BROADBAND CAPACITY FOR COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION: HELPING LIBRARIES MANAGE NETWORK-ENABLED SERVICES

The U.S. is facing a broadband access crisis: at the community level, many rural areas have little or no access to broadband, and at the residential level, millions can neither access nor afford it. No-fee access at the public library is more important now than ever before. Americans are flocking in much larger numbers to libraries to search for jobs, engage government services, & continue their education online. While these essential services help people improve their lives, all of these uses require increasingly greater bandwidth. The impact on public libraries’ ability to provide public computer service is staggering; library networks are straining to manage traffic, response times are slowing, lines are growing ever longer, & all of this is happening when libraries are forced to slash their budgets.

Public libraries are a vital & vibrant part of America’s communities. Libraries provide no-fee Internet and computer access in nearly every U.S. community through 16,561 public library buildings. In 2007, public library services were used over 1.4 billion times. Roughly half of public libraries serve rural communities; in most of these, the library is the only source of no-fee access to the Internet.

Statement of the Problem

The rising demand for Internet connectivity places enormous pressure on libraries, particularly library managers, who struggle to translate their current & future service needs to broadband capacity requirements; planning for & managing Internet connectivity is not a traditional role for librarians, and most are not prepared to assume this role. While some large libraries can afford technology staff, small & rural libraries supporting the neediest populations cannot. In this rapidly-changing library service environment, all librarians need training in bandwidth capacity planning to ensure their libraries continue to meet the evolving needs of their patrons. This has become a core competency for the library profession.

Helping Librarians Develop a New Core Competency

For libraries to fulfill the role of public computer center, librarians need to manage online resources & services like any other library function. The centerpiece of this project will be the launch of the Broadband Capacity Planning and Implementation website, which will help to develop this competency in librarians through training and communications by making available:

- Tools aimed at assisting public libraries to expand broadband capacity & manage existing network services;
• Resources to help librarians conduct broadband & network “audits” to improve the efficiency and performance of existing technology infrastructure; &
• Instructional modules, tools, & planning guides.

These interactive, customizable resources will improve community access to and use of broadband services by:

• Helping libraries recognize & address inefficiencies in their network design, & address these to improve the user experience;
• Anticipating next-generation broadband applications & what they might mean for capacity planning;
• Sharing library best practices;
• Assisting libraries to negotiate with vendors and understand their options; &
• Preserving library jobs that might otherwise be lost as libraries look to streamline their budgets.

While the primary audience for this website is the public library community, other community anchor institutions also will be able to benefit.