

Libraries – 21st Century Hubs for Digital Inclusion

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As renowned California historian and State Librarian Emeritus Kevin Starr has proclaimed, it is time to “reboot California”—literally “restart” all aspects of governance and reform all institutions of government. That includes a transformation of libraries to be 21st Century Hubs for Digital Inclusion—places where the public can use their library card not only to check out a book, but also to access a computer for high-speed navigation of the Internet to retrieve information from the virtual global library.

While prominent librarians throughout California share this vision and many libraries provide computers for public access, they lack adequate resources and sufficient policy support to make this concept a reality. Often there are too few computers in a library for the demand and, thus, the time allowed for each user is limited. Imagine trying to complete a college application in the allotted 15 or 30 minutes at a time to use a public library computer, but that’s the reality faced by students and families who do not have a computer or broadband service at home.

Fortunately, State Librarian Stacey Aldrich and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation are convening library leaders and stakeholders to plan for 21st Century libraries. The California Emerging Technology Fund, whose mission is to close the Digital Divide in our state, see libraries as key partners to help all Californians get connected. We envision libraries being both physical and virtual centers of knowledge and information—21st Century Hubs for Digital Inclusion—by:

- Expanding public access to computers, increasing the number of computing devices available for public use inside libraries, including on Native American tribal lands.
- Providing digital literacy training through professional staff and volunteers, orienting non-users to the basics of using a computer and navigating the Internet.
- Establishing libraries as broadband (WiFi) hot spots, so that there is wireless access in and around the vicinity of libraries for residents to use their own computing devices to obtain high-speed Internet access.

We invite all elected officials and policymakers to join this call to action for libraries of the future. Advancing this vision will be a giant step forward for Digital Inclusion and will add to California’s reputation of being a national leader in closing the Digital Divide.

Sunne Wright McPeak is president and chief executive of the California Emerging Technology Fund, an independent, public-purpose non-profit whose mission is to close the Digital Divide in California. CETF has offices in Los Angeles and the Bay Area.