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Vermont State Librarian testifies about the importance of open internet at Senate hearing

BURLINGTON, Vt.—Today Vermont State Librarian Martha Reid voiced the concerns of our nation’s libraries about the importance of an open Internet at a [U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary](#) field hearing. Led by Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) in support of network neutrality, the hearing “Preserving an Open Internet: Rules to Promote Competition and Protect Main Street Consumers” took place in Burlington, Vt.

Speaking before an audience that included many from the Vermont library community, Reid said, “We are united in our belief that an Open Internet is essential to our nation’s freedom of speech, educational achievement, economic vitality, and equal access to information. An Open Internet is fundamental for libraries to fulfill their mission to provide students, teachers and faculty and the general public equal access to information and to the wide variety of resources and opportunities made available via the Internet.”

Vermont is one of many states where public libraries are often the only place in town to offer free Internet access and they are the go-to places for job seekers, independent learners, researchers and local entrepreneurs.

“Technologies now permit our libraries—and individuals—to create and disseminate their own information online,” said Reid. “We are not just providers or consumers of information, but creators, as well. Network neutrality is vital so that all voices can be heard and that the benefits of the Internet can be realized by all—not just those who can pay.”

National studies show that citizens often choose to use public library Internet and Wi-Fi – even if they have it at home. During the hearing, Reid used an example from Readsboro, Vt., a small town where a local entrepreneur with a home-based business started to work at the public library because the library internet fiber connection is fast and efficient. Videoconferencing, distance learning, job searches, resume and career development. In the past year 14 Vermont public libraries have launched no-fee community videoconferencing services.

“Internet resources must be both affordable for libraries and freely accessible to those we serve,” said Reid. “Without the Open Internet there is a danger that libraries will face higher service charges for so-called “premium” online information services. This would, in turn, place limitations on the amount or quality of information libraries can provide to their users. There simply cannot be a system of tiered Internet access in this country that would set limits on bandwidth or speed because of paid prioritized transmission.”

American Library Association (ALA) Immediate Past President Barbara Stripling echoed Reid’s testimony, noting that the preservation of the free flow of information is critical to an informed society. “ALA agrees with my colleague, Martha Reid, when she says it is ‘the right of citizens to have access to information, including that which may be controversial, is a hallmark of our democracy and of libraries. Currently, the Internet is freely and equitably accessible to all. And it needs to stay that way.’”

Just days before the Senate hearing, leadership at the 2014 American Library Association Annual Conference in Las Vegas passed an organizational resolution supporting network neutrality.

“As information professionals, our members know first-hand that our society cannot afford to let only those with deep pockets control what information and content gets faster or preferential treatment on the Internet,” said Stripling. “Just think of the consequences if libraries were forced to unplug and close down access to the vital information used every day by library users across the country. Like other public institutions, in higher education and the K-12 education, libraries cannot afford to compete with big companies and content providers. We cannot turn off access to vital information to those who need it most.”

ALA also [announced](#) its public support for the “Online Competition and Consumer Choice Act of 2014,” a bill introduced in the Senate by Sens. Leahy and Al Franken (D-Minn.), and in the U.S. House by Rep. Doris Matsui (D-CA).

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About the American Library Association

The American Library Association is the oldest and largest library association in the world, with approximately 57,000 members in academic, public, school, government, and special libraries. The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.