



News Release

## **Broadband library network offers lifeline to people in need -- 44 percent use library Internet access and computers nationally**

(TACOMA, Wash.) April 29, 2010 -- Imagine being responsible for a family of four and earning a household income of \$22,000 or less. Forty-four percent of these households living below the federal poverty line report using library computers and internet access during the past year reports the Associated Press.

Libraries, impoverished households, and young people throughout rural Washington state had a major victory on March 1, 2010. U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, joined by U.S. Sen. Patty Murray and U.S. Rep. Jay Inslee, announced an \$84 million Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) investment grant to Northwest Open Access Network (NoaNet). NoaNet will build and coordinate the construction of middle mile fiber optic infrastructure throughout Washington state in the next three years. A significant portion of the award is earmarked to create a network for libraries.

NoaNet CEO, Greg Marney, explains, "The creation of a network for libraries provides broadband solutions that meet the needs of rural communities and provides the people in the most need, access to employment and educational opportunities."

Without broadband infrastructure people in our rural communities simply cannot compete and don't have a chance without the essential infrastructure.

Gov. Chris Gregoire said at the March 1 award conference, "Access to information is essential to build healthy, connected, and economically viable communities ..."

Libraries now more than ever are functioning as an essential gathering place -- a lifeline for people in need. A shining example serving this need is Whitman County Library District's 14 branches. Colfax had more than 15,000 people attend community events and educational programs in the Colfax library even though the town's population is just 2,800. Librarians at Colfax offer guidance and training for basic computer skills, job searching, career and social service guidance.

"Because of increased broadband access, libraries in rural Washington state communities will be able to provide opportunities for education, commerce, job, and consumer health," said Jan Walsh, State Librarian of the Washington State Library.

In another Whitman County Library Branch, usage of online services has skyrocketed by 24 percent. Rosalia residents sign up to reserve computer time and take advantage of the library's job skill classes. Wireless computing has also taken off with people parking around the library at all hours with laptops. In this rural area, many people have slow or no Internet service at home.

These free services are good news to library users like Edyth "Edie" Charles, a patron of the bustling Rosalia Library, who, due to an injury, is no longer able to work in the health and assisted care field, where she has been employed her whole life. Edie found help at Rosalia Library's Whitman County Occupational Resource Connection (WORC) program. Library staff helped Edie update her resume, write a cover letter, learn interview skills, and submit an application online. Edie, who received several call-backs and one interview shared, "I get on the computer to look up jobs and apply for jobs online. The computers and online access here at the library and the WORC staff has been invaluable in supporting me to reach my goals of making my resume and interview skills more marketable in order to find work."

Enhanced broadband connectivity will allow for downloading streaming videos for customers, connecting groups of people through video conferencing shared among branch libraries, and the potential for one unified statewide library catalog.

NoaNet's project strengthens services of libraries such as the one in Rosalia. Providing enhanced broadband opens a world of possibilities such as distance education classes, videoconferencing and enhanced training capabilities like those happening with the WORC program.

Kristie Kirkpatrick, Director of Whitman County Rural Library District, adds, "Here in Whitman County, people are seldom able to work or go to college in the rural towns where they live. High speed Internet in our libraries may be the first step in keeping our residents from leaving the small towns that they love."

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**About NoaNet** -- NoaNet is a nonprofit mutual corporation providing wholesale telecommunications transport and is headquartered in Tacoma, Wash. It operates a reliable public open-access broadband communication network totaling over 1,500 fiber miles that provides rural areas access to broadband services. NoaNet's members are 12 public utility districts and a joint operating agency that have served wholesale customers in Washington state since 2000. [www.noanet.net](http://www.noanet.net)

## Background Resources

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**About Whitman County Library** -- Whitman County Library District is committed to be its community's No. 1 resource for information, recreation, and discovery. With 14 branches, Whitman County Library is committed to providing the highest level of service in the most efficient and cost effective manner to its patrons in a safe and healthy environment. <http://www.whitco.lib.wa.us/>.

**About Rosalia** -- Rosalia is a town of 648 people located 30 miles south of Spokane. The once thriving community is working to evolve from an agriculturally based economy to a more service oriented model. In that effort, the community expanded its library (a branch of Whitman County Library system), renovated a visitor's center, developed a performing arts center and is working to attract new business and community infrastructure such as NoaNet's expanded broadband infrastructure.

**About Washington State Library** -- Washington State Library provides programs and services to all Washington libraries to ensure Washingtonians have access to the information they need. They collect, preserve, and make materials on the government, history, culture, and natural resources accessible. The Washington State Library partnered with NoaNet on two federal broadband stimulus applications to bring increased broadband to public libraries. <http://www.sos.wa.gov/quicklinks/broadband>.

## Related Articles

April 2010 report, *First-ever National Study: Millions of People Rely on Library Computers for Employment, Health, and Education*, U.S. Impact Studies, Information School, University of Washington, <http://cis.washington.edu/usimpact/>.

March 2010 report, *Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries*, revealed that roughly 77 million Americans used public library computer and Internet access in the past year. Of those, 40 percent of library computer users (about 30 million people) received help with career needs.