



URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

INSPIRING LIBRARIES.
TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES.

Modernizing the E-rate program

E-rate is an important program that provides affordable broadband rates to libraries serving communities with great needs and few resources. In early February, The Federal Communications Commission Chairman Tom Wheeler with support from President Obama called to immediately double E-rate funding to help ensure all communities have equal access to high-speed Internet. The program has been capped since 2010 and adjusted only for inflation despite the increasing need for Internet access and digital literacy in everyday life.

Why is E-rate valuable to the American public?

- **E-rate connects more people to the Internet:** Access to broadband Internet is essential to excelling in today's economy. Libraries are at the forefront of bridging the digital divide ensuring all people can participate fully in the digital age.
- **The Internet connects people to information that improves their lives:** Technology tools and training in libraries enables millions of Americans to productively participate in the knowledge economy. Americans use technology services at libraries to search and apply for jobs, connect with government services, complete college applications and apply for financial aid, and so much more.
- **Libraries are the only source of free Internet for many communities:** Libraries have become the primary and often only place for free Internet access for many Americans.
- **Libraries provide digital literacy training needed to excel in today's economy:** Librarians have become a de-facto digital literacy corps, helping millions to improve their digital and information literacy — skills that are critical to most aspects of American life and work today.
- **Libraries must offer up-to-date technologies:** Libraries need the necessary resources to adopt constant upgrades of technology infrastructure. From dial-up modems in the 1990s to Wi-Fi and fiber connections today, libraries must keep up with the latest technologies to provide valuable services to their communities. Despite significant investments in broadband speed, more than 41 percent of libraries report insufficient speeds signaling the need to focus on capacity, not just connectivity.

Public Libraries: Connecting in the Digital Age

Learning and information consumption happens primarily online. Internet access and basic digital skills are essential for thriving in today's world.

Libraries are the leading public institutions to offer free access to computers, the Internet, and digital literacy instruction — all high-demand, staple services.

In fact, more than 62 percent of all libraries — and 70 percent of rural libraries — report they are the only providers of free Internet access and public computers in their communities.¹

What are libraries saying about E-rate?

Libraries rely on E-rate in order to provide some of the most sought-after services. According to a February 2014 survey of ULC member libraries:

- Programs and services that depend on E-rate funds include: Wi-Fi, increasing Internet speed, Internet access in branch libraries, a public laptop program, online class registration, and technology labs.
- 92 percent have applied for E-rate funds.
- Nine in 10 say that E-rate is important or very important to their ability to serve their communities.

While the vast majority relies on E-rate, more than a quarter of respondents noted they used a paid consultant or support from the state library system to prepare the E-rate application and suggest that simplifying and streamlining the application process is important to save valuable resources.

Recommendations for Strengthening E-rate

The Urban Libraries Council recommends the following steps to expand the E-rate program:

- **Reduce barriers for libraries to use E-rate funds:** Encourage more libraries to apply for E-rate funding by streamlining the application process, developing procurement practices that lead to cost-effective services, and allowing libraries the flexibility to seek diverse, cost-effective technology to meet changing needs.
- **Create a capital investment fund:** Capital investment will provide more libraries with broadband services faster than the current allocation structure.
- **Incentivize libraries to innovate with supplemental funding:** Establish an innovation fund that provides supplemental resources to libraries that are at the forefront of developing new technology and digital learning tools. This fund would incentivize libraries to innovate and allow them to leverage E-rate funds with other resources to advance digital-based learning.

"With E-rate funds, our library has been able to transform its technical and digital services and provide our community with access to high speed Internet, including WiFi. For many of our patrons, the library is their only resource for accessing computers and the Internet. I applaud the Administration's decision to expand and examine the E-rate program. Schools and libraries must be able to expand connectivity and technology to respond to the growing demands of digital learning. A revitalized E-rate program is key in helping them respond to current needs and plan effectively for future ones."

– Gina Millsap, CEO,
Topeka and Shawnee County
Public Library

For more information on how to apply for and support expansion of E-rate funds, please visit and contact the Urban Libraries Council at www.urbanlibraries.org.

¹ U.S. Public Libraries Weather the Storm, American Library Association, 2012