

For Immediate Release:

October 23, 2007

Contact:

Allison Davis
(206) 709-3400
media@gatesfoundation.org

Opportunity Online Hardware Grants Will Help Public Libraries Provide Improved Computer Access for Communities in the United States

SEATTLE – The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced today \$8.3 million in grants to help public libraries in 10 states provide quality access to computers and the Internet. The new “Opportunity Online” hardware grants are for public libraries serving communities with high concentrations of poverty and that are at risk of having outdated technology. Libraries must provide matching funds to be eligible for the grants. These required local funds are expected to total \$4.75 million.

This is the first of three rounds of Opportunity Online hardware grants. More than 1,000 library branches in Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Nevada, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wyoming are eligible for grants in this round.

"If you walk into any public library today, you will see people using computers to find jobs, access e-government services, complete school assignments, and connect with friends and family," said Jill Nishi, program manger of the U.S. Libraries initiative at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "Unfortunately, many libraries do not have enough local funding to adequately maintain their technology services, putting people who rely on library computers at a disadvantage. It's critical that communities commit the local resources necessary to ensure all people have opportunities to benefit from technology."

Over the last decade, public libraries have provided communities with access to information through computers and the Internet. However, many libraries struggle to keep pace with technology and rapidly increasing community demand for these services. A recent national survey revealed that four out of five public libraries say they don't have enough computers to meet their community's needs. Sixty percent of libraries say that they have no plans to add public computers in the coming year citing cost and space as major limiting factors. With nearly half of the nation's public libraries reporting decreased or flat public funding in 2006, inadequate technology services persist in many libraries.

"I dreamed of pursuing my teaching degree, but wanted to stay in my rural community, and had no computer or Internet access at home to complete online learning classes," said Coreen Rea Braden of Basin, Wyoming. "I used the computers and Internet connection at the Big Horn County Public Library to enroll in a well-respected online education program. Now I do coursework, correspond with instructors, and take proctored exams online, and check out books for free. Without the library, I wouldn't be able to pursue my degree."

Opportunity Online grants are designed to help public libraries like the Big Horn County Library secure sustained local funding for computer replacements and upgrades in order to maintain quality technology services. The Opportunity Online grants require participating libraries to secure a local match, preferably in the form of a local budget allocation. Librarians participating

in the program will also be required to go through training designed to help them raise awareness in their community about their library's services and increase local support and funding for technology services.

"Previous support from the Gates Foundation inspired the state to fund a computer replacement match program for our libraries," said Annie Norman, state librarian and director of the Delaware Division of Libraries, which works with 18 libraries eligible for the Opportunity Online grants. "But some libraries are still struggling. Opportunity Online will help those libraries convince local decision makers that their communities can't thrive without strong technology services at the library and that libraries need adequate funding for technology now and into the future."

The second and third round of Opportunity Online hardware grants will begin in 2008 and 2009, respectively, and will be offered to libraries in Alaska, Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin. The remaining 18 U.S. states participated in the foundation's recent Public Access Computing Hardware Upgrade Grant program in 2006 and are not eligible for Opportunity Online hardware grants.

If eligible for the Opportunity Online hardware grants, libraries will be contacted and invited by the Gates Foundation to participate in the program, which will be administered through an intermediary organization in each state. The round-one grants were awarded to the following intermediary organizations: Bibliographical Center for Research, the Delaware Division of Libraries, the State Library of Iowa, the Nevada State Library and Archives, the New York State Library, Pennsylvania Area Library Network, the Utah State Library, and the Wyoming State Library.

In the U.S., to date, the foundation has invested \$320 million in grants and other support to train thousands of library staff and install and sustain computers in libraries in all 50 states and U.S. territories. The U.S. Libraries initiative currently invests in computer and connectivity support for libraries, technical training and support for libraries, research and evaluation, and advocacy training to help libraries adapt to and sustain their new role as community technology hubs. The Opportunity Online hardware grants are expected to be the last round of grants given by the foundation to support computer upgrades for U.S. public libraries with vulnerable technology.

###

About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Patty Stonesifer and co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett. More information is available at: www.gatesfoundation.org.