Education

Libraries angle for bigger role in E-Rate

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12/2/13 5:07 AM EST

Libraries want to ensure that a rewrite of a federal Internet subsidy program opens up new possibilities for their patrons as much as it could for public school students — some of whom are also library patrons.

In recent comments to the Federal Communications Commission on a proposal to overhaul the E-Rate program, groups including the American Library Association and the Urban Libraries Council stressed their roles as points of Internet access for students who lack services at home.

Libraries could expand existing roles as centers for continued learning and career assistance for adults, they said. And with more high-speed Internet access, more libraries could serve as community wireless hotspots, too.

E-Rate provides $2.25 billion in annual discounts for telecommunications services, Internet and internal connections for schools and libraries. FCC proceedings to overhaul the program and possibly more than double the funding cap have focused largely on schools.

The FCC's proposal to overhaul the program aligns closely with President Barack Obama's $4 billion to $6 billion ConnectED proposal, which aims to connect 99 percent of students to high-speed broadband within five years. That could encourage more one-to-one device learning in schools, change how classrooms look, how teachers teach and how students interact.

E-Rate has almost quadrupled the number of public libraries with Internet access since 1996. Still, the majority of libraries get nothing from E-Rate, said former FCC Chairman Reed Hundt, who now provides legal advice to the Urban Libraries Council.

Under a revamped E-Rate, libraries would be able to serve more people with Internet access in different ways, said Susan Benton, president of the Urban Libraries Council. Libraries could cycle in more devices like tablets and accommodate people bringing in their own devices.

"We've been trying to build relationships with the FCC," said Marijke Visser, assistant director of the Office for Information Technology Policy at the American Library Association. "We're building appreciation of how libraries and schools work together. Libraries can go a little bit further and work with the whole community."

According to one study, 62 percent of libraries report that they're the only source of free Internet access in their communities. About 92 percent reported helping people use and understand government websites and 76 percent said they helped people apply for jobs online.

Libraries want high-speed Internet access and fiber-optic cable to facilities that will carry large amounts of bandwidth. They want to be able to apply as groups and receive services that way, which could save money.

They appear to have support from the person championing changes to the program.

FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel said it's imperative libraries are brought up to speed.

"In the digital age, libraries are about more than just borrowing books," Rosenworcel said. "They have become an important community hub for expanded access to technology."

Currently, Hundt said libraries make up about 17 percent of total E-Rate applicants but receive about 3 percent to 5 percent of the overall program.

But libraries get a smaller cut of the program because there are fewer applicants compared to schools. There are about 9,000 public libraries and about 100,000 public elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. About 58 percent of libraries applied for the E-Rate program in fiscal year 2012, according to the American Library Association.

Some education groups, like McGraw-Hill Education, have told the FCC that the program should fund wireless hotspots throughout the community, helping students continue learning after schools and libraries close for the day.

"We do not believe that access to the Internet is optional," said Jeff Livingston, senior vice president of education policy and strategic alliances at McGraw-Hill. Livingston filed comments to the FCC on behalf of McGraw-Hill. "It's about having the access to contribute to the rest of society."

Hundt said libraries already serve as those access points, and E-Rate should focus on beefing up library Internet access before funneling money into an idea that the program wasn't created for, he said. In comments to the FCC, the American Library Association said it was "cautious" about using funds for that reason.

But Livingston said using libraries as community wireless hotspots isn't enough. The hotpots will extend the learning day beyond school and library hours and bring others, including parents, into the educational process, he said.

Schooling that's limited to a set number of hours per day, Livingston said, is about as "anachronistic as using chalk and paper."