

**REMARKS OF
CHAIRWOMAN JESSICA ROSENWORCEL
TO THE
AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION ANNUAL CONFERENCE
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Hello, American Library Association! It is terrific to be with you. I am thrilled to be here in Chicago and honored to be part of the opening session at your annual conference.

I know the stereotype is that librarians are always shushing people and trying to keep things quiet. But my experience is that the ALA isn't afraid to make a little noise. So thank you and your leaders like Lessa Pelayo-Lozada for speaking out and standing up for access, for opportunity, and for intellectual freedom.

Now when you are Chairwoman of the Federal Communications Commission, you get invited to speak at a lot of annual gatherings like this. To prepare for these appearances, it is standard practice to look back through your calendar and see if you did any events with those you are joining at the conference.

I was going through that exercise for these remarks and had a bit of an epiphany: I really like libraries. Just look at my schedule.

Almost every time I hit the road, I end up at a library.

When I was in Baltimore County earlier this month, where did I go? A library. When I was in Phoenix in May? A library. How about my trip to Los Angeles in March? A library. San Antonio last year? Library. My Tribal visit in New Mexico? Library, in fact two.

Why is the Chairwoman of the FCC visiting so many libraries? I think libraries are amazing.

For me, this is not a new take. We are in Illinois right now and growing up I lived in Rantoul, which is about two hours south of here. However, the bulk of my childhood was spent in West Hartford, Connecticut. That is exactly what it sounds like because it is a town just west of the Connecticut capitol. It is also the birthplace of Noah Webster.

We love our dictionaries in West Hartford. Growing up, we took a lot of school trips to the Noah Webster house. The annual spelling bee was named for the town's most famous historical resident. I was never all that good at spelling words into a microphone on stage, I was always out in the first or second round. And sitting right in the center of town was the Noah Webster Memorial Library. It was a brick colonial revival building, just the kind you would imagine in a New England town. I loved it. I traipsed there as a kid exchanging my library card for all kinds of books, researching papers for everything in school, and marveling at how this community hub attracted everyone in town. The students hovered by the encyclopedias, the elderly gathered in the big chairs by the periodicals where they read the newspapers on long

wooden sticks, and the new parents kept their watchful eyes on their offspring in the children's section which was colorful and inviting.

In his terrific book, Eric Klinenberg called libraries *Palaces for the People*. I believe it. These are the shared spaces that bring us together and are built on the proposition that information and opportunity should be available to all.

I am going to guess a large chunk of this audience read and shared the love letter to libraries that *The New York Times* put out in February, which was literally titled "A Love Letter to Libraries."

This photo essay beautifully captured the diversity of modern libraries' offerings and their patrons. As great as the pictures were, what I loved most might have been one line from the accompanying text: "The modern library keeps its citizens warm, safe, healthy, entertained, educated, hydrated and, above all, connected."

This is the good stuff. This is what keeps you going. But I know the evolution of libraries as the place where the public goes for books to the place where the public goes for everything is creating new challenges as you address new needs.

I see it from where I sit. Consider my agency and its mission. At the FCC, we want to make sure that everyone, everywhere has access to high-speed internet service. But we know millions of people in this country are on the wrong side of the digital divide. Libraries help fill that gap. You have computer labs. You teach digital skills. And you help enroll people in our programs to support internet for all, like the Affordable Connectivity Program.

These efforts are on top of the day-to-day work you do to help people navigate information, get the facts they are searching for, the services they require, and the support they need to participate in modern life. It's a lot, but you are part of the glue that holds us together. You help build the bonds that strengthen our communities.

I know there are those who want to tear us apart. There is a short-sighted and cynical campaign that is threatening the treasured spaces you represent and the intellectual freedom that you support, freedom that is grounded in the First Amendment. This has led to threats on you, your safety, and even the possibility of prosecution.

The attacks by those seeking to ban books are growing. You have state legislators who are pushing to zero out funding for their libraries because librarians chose to push back on a law seeking to remove certain materials. There are local libraries that have been asked to remove books that were never even on their shelves. And don't forget the effort to remove a book by Ruby Bridges because it might make someone uncomfortable to see images of what six-year-old Ruby had to endure when she integrated New Orleans public schools. Plus we have seen new efforts in four separate states to ban books by this session's keynote speaker Judy Blume. For the record, I took every one of her books out of the Noah Webster Memorial Library. I read them from cover to cover, some of them even twice. I am standing here today; it worked out okay. In fact, I am better for it.

So what is being done to push back?

Not surprisingly, the ALA is leading the charge. Your Unite Against Book Bans initiative provides tools to push back against censorship. And take a look at the work of the Brooklyn Public Library. Their “Books Unbanned” is offering free electronic access to its entire catalog. In the first year after this effort launched, more than 6,000 students covering all 50 states have signed up for digital library cards, and they have checked out over 72,000 titles.

What I love about this initiative is that it takes what is fundamental in libraries—access to information—and uses the tools of the digital age to extend its reach. Because it speaks directly to the work of the FCC to bring broadband to everyone, everywhere. And it reminds us what a vital role libraries play in that effort.

That is why I am pleased to announce today that I am putting forward a new proposal at the FCC to help you better serve your communities in the digital age.

Let me explain.

First, roll back. Remember 1996? It was when I called the internet the information superhighway. Maybe you did, too. But in 1996, Congress had the foresight to develop the E-Rate program. E-Rate was visionary. Because Congress saw clearly—in 1996—that it would be a good idea to bring high-speed internet service to every school and library in this country. In the years since, this program—which is run by the FCC—has been a quiet powerhouse. It has helped support broadband in schools and libraries in urban America, rural America, and everything in between. And because great programs do not thrive without continuous attention and care, over time the FCC has updated it from low-speed to high-speed services and from wired connections to Wi-Fi connections.

Then, in response to the pandemic, Congress created a new FCC program to help meet the adapting connectivity demands of libraries and schools—the Emergency Connectivity Fund. This one-time fund was designed to make sure that libraries and schools could connect patrons and students not just in libraries and schools but at home, with funding for devices and connectivity. It was needed. Because everyone of us saw what the pandemic exposed—that when we were told to go online for modern life, too many people in too many places lacked the connections they needed to get there. We saw it with students lingering outside of fast food restaurants with laptops on their knees, using the free Wi-Fi just to stay in online class. We saw it with people who could not take telemedicine appointments because they didn’t have the bandwidth to keep up with their healthcare. And, of course, we saw it in the parking lots of our libraries, where folks sat in their cars with their devices just to connect to family, friends, and co-workers during the height of the pandemic.

Maybe you also saw it during the ALA gathering last year in Washington. Because I joined you then for an interview with Patty Wong. During our discussion she brought up a video. It was a testimonial from Chris Martinez from Harris Country Public Libraries in Texas.

He talked about how they used the Emergency Connectivity Fund to buy Wi-Fi hot spots to loan out so they could help Harris County library patrons when they needed to connect.

Of course, libraries were investing in this kind of connectivity before the creation of the Emergency Connectivity Fund. But during the pandemic it went from being something on the side to being central to your efforts to support information and opportunity for all.

There are things we take with us out of the pandemic. Like the way libraries rallied communities, offered services to get online, and doubled down on getting Wi-Fi hotspots to help their patrons connect. But one thing that does not continue is the Emergency Connectivity Fund. It was a one-time effort. The support it provided has largely been allocated; the fund will sunset next year.

That brings me to today's announcement.

What I have learned from all of this policymaking and from traveling the country is that E-Rate has done a wonderful job of connecting libraries and schools, but too often, that connectivity ends at the edge of the building. The Emergency Connectivity Fund was a great down payment on narrowing that gap—which I've long called the Homework Gap—but it is time for a permanent solution. It is time for an E-Rate program that supports students and library patrons wherever they are. Call it Learning Without Limits.

Here's what Learning Without Limits means.

First, next week I will ask my colleagues at the FCC to join me in an updated ruling to allow E-Rate support to be used for Wi-Fi connections on school buses. We already know this can work, because dozens of school districts used the Emergency Connectivity Fund to make this happen. This could make a big difference in rural areas where students spend long hours on school buses just to get to class and home again. We can turn ride time into connected time for homework. We can take E-Rate policies from two decades ago that supported mobile phones on these buses and modernize them so we have Wi-Fi on wheels—and students can Learn Without Limits.

Then, next week, I will share a new proposal to modernize E-Rate.

What the Emergency Connectivity Fund taught us is that when libraries around the country, like in Harris County, Texas, were able to loan out Wi-Fi hotspots to their patrons, they helped their communities stay connected. Those connections mattered during the pandemic. But they also matter post-pandemic. Because we know like never before that high-speed internet access is essential for everyone to have a fair shot at success. And we know that when we are all connected we can expand access to information and opportunity for all.

That is why I believe every library and every school library in this country should be able to loan out Wi-Fi hotspots to keep their patrons and kids connected. And we can use the FCC E-Rate program to do it. So next week, I am asking my FCC colleagues to join me in a rulemaking to modernize the E-Rate program to support Wi-Fi hotspots for loan in libraries nationwide. We

can make sure that every library, and every school library, can loan out these devices to any patron or student in need—so they can Learn Without Limits.

And finally, as we modernize E-Rate, we also know that network security is a growing concern for schools and libraries. That is why at the end of last year, we sought public input on this challenge, and we plan to announce next steps soon.

Let me close by returning to *The New York Times* “Love Letter to Libraries” I mentioned earlier. But this time let me do something that is often dangerous and that is talk about the comment section. Because it was remarkable.

A.D. of Wisconsin gets straight to the point: “The library saved my life when I was young. It’s that simple and that beautiful. Thank you, librarians, and thank you people who support libraries.”

“Sandy” from Florida wrote that, “[T]he sign of a functioning democracy is a vibrant library system. Couldn’t live without mine.”

This next one is a little longer, but it is worth it. It’s from Clatterbuck in Maryland. “I grew up in poverty. From an early age I knew we were different than most families, but every Saturday my mother would take my little brother and I to our local public library. The library was the one place in my life where I felt equal to everyone else. Even though I was poor I could take out just as many books as a rich person. The library was like a second home to me. The books took me to places I had never seen and showed me there was a world beyond what my current circumstances. My library was my sanctuary.”

Amen to that.

Thank you, libraries, for what you have done, what you are doing, and what we will do together.