

## Alaska OWL: Online With Libraries

I attended the launch meeting in Anchorage in December. This meeting was attended by the directors of all 105 libraries in the state as well as many representatives from the state library and an overwhelming array of agency and organizational representatives up to and including Governor Parnell.

This grant program brings together 22 entities in a two-part effort to meet the federal goal of providing all Americans with rapid and dependable access to the internet. It is increasingly the case now and will become more so in the future that many government services and documents are only accessible via the internet. For example, the IRS no longer routinely mails out forms and the Permanent Fund Dividend must be applied for online starting this year. In order for the state and federal governments to take their services online, citizens require online access to use them. Additionally, there are many, many educational, professional, health-related and other services that can enrich citizens' lives that are only provided online.

Alaska has the slowest internet access speeds and the highest internet access costs in the nation. We are, therefore, a fitting population to launch this nationwide program. The FCC has defined acceptable broadband access as 4 Mbps download and 1.5 Mbps upload as the standard we need to achieve to meet this service goal. Presently, our own connections are barely a 10th of this capacity...on a good day.

The two parts of the program involve:

1. creating a consortium to provide faster more reliable internet bandwidth at reasonable cost and
2. providing us the basic equipment to permit the residents of our community to use these new online services and the training plus technical support to keep the equipment operational.

I will look at both of these program aspects in more detail below.

### **Equipment**

Each library was made an offer of specific equipment based upon...something. We didn't get any particular explanation of the assignments, other than that it was based somehow upon our size, service times, and other local aspects. We are presently authorized to receive:

- 1 desktop computer (\$1152)
- 1 laptop computer (\$1129)
- headphones (\$20)
- microphones (\$20)
- speakers (\$45)
- flat screen monitor (\$350)
- printer (\$400)
- privacy screen (\$100)
- monitor upgrade (\$249) -- no, I couldn't get an explanation of what this would be
- furniture (\$800) --no details on this
- router (\$500)
- software (\$800) --no details
- video conferencing equipment (\$5570)

for a total of \$11,135

We must agree to return all equipment if we drop out of the program during its three year lifespan. We also must agree that it must not be removed from the library and be made available to the public (in other words, we cannot reserve it for staff use). We have to provide a secure and private place for the videoconferencing storage and use. I don't see any problem with meeting these requirements of the program. The only note I will make is that we will be required to modify our [facility use policy](#) to provide for privacy specifically related to videoconferencing in order to meet requirements such as [HIPAA](#).

### **Technical support**

This is the part I understand least. There was a great deal of discussion that all of this equipment would come with training. Further, if we were open 20 hours a week (although in some places the statement is "less than 20 hours a week" which is somewhat confusing) or would commit to an additional 5 hours open a week, we would be eligible for a subsidy to pay for a part time tech support staffer.

I have a question in to the state personnel as to why we are not shown on the project sheet as receiving any tech support or training and am awaiting that answer. As for the tech staffer, while this would be absolutely wonderful in terms of reducing the stress on me to provide this, I do not really consider it feasible to recruit enough volunteers to commit to keeping the library open 20 hours a week year round even though I suspect we average closer to that than our actual requirement of 12.5 hours. If the board can assist with this recruitment and the treasurer would be willing to undertake the payroll accounting to support a paid employee, I would be delighted to challenge our allotment in this regard. I do, however, plan to at least challenge whether or not we will receive training in setting up and using all of this equipment, some of which is outside my present level of expertise.

### **Broadband bandwidth**

If we participate in this portion of the program, we will receive faster and more reliable internet connection that is intended to achieve the FCC standard.

In order to gain this, we must participate in the federal E-Rate program that you considered and declined at your September meeting. I have since learned more about this program and I now feel that a number of the objections that you raised then can be satisfactorily dealt with. In essence, while we may deplore the restrictions on personal freedom of information that result from this program's requirements, they are actually slight enough that they may be worth selling out for...as most of the libraries in the state have already decided despite their misgivings.

One of the primary concerns raised was the requirement for filtering internet access. I have since learned that this requirement may be met by simply taking a list of urls that the state police have determined to access illegal activities and blocking just those specific sites in our browsers. In other words, this does not have the broad blocking represented by filters that are based on specific words. Since we already, in [our internet use policy](#), prohibit using our connection for illegal activities or child pornography, this represents no further restriction on service beyond which we are already placing, except that it cannot be gotten around.

Another concern raised was that the volunteer staff felt they lacked both time and computer expertise to turn the filters off when requested to do so by adults (we are only *required* to filter for children). I have verified with the state library's E-Rate coordinator that we are not required to turn off our filtering for anyone. We may merely state that if you want to use our computers, you must use them filtered; users bringing their own computers to the library are not required to be filtered (although our internet use policy still pertains) and so may evade this restriction that way. I feel that this successfully deals with this concern.

We would still be required to hold a public meeting and provide a record (meeting announcement, photo of meeting, minutes of meeting) of doing so to discuss putting filtration in place. We would need a specific Internet Safety Policy that would, I believe, supersede and incorporate our present Internet Use Policy, but state library personnel have policy templates they can make available to us. We would also, as I noted above, need to modify our facilities use policy to provide for private videoconferencing where required by law. The record-keeping, while extensive, can be managed with the help of the state coordinator, who is very knowledgeable and helpful.

### **Bandwidth cost**

This is one area where we did not do ourselves a favor by declining to apply for E-Rate last fall. If we participate in this program, we now won't get any discount and we must commit to continuing to pay what we are presently charged for internet connectivity (\$49/month)...albeit for more service. This would not, however, prevent our also receiving a discount of perhaps 70% on our phone service though.

### **The problem**

To my surprise, our initial grant "offer" that detailed the equipment we could receive did not include any bandwidth participation at all. Neither the state library officials nor the E-Rate coordinator could explain why we were not authorized for this portion of the program--an essential one for actually using this equipment effectively. It was speculated that perhaps our decline to apply for E-Rate this fall caused them to assume we wouldn't do so for this program; it was speculated that ACS's inflated bandwidth figures led them to believe we already had the necessary connection speeds (we do not, oh we so do not). I do not yet really understand our initial omission from this portion of the program, but after doing some lobbying and providing documentation of our actual connection speeds, now have confirmation from Sue Sherif, the head of the OWL grant program for the state, that "we are placing you in the category with bandwidth support."

### **Recommendations**

As this FCC standard comes into effect through the country, those of us in communities with less capable equipment and insufficient bandwidth will find ourselves increasingly cut off from important online-only services, not to mention the enrichment that many online programs can provide. That this service is targeting libraries enhances their political and fiscal durability and lends weight to the need for our continued funding and support by our state and local governments. If libraries are to provide an essential service in the near future, we require the equipment and connectivity to support it, and that in turn requires participation in this program.

I recommend to the board that you vote:

1. to approve participation in both portions of this program to the fullest extent to which we are deemed to qualify;  
and
2. to commit to holding the required hearing(s) and approving the required policy creation and modification to administer these services.

I will of course continue to update the board on the progress being made on this program. At this point, we have given only provisional commitment to our *intent* to proceed, and the board may in the future revoke our participation in the future if it fails to approve of any particular program component or procedure.