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ALA's Broadband Resolution and the FCC's Emergency Broadband Benefit Program

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March 11, 2021   David Sye   Advocacy, Information Access

One of the main advocacy items at the ALA Virtual Council Meeting on January 25th was increased funding for broadband. Since the summer, the Committee on Legislation (COL) advocated for library broadband funding to be included in the next COVID relief package. The goal was to allocate $200 million for the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). These funds would be distributed to libraries so they could expand internet access, either through boosting Wi-Fi signals or loaning internet capable devices such as hotspots. Unfortunately, such allocations were removed from the most recent COVID-19 relief package, the Consolidated Appropriations Act. ALA thanks the many advocates who reached out to their networks and worked hard in their attempts to attach such provisions on to legislation.

In response to the exclusion of library broadband funding from the relief package, ALA has passed the "Resolution in Support of Broadband as a Human Right." You can view the full resolution in the meeting minutes, but I want to highlight some of its key provisions. ALA emphasizes that libraries provide no-fee broadband access in communities, which is essential to those in communities with little to no broadband access. Additionally, they endorse legislation which promotes broadband access for low-income and BIPOC households, especially families with school-aged children who lack home internet access. Ultimately, the resolution states that ALA "affirms universal access to affordable high-capacity broadband is an essential as electricity and therefore a basic right for all; and advocates for legislative and regulatory policies through which libraries can affect positive change toward such universal access."
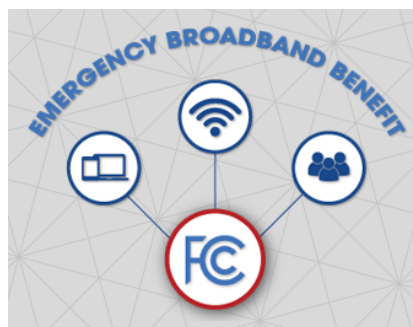
While the Consolidated Appropriations Act did not provide funds to IMLS as hoped, it did contain $7 billion to increase broadband access. Broadband access has been a big issue in this country the past several years, but the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted further challenges of the digital divide. Whether it is for education, business, or leisure, many Americans are able to manage pandemic-related obstacles using a reliable internet connection. Unfortunately, this is not the case for all Americans, specifically in rural and tribal areas of the country. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), approximately 35% of Americans in rural areas and 40% of American in Tribal areas lack access to high-speed fixed service. ALA supports efforts by Congress and the FCC to improve rural and tribal broadband access. This package allocates $300 million for rural broadband and $1 billion for tribal broadband. There is also $285 million to assist with broadband issues at historically Black colleges and universities. This provision should help address some racial inequities that exist in relation to information access.

So what else does the $7 billion go towards? The main provision is a $3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit Program (EBBP). The EBBP is still under development by the FCC, but the plan includes providing $50 per month to low-income families to be used towards broadband services. An eligible household needs to contain a member meets any of the following requirements:

1. Qualified to participate in the federal lifeline program
2. Qualified to participate in the free and reduced price lunch program
3. Has experienced a substantial loss of income since February 29, 2020 that is documented by layoff or furlough notice, application for unemployment benefits, or similar document
4. Has received a Federal Pell grant in the current year
5. Meets the eligibility criteria for a participating provider's existing low-income or COVID-19 program

On February 12, the FCC hosted a roundtable to discuss the EBBP further. One of the challenges the panelists identified was making the program known to people. One mentioned that the idea of "free internet" sounds like a scam, so the FCC wants to turn to community-based solutions involving trusted sources. Libraries were identified as a trusted source as panelists talked about best practices (other sources discussed included churches and housing authorities). The role of libraries in the EBBP, therefore would disseminate jargon-free information about the program to people. While libraries did not receive any broadband funding in the $7 billion broadband allocations, they still expected to support the FCC's efforts in getting the EBBP up and running. Nevertheless, ALA supports broadband access as a human right so we (libraries) will do our duty to help our community members get connected.

Update

Congress has passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This is landmark legislation that includes **$200 million dollars for libraries.**

American Library Association (ALA) President Julius C. Jefferson, Jr., praised the bill.

"Libraries are a lifeline for millions of people, and the people who know that best are those who need this rescue package most. Because libraries stepped up, people without home broadband have been able to keep their jobs, students and teachers have continued to learn in a remote context, and seniors and other vulnerable people have safely connected with doctors and maintained contact with loved ones. Now libraries are also helping people register for the vaccine and even serving as temporary clinics.

"The pandemic has exposed the level to which Americans rely on libraries to access the internet and learn to navigate it, find jobs and gain new skills, learn to read and identify what information to trust, and become actively engaged in their communities. At the same time, COVID-19 has forced many states and local governments to implement cuts and furloughs that threaten the very services that communities are relying on for relief.

"ALA has been working tirelessly behind the scenes for months to secure federal support for libraries and librarians. Transformative library services rely on the library workers who offer them," said Jefferson. "In many cases, ARPA means libraries won't have to choose between funding community programs and paying salaries of the professional staff who lead them."

In addition to IMLS funding, ARPA also includes $7.172 billion for an Emergency Education Connectivity Fund through the Federal Communications Commission's E-rate program. Updates will be posted on ALA's ARPA web page.

David Sye

David Sye is a Research and Instruction Librarian at Murray State University in southwestern Kentucky. He is liaison for the History, Political Science & Sociology, and Psychology departments, as well as teaching instruction sessions and credit-bearing courses on information literacy. He holds a BA in History from the University of Illinois at Springfield, in addition to an MA in History and MLIS from Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Prior to working at Murray State University, he has worked in public libraries and briefly taught middle school social studies.