal home computers and a fast Internet connection can come to the public library and use our resources. You must keep in mind; Oregon County is a rural, economically disadvantaged county. The Alton Public Library is located about "fifty miles from anywhere". What does Internet access mean to us? It means everything!

**From a librarian in Warrensburg, MO:**

The Social Security office in Warrensburg closed last year. The nearest physical offices are now in Sedalia or Lee's Summit - a 30+-mile drive for nearly everyone in the two counties we serve. Since many of the activities related to Social Security (go to <http://www.ssa.gov/onlineservices/> for a list) can be done online, it is crucial for the 80,000 residents of Johnson & Lafayette Counties to have access to the Internet. Our connections are quick (T1 & faster) so we can assist those who cannot travel to the Social Security offices or those who have no computer or decent connection speed.

**From a librarian in Morgan County, MO:**

High-speed Internet access is critical in Morgan County. We are a poor rural community. Students who cannot afford to go away to college stay at home to work and take online classes and we proctor many of their tests monthly. We have kids who commute to the local community college and come to the library to check and complete assignments. This is their only opportunity to continue their education. We have MANY grandparents for whom the public computer is their only link to children and grandchildren. We print a lot of family photos! Seniors who do not drive great distances rely on us to bring their families together

Society has made it necessary for almost everyone to have computer access. People come in to apply for jobs online on a weekly basis now that large chain stores like Target, Lowe's, Applebee's, and Wal-Mart require people to apply for jobs online. More local companies now require online applications and even truckers apply for jobs online. Our community would be at a great loss without the Internet.

The dad in a local family was being sent to Argentina for his job and the family wanted current information on climate, food, culture, etc. The library did not have books on modern Argentina (not much demand usually), so the Internet brought Argentina to them. Home-school families, who do not have a school library computer, use our library to access the Internet for world news, homework help and more.

**From a librarian in Centralia, MO:**

Internet is vital to Centralia patrons for online job applications. More and more companies are requiring job applications to be done by computer. The staff has helped numerous grateful patrons that need a non-technical job but have no computer skills to apply. How sad it would be if community members were unemployed just because they had no Internet access or computer skills.

**From a librarian in a suburb of St. Louis, MO:**

When I was at the Richmond Heights Memorial Library I observed a nice young man who came in frequently to use our computers. I never really knew what he was doing, but one afternoon he came up to me at the reference desk and proudly announced, 'I got into medical school!' I congratulated him, and he thanked me, noting that he had done the entire application process right there on the library's computers. I thought it was the kind of success story for which we live.

**From a librarian in the town of Ozark in southwest Missouri:**

I remember the young man who didn't live in Ozark but was just traveling through and came into the library on 9/11. His sister worked in the Twin Towers and he came to our library to check the news and send e-mails to his family in New York City.

**From a librarian at Wood Place Public Library:**

Providing reliable, fast Internet access has become an increasingly necessary library service in my small rural community. Today it is used by many of the lowest income patrons and is vital for anyone who is trying to "get ahead". The GED classes that are held here have started using Internet based study programs. There are also several individuals that come in regularly to work on their on-line college classes. Having college classes available is making it possible for more non-traditional students in our community to take college classes.

I stopped in a convenience store recently and the clerk was one of the middle-aged patrons that have been coming into the library to take college classes on-line. She said the convenience store job is her second job and in addition to working two jobs and raising a family she is slowly working her way through college in order to eventually obtain a better paying job. It's rewarding to see someone working so hard to become financially stable.

I also see lots of individuals here that are not working or not able to make ends meet. Their first step towards becoming financially independent is to find work, so they don't need to rely on public aid for food and other necessities. The local McDonalds is one of the businesses that hire individuals with no prior work experience. McDonalds now only accepts online applications, and of course many of the people who need these jobs don't have access to the Internet at home. We help many individuals find their way into the online application website for McDonalds.

We recently used an LSTA grant to fund an upgrade and expansion of our public access computers. I thought that after this project was complete, we'd have all the Internet services needed for this small community. I was wrong! Everything was done in June 2008 and already the demand has increased to the point where people are often waiting for their turn to use the Internet. We have set aside a room to add a computer lab and have furniture available. I know that there is an LSTA grant available that will partially fund the equipment we now need in order to meet the basic needs of our patrons.

However, we don't currently have enough funds to even provide the 25% match that is required with that grant. I don't think the taxpayers will approve additional funding for us and the local businesses and organizations that we used to rely on to help fund library projects are already overwhelmed with requests for financial assistance from other entities.

I hope your visit to Washington will help inform Congress that funding for increased broadband Internet access at libraries is necessary for the good of our country.

**From a librarian at Macon Public Library:**

Here at Macon Public Library we feel our MOREnet Internet access is as important to our community as our state and federal highways. Our computers are used daily and often people come to us in a panic like the lady who had very little travel experience and had ordered airline tickets over the phone but was told she had to go online and print her tickets. She had no computer, no Internet access and no computer skills. We easily helped this woman and lessened her stress so she could enjoy her trip.

Wal-Mart employees use our public terminals to access their pay history. They have online access at work, but when they need assistance and have privacy concerns, they prefer to ask us instead of someone at their place of employment. We do more and more online test proctoring for students of all ages and abilities who are often on a budget and saving travel miles really makes a difference. These are just a few examples of how average citizens in a city of 5500 people depend on public broadband access in their libraries and feel it is a necessity.

**From a librarian at Daniel Boone Regional Library, Columbia, MO:**

We are opening our computer-training lab on Friday mornings for Refugee and Immigration Services to help their clients. We also have added a special time each week in the computer-training center to help people with on line job applications and writing resumes. This is in addition to our normal classes and partnering with AARP to provide electronic tax filing for people over 65 and low-income members of the community. They are always so grateful—when I walked by one day last week I was greeted with a round of applause for allowing AARP to use the space. I know computer access means a lot to them. At CPL, we had 2,800 people log on using our wireless access just in July.

We see more and more business people, travelers and students taking online classes and others using our wireless capacity.

**From a librarian in the Doniphan-Ripley County Library:**

We had a patron who had a good deal of pain due to blockages in the veins in her legs and needed surgery. She had heard of a new kind of procedure with a cool laser that needed much less recovery time but she couldn't find anybody who knew anything about it. With some research on the Internet, I found a surgeon in Springfield, MO who specialized in the surgery and successfully performed it on her. A year and a half later, the hospitals in Cape Girardeau, MO (closer to her home) had the equipment but it was too because the patron needed the surgery immediately and we were able to help her avoid a long and painful recovery with the old technique.

You can see from these examples why librarians well understand the importance of broadband.

Not only have we embraced the digital revolution, we also maintain our more traditional services – services that are now in greater demand because technology has also made our traditional resources better known, increasingly used and easier to share through interlibrary loans and online bibliographic catalogs.

While our efforts to enhance Internet connectivity have been incredibly rewarding, we need to do more. Broadband needs for a library are not the same as the needs for home users. Libraries need to respond to a wide range of bandwidth-intensive applications requiring simultaneous robust connectivity for multiple users. We must support user needs at in-library computer workstations, for those connecting wirelessly on their laptops, and for those connecting remotely from home.

As I mentioned earlier, the Internet has grown beyond all our previous wildest expectations, and libraries across the country are constantly playing catch-up with the growth in demand. Video-based services require exceptional levels of capacity. Even ordinary consumers will soon be

demanding huge amounts of capacity for basic uses. Or, as some advocates have said, “today’s bandwidth hog is tomorrow’s average Internet user.”

While policy-makers and libraries have made extraordinary efforts to adapt to this rapidly changing environment, libraries are challenged to take maximum advantage of these new services. Public libraries across the country are struggling to find, install and pay for large enough broadband “pipes” to meet the great demand for Internet access. Frequently, patrons must wait in line to use the computers and librarians often find that their networks slow to a crawl, especially in the afternoon when students get out of school and come to the library to do homework. Several libraries have delayed purchasing popular online resources, such as the interactive homework help site *www.tutor.com*, in an effort not to exacerbate already slow access speeds.

These problems are particularly acute because of the rapid innovations of Internet-based technologies. As Moore’s Law says, Internet usage is doubling approximately every 18 months, and public libraries are no exception. Libraries that installed a basic T1 connection last year, believing it would satisfy several years of demand, are finding that the capacity is already overwhelmed with additional demand. Our studies show that 82.5% of public libraries have fewer computers available than patrons who want to use them, at least some of the time (up from 77.5% in 2006-2007) and 57.5% of public libraries report that their Internet bandwidth is insufficient to meet the demand some or all of the time (up from nearly 52% in 2006-2007).<sup>9</sup>

There are many reasons why public libraries cannot satisfy this burgeoning demand.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

- Sometimes there is simply no broadband capacity available from any of the existing broadband providers. Many libraries, located in more rural areas, require connectivity that resembles the needs of a large business, and providers may not even have sufficient pipes to satisfy library needs in those locations.
- Sometimes the cost of the new capacity is prohibitively expensive. We often find that there is little competition among broadband providers so there is little incentive for them to reduce their rates to affordable levels.
- Sometimes local budgets cannot bear the increased costs, even with E-rate discounts.

In Missouri, we have taken special efforts to address the need for greater Internet connectivity. Established in 1991, the Missouri Research and Education Network (MOREnet) provides Internet connectivity, access to Internet2, technical support, videoconferencing services and training to Missouri's K-12 schools, colleges and universities, public libraries, health care, state government and other affiliated organizations.

MOREnet encouraged the state's telecommunications providers to construct a MOREnet-designed, advanced, high-speed, high-bandwidth network throughout Missouri. These connections, managed by MOREnet on behalf of the state's schools and libraries, also laid the groundwork for Internet availability to thousands of rural Missourians. MOREnet is tremendously important to our 152 public library systems, with 372 physical library locations and 29 bookmobiles serving more than 5.1 million residents. Currently, 245 of our physical library locations are served by connections from 1.5 Mbps to 100 Mbps capacity.

[Missouri's public libraries are primarily organized as library districts (88.6 %) with the rest organized as municipal government libraries (9.4 %) and as association libraries within a municipality (1.3 %).<sup>10</sup> ]

Unfortunately, Missouri is the exception rather than the rule, as most states do not have the resources to adopt such a framework. Most states are struggling to meet a demand that simply will not wait.

As I mentioned before, the E-rate program is an incredibly valuable resource without which many libraries could not afford telecommunications and Internet service. Libraries across the country have great appreciation for the foresight of this Committee in originating this program. In the coming months and years, the library community is ready to work with you, the FCC and other stakeholders to make appropriate refinements that could enhance the program. Many libraries cannot benefit fully from this program because of the burdensome application and disbursement process. Furthermore, the discount formula does not work as well for libraries as it does for schools so that library discount rates may not accurately reflect the local poverty levels. To encourage more library participation, ALA has submitted a simplification proposal to the FCC. We hope that the Commission will move forward on our recommendations in the near future. In this way ALA hopes to increase library participation in the E-rate and our libraries' ability to serve the American public.

Mr. Chairman, I cannot say strongly enough how indebted we are to your leadership and to this Committee for the enormous progress we have made in the last decade. We know that 99% of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 97.

public libraries can now offer the public some level of no-fee public access computing. We know that the American public is benefiting from our services. Public libraries are at the forefront of the Information Society and provide invaluable access to the Internet that cannot be obtained in other ways.

But as we champion the many public services and benefits brought to us by broadband, we want to ensure that public libraries can continue to serve and enhance our service to the public. It has been clearly demonstrated that Americans need the services and applications that broadband technology delivers. Public libraries require faster and cheaper broadband services to deliver those services to the public.

I applaud this Committee for expressing interest in the role that public libraries play in increasing the availability of Internet access for all Americans. On behalf of the American Library Association, we look forward to working closely with you in addressing the issues of expanding broadband deployment and meeting the telecommunications needs of all Americans.