

ALA American Library Association

March 19, 2020

Chairman Ajit Pai
Commissioner Brendan Carr
Commissioner Mike O’Rielly
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel
Commissioner Geoffrey Starks
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th St. SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Mr. Chairman and Commissioners:

America’s 16,557 public library locations are essential nodes in our digital safety net—connecting people with no-fee access to computers and the internet, as well as digital literacy training and expansive learning and enrichment digital collections for all ages. While the coronavirus is disrupting this safety net as many public libraries limit public programs and temporarily close, library leaders are working diligently to continue and expand our mission of ensuring equitable access to online information.

The FCC and its Universal Service Fund programs—particularly E-rate—have provided essential support to building libraries’ digital capacity. Amid this current crisis and into what is likely a longer recovery period, libraries need greater flexibility and support in maximizing and leveraging our digital resources to support out-of-school students, distance learners and new teleworkers of all ages, information seekers desperate for accurate health and human services information, and more. Our communities cannot wait and we wish to amplify the call to action of our coalition partners, [Schools, Health and Libraries Broadband \(SHLB\) Coalition](#) and the [Education and Library Networks Coalition](#) (EdLiNC).

The American Library Association (ALA) and our 58,000 members today call for the FCC to act now. Specifically, we urge the Commission to use its authority to immediately address the crisis-driven digital divide caused by work and school closures and social-distancing requirements and:

- 1) Clarify that public libraries can allow community access to their Wi-Fi networks without jeopardizing E-rate funding. We’re all familiar with stories of people in the library parking lot after hours using the Wi-Fi, but some libraries may refrain if they believe they must cost-allocate a portion of their capacity to account for usage outside their building walls. As the SHLB letter rightly indicates, the [Sixth Report and Order](#) (2010) already permits libraries and schools to allow non-educational use after hours. With swift action, many more libraries would be empowered to provide a desperately needed service to those without home broadband.
- 2) Clarify that public libraries may use the Wi-Fi enabled bookmobile or techmobile as a community hotspot without jeopardizing E-rate funding. This would enable them to bring internet access to public locations in communities with a high percentage of families or individuals without home broadband access.

- 3) Allow libraries to increase their broadband capacity immediately without requesting a service substitution as is required under E-rate rules. Maintaining this rule now would unnecessarily delay access to needed additional capacity to accommodate more users.
- 4) Provide a temporary waiver of E-rate rules that restrict broadband services to library (and school) property and more broadly interpret “Educational Purposes” to enable libraries to amplify their bandwidth beyond library walls to better reach disconnected learners and workers in proximity to library buildings.

While we encourage the Commission to focus on steps that will lead to immediate outcomes, it is not too early to prepare for the recovery period we will undoubtedly face as libraries and schools re-open. Most immediate, with library closures, we anticipate many will not be able to meet numerous program deadlines and/or address queries from Program Integrity Assurance (PIA) personnel. We are grateful the Commission already extended the Form 471 filing deadline and agree with the SHLB request for a blanket one-year waiver of deadlines. We further request the Commission direct USAC to delay any PIA inquiry or action until the library re-opens.

As libraries themselves recover, we anticipate a marked decline in revenue and as such urge the Commission to consider an emergency temporary relief package for C2 budgets for those libraries (and schools) that had planned for upgrades that may now be delayed because of lost local revenue. This could be in the form of an increased per square footage formula or added 10% to the discount rate (not to exceed 100%) for the 2020 transition year.

Finally, we commend the Commission for calling on the service provider community to make a public commitment to offer access to low-cost broadband and the temporary waiver of E-rate gift rules. Thank you for these timely actions.

Sincerely,

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