

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's (BMGF) Opportunity Online Hardware Grants

December, 2010

By Missy Lodge, Associate State Librarian for Library Development
State Library of Ohio

In late 2008, the State Library of Ohio was chosen to participate in the third and final round of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's (BMGF) Opportunity Online hardware grant. This two year grant provides funds that assist public libraries with upgrading and adding public computer workstations for patrons in communities that have a high concentration of poverty and also have public computers that are at risk of becoming outdated with limited capacity for users.



The BMGF, using their own process, determined which public libraries were poverty-eligible and thus met the first criteria for participating in the program. Those libraries then completed the TechAtlas technology planning tool to determine if they were "hardware vulnerable." Those public libraries that met both criteria were invited to participate in the program. In total, 61 public library systems representing 162 public library outlets were included in the program.

In order to receive BMGF funds, public libraries had to complete three requirements: send match verification and documentation to the State Library, attend the Public Library Association's "Turning the Page: Building Your Library Community" Advocacy Training and complete the ALA Funding and Technology Access Survey. The BMGF valued each computer at \$2600; this cost covers not only the initial purchase price but also the cost to maintain a workstation for four years. For Phase I of the program, a library had a match requirement of 25% (\$650) per workstation and this escalates to 50% (\$1300) in Phase II. This aligns with the BMGF goal of assisting libraries with building long-term support for sustaining free public access computers in libraries.

Between October 2009 and March 2010, the State Library Board awarded \$1,015,950 in BMGF Opportunity Online hardware grants to 60 Ohio public library systems. (Because of state budget cuts, one library opted out of the program prior to completing requirements.) In August 2010, these public libraries completed the TechAtlas program for a second time. This was used by the BMGF to ascertain if libraries met their Phase I requirements and was the first step toward participation in Phase II. To participate in Phase II, libraries must also complete a Phase II match verification and complete the ALA Funding and Technology Survey. The BMGF Opportunity Online hardware program is already having a huge impact in Ohio. According to the Foundation, 1 system opted in to Opportunity Online but did not complete the grant requirements, 520 workstations were granted in Year 1, and 855 workstations were purchased.

A narrative report submitted to the State Library indicated that many library systems opted to purchase all of their required workstations the first year. Grant funds were also used for peripherals such as printers and software as well as for training, maintenance and support. One librarian noted that the additional computers mean that they can serve the same number of customers in a shorter timeframe, which is essential since they have had to cut their hours. Many libraries placed moneys in a special fund for future technology needs. Librarians also indicated that the Advocacy Training proved beneficial in either levy campaigns or in seeking grants. Almost all librarians noted that there is a growth in the use of the library computers.

The BMGF Opportunity Online hardware grant became available to Ohio libraries at a very opportune time. The hardware was much needed and the advocacy training has proved invaluable. Libraries are completing their Phase II participation requirements and it is anticipated that most of the funds will be awarded at the January 2011 State Library Board meeting. Public Libraries will be asked to complete the TechAtlas program and the ALA Funding and Technology Survey in the fall of 2011 as the project concludes.