



PRESS RELEASE

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Urban Libraries Council Members Urge E-rate Fixes to Ensure Digital Access

Letter to the Federal Communications Commission Outlines Changes Needed to Enhance Library Access to Vital E-rate Funds

May 22, 2014 (Chicago, IL) - Members of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) have called on the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to level the E-rate playing field to enhance public libraries' access to funds that will help provide a digital future for all Americans.

In a letter to the FCC, more than 100 public library systems outlined a case for reform of the E-rate program to meet library needs and ensure proportional distribution of available funds. E-rate is the FCC legislative mandate, established in 1996, to help pay for certain telecommunications and broadband services in libraries and schools. Last year, the FCC launched an overhaul of the E-rate program to address current needs in libraries and schools.

Over its 17-year history, libraries have received only about \$60 to \$70 million annually, which represents a cumulative shortfall of \$4 billion if E-rate had been indexed to inflation and funds had been distributed proportionally between school and library buildings, the letter argues.

"While there is nothing in the statute or regulations that suggest that the status of public libraries is inferior to schools, and no one commenting in the pending E-rate proceeding has supported this idea, public libraries and the citizens they serve are not being equally considered," wrote the library leaders.

The letter calls for three fixes to the E-rate program that address public libraries:

1. Proportional distribution of funding to library buildings that parallels distribution of funding to school buildings
2. Creation of a formula for prioritizing funding that considers the income of the user group and the number of daily users of the library building
3. Revisions to E-rate administration to give libraries and schools access to more cost-effective contracts for technology and digital services including "whole networks" to meet broadband needs.

In recommending the changes, library leaders emphasized that any changes to E-rate priorities and funding administration should not pit "urban against rural or library against school."

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"Instead, this is an opportunity to ensure that the playing field is leveled for all simultaneously," they said.

In the 17-years since the E-rate was created, public libraries have become the most important and often only free public Internet access point for after-school children, the 90 million adults who are not in the workforce and are unable to access the Internet at work, and the estimated 40 percent of Americans who don't have broadband access at home. Today, no other institutions rival the significance of public libraries in the civic landscape for adults and for children during the many days and hours when school is not in session.

The Urban Libraries Council has been working closely with its member libraries and other organizations representing libraries to raise awareness of the importance of E-rate funds to public libraries and to develop recommendations for modernizing the program to meet current and future digital needs.

"The discussions and research around modernizing the E-rate has helped shape libraries' thinking about the digital future of all communities," said Urban Libraries Council CEO Susan Benton. "It has become clear that a new vision for the E-rate program must recognize the important role libraries now play in meeting community technology needs and delivering education for all using the best available technology resources."

A copy of the letter to the FCC is available on the ULC website at www.urbanlibraries.org.

About the Urban Libraries Council

The Urban Libraries Council (ULC) is a membership organization made up of North America's premier library systems. For more than 30 years, ULC has worked to strengthen public libraries as an essential part of community life. Serving more than 90 million people in the United States and Canada, ULC's 138 library members prove each day how essential libraries are to the health and vitality of their communities.

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