Before the
Federal Communications Commission
Washington, D.C. 20554

In the Matter of	)
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Modernizing the E-rate	) WC Docket No. 13-184
Program for Schools and Libraries	)
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REPLY COMMENTS OF THE URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

The Urban Libraries Council ("ULC") respectfully submits these reply comments in response to the Wireline Competition Bureau's Public Notice requesting comment on the sufficiency of E-rate category two funding.[1] ULC welcomes the opportunity to provide the Bureau with information regarding how urban libraries are using their category two funds and the critical role these funds are playing in local communities around the country.

I.   INTRODUCTION

ULC commends the Commission's work to modernize the E-rate program to ensure that it keeps pace with the growing demands of local communities and their technology needs. The E-rate's category two funding mechanism has facilitated the deployment of high-speed broadband infrastructure within libraries across the country. These long-overdue funds have allowed more libraries to obtain more E-rate funds, resulting in tangible benefits for their residents. These include widespread and robust WiFi services within libraries and greater access to and use of the Internet by individuals in varying communities across the country.

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[1]   *Wireline Competition Bureau Seeks Comment on Category Two Budgets*, WC Docket No. 13-184, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, Public Notice, 32 FCC Rcd 7012 (2016).

This is especially true in urban communities whose libraries serve a majority of the nation's library patrons. As the Commission is well aware, millions of individuals across the country would not be able to access the Internet without urban libraries and the critical broadband access services they provide.

As discussed below, the broadband funding needs of urban libraries have only increased since the Commission modernized the E-rate program several years ago. Urban libraries continue to be the only source of daily Internet access for millions of individuals across the country. Many of these individuals lack any other cost-effective option for broadband access and rely on urban libraries for this essential service. The preliminary data available at this point confirms that category two funding is meeting these challenges by advancing the Commission's stated priorities of expanding funding for internal connections while maintaining the program's historic focus on expanding broadband opportunities in lower-income communities across the country. The category two funding mechanism adopted by the Commission has also provided a relatively predictable and equitable framework for urban libraries. The funding made available through this framework has allowed many urban libraries to deploy robust and scalable high-speed broadband services within their facilities for the first time. Importantly, it has allowed urban libraries to deploy these services notwithstanding the significant logistical and financial challenges they encounter in their communities and facilities.

II.   **DISCUSSION**

A. Urban Libraries Continue to Experience Significant Broadband Funding Needs

As a membership organization of North America's premier urban public library systems and the organizations that serve them, ULC was actively involved in the Commission's efforts to

reform and modernize the E-rate program. In modernizing E-rate, the Commission

acknowledged the central role that libraries play in the daily broadband needs of millions of

individuals across the country.[2] The Commission particularly recognized the significant role that

urban libraries serve in meeting the broadband needs of their communities.[3] These needs have

only increased in the past several years.

According to a recent Pew Research Center study, approximately 59 million individuals

over the age of 16 visited a public library within the past year to use a computer, the Internet or

the WiFi service.[4] Of these individuals, nearly 30 million live in urban areas or in suburbs

immediately adjacent to an urban area. Of particular importance, more than one-third of these

individuals do not have broadband at home and are predominantly minority and lower-income.[5]

The study also found that the broadband resources libraries provide in their communities do not

cease when the library closes as more than 18 million Americans acknowledged using a library's

WiFi service when the library itself was closed.

This data confirms that urban libraries play a critical and continual role in serving the

broadband needs of their communities. From fostering employment searches, to fulfilling

educational needs to accessing governmental services, urban libraries are leveraging E-rate

funding to empower individuals to use broadband services to better their lives and their

communities. The broadband services provided by urban libraries are wholly dependent on

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[2]   *See Modernizing the E-rate Program for Schools and Libraries, WC Docket No. 13-184, Order, 29 FCC Rcd 8870, 8872 (2014)* ("*E-rate Modernization Order*").

[3]   *See Modernizing the E-rate Program for Schools and Libraries, WC Docket No. 13-184, Second Report and Order and Order on Reconsideration, 29 FCC Rcd 15538, 15565 (2014)* ("*Second E-rate Modernization Order*").

[4]   *See* Pew Research Center, *Libraries 2016* at p.12 <available at http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2016/09/PI_2016.09.09_Libraries-2016_FINAL.pdf. (last visited November 7, 2017).

[5]   *See id.*

scalable, high-capacity broadband systems and infrastructure. Urban libraries would not be unable to provide these services without the category two funding made available by the Commission through its E-rate modernization.

The value urban libraries create through E-rate funding is much broader than providing individual end users with Internet access. Its importance lies in the aggregate communal benefits E-rate helps to achieve: education, workforce development, economic growth and innovation/entrepreneurship. Community leaders recognize the societal benefits libraries provide in making high-speed broadband access freely available in their communities. A recent survey of city and county managers listed the five highest priorities these managers identified for their library systems.[6] Access to high-speed broadband led the survey with 73% of the managers listing it as the highest priority. Of particular note, managers from larger urban areas were more likely than those from less populated areas to list access to high-speed broadband as the highest priority.

B. Urban Libraries Heavily Depend on Category Two Funding

While the data available at this point only provides an early read, it strongly supports the Commission's E-rate modernization efforts—particularly its category two funding framework for urban libraries. The fact that E-rate funded category two requests for many libraries during the past two funding years, which it had not accomplished in prior years, is evidence in and of itself that the modernization effort has been successful. ULC has undertaken a preliminary survey of the funding requests of its members and can report a nearly 50% increase in the E-rate

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[6] *See* The Aspen Institute ICMA Report, *The Role of Libraries in Advancing Community Goals* at p.5. Available at <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2017/01/AspenICMAReport-1-13-17.pdf> (last visited Nov. 7, 2017).

funding responding members have received since 2014. Of particular importance, this increase is largely the result of category two funding requests.[7]

Given the extensive coordination urban library systems must undertake with their respective jurisdictions to plan and develop E-rate funding requests, it is not surprising that all urban library systems were not able to take advantage of category two funding in the first two years. The Commission itself recognized that a five-year budgetary window was necessary given the uncertainty applicants might face in the first years after completion of the modernization effort.[8] It is clear that the new framework has only just begun to extend the benefits of WiFi to urban libraries across the country. Based on discussions ULC has held with its members, ULC anticipates that additional requests for category two funding are forthcoming. These funding requests, coupled with requests already underway, will ensure that the current framework for category two services will achieve its fullest potential.

C. The Current Category Two Framework Meets the Needs of Urban Libraries

The current category two framework recognizes the unique challenges urban libraries face in providing broadband to their communities. As the Commission noted during its modernization effort, urban libraries "serve more people per square foot than other communities" and this "usage density increases the cost of internal connections…."[9] These conclusions responded to a ULC study that determined a square footage funding metric ignores factors most relevant to WiFi performance, including the number and density of users at any

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[7] To assist the Bureau in gathering detailed information regarding the success of the category two framework, ULC is commencing a more detailed study of its members' category two funding requests and will submit this information on the record.

[8] *See E-rate Reconsideration Order* at 15,575.

[9] *Id.*

given time and architectural or structural impediments. Unlike rural and most suburban libraries, the study also concluded that the square footage of urban libraries does not increase in a rate proportional to users. As a result, the Commission increased the per-discount, per-square foot budget for libraries located in densely populated areas to $5.00 per square foot. Coupled with the overall E-rate funding increase, this framework has ensured that urban libraries across the country can receive the funding necessary to deploy the internal infrastructure necessary to provide high-speed broadband services throughout their facilities.

D. ULC Supports Targeted Changes to Category Two Funding

Notwithstanding the successes of the category two budgets to date, there are opportunities for the Commission to improve the existing funding framework and structure. There are still too many schools and libraries that need more category two funding than they are receiving. ULC agrees with a number of other commenters who have suggested a variety of improvements to the existing framework. In particular, ULC supports the addition of managed WiFi services to category two so that schools and libraries have the option of using a third party to install and manage WiFi networks within their facilities. This would increase competition and promote the efficient use of E-rate funding. ULC also believes that the Commission should provide schools and libraries with additional flexibility to allocate funding among their locations as necessary to meet their needs. Commission rules currently require schools and libraries to apply for funding on a per-building basis, and funds requested for one building may not be used for another. This results in funding constraints and unnecessary administrative burdens for E-rate applicants. A more effective approach would be to allow schools and libraries to distribute their allotted funding among their locations as necessary to meet their broadband deployment

needs—even if such distribution would cause a particular location to exceed its category two funding cap.

III. CONCLUSION

ULC appreciates the opportunity to provide information for the Bureau's report to the Commission on the category two funding framework. As discussed herein, ULC believes that the framework is successfully advancing the Commission's universal service goals by facilitating the deployment of high-speed broadband services within schools and libraries across the country.

Respectfully submitted,

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