

**Presentation of Jeanne Hurley Simon, Chairperson
U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science**

Mr. Chairman and Senators:

Good morning, Senator Grassley, Senator Breaux, and Members of the Committee. I am Jeanne Hurley Simon, Chairperson of the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science. I was appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate in 1993.

In establishing the Commission in 1970 as a permanent and independent agency, the Congress and the President affirmed that library and information services adequate to meet the needs of the people of the United States are essential in order to achieve national goals and use the Nation's educational resources effectively. The Commission is charged with the responsibility to discover what Americans need in the way of library and information services; to translate those needs into recommendations for national policy; and, after the policy is decided upon, to advise the President, the Congress, state and local governments and others on the implementation of national policy. The Internet is clearly an important part of our national information infrastructure. Forums such as this are essential as we develop and implement policies for this relatively new and rapidly evolving resource.

The Congress authorized the Commission "to conduct studies, surveys, and analyses of the library and informational needs of the Nation, including the special library and informational needs of rural areas, or economically, socially, and culturally deprived persons, and of elderly persons, and the means through which these needs may be met through information centers, through the libraries of elementary and secondary schools and institutions of higher education, and through public, research, special, and other types of libraries." Studies on the Internet are a significant part of our activities, so I am pleased to offer the Commission's expertise as the Committee explores this important topic of empowering older Americans through the Internet.

Traditional Asian cultures hold the elderly in great respect, deferring to their wisdom, knowledge, and experience. With the American emphasis on youth, novelty, and the cutting edge, the elderly in our society do not fare so well--especially if they can't program their VCRs, haven't heard of MTV or DTV, and are not familiar with carpal tunnel syndrome.

How to redress the balance? When adult children buy their parents a PC, it forces many decisions on them. Which Internet service provider? A separate telephone line or not? What software? How to learn to use the equipment and the Software. Often that expensive PC becomes one more piece of equipment that doesn't get used, sitting right next to the stairmaster. And what about those seniors who can't afford either the PC or the stairmaster, but still want and need to use the technology, not just to gain the respect of younger people, but to obtain essential information or improve their lives?

The Committee asked me to comment on how, why and where seniors first begin using the Internet. Learning and using the new electronic technologies are such idiosyncratic decisions that there are probably as many answers to the question as there are seniors. I intend to defer to Dr. Furlong and her experience with SeniorNet on that issue, but let me mention two instances here.

One spring day last year a retired church secretary came hesitatingly into the Virtual Library run by Mike Moyer of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. She wanted to find some part-time work to supplement her Social Security but had found that her skills were badly

outdated. As she explained her problem to the librarian, she was "afraid of mice," so she had stayed far away from computers. The Virtual Library staff taught her how to use the CD-ROM tutorials on word processing skills available in the library and encouraged her to sign up for two hours of practice time a day on the library's computers. She is working today as a secretary and, as Mike Moyer said, "That lady is just so tickled to death with herself and with the library that she sends us lots of new users."

It was in Charlotte, too, that a retired couple went to the Virtual Library because their grandchildren were urging them to buy a PC. The couple did not want to "embarrass" themselves by confessing their ignorance of the whole technology arena to the grands, so they took the library's seminar on the basics of PC buying, taught by a retired Microsoft official, then came back for the library's other classes on the Internet once they had bought a PC for home use. Their grandchildren were impressed and the library kept their secret--and their patronage.

These are just two illustrations of seniors' motivation for and means of obtaining an introduction to the Internet. It is gratifying to me that these senior citizens turned to their local public library for help.

Libraries are familiar places for seniors. They feel comfortable using their local libraries to catch up on out of state newspapers, to check on their investments, to research their family histories, and to borrow materials for entertainment and enlightenment. In fact, the Benton Foundation's recent survey on attitudes towards public libraries emphasizes the high degree of confidence people have in public libraries and librarians--they trust them.

Building on this trust and familiarity, public librarians are encouraging their older patrons to expand their use of the library by learning computer skills and jumping onto the library's computers to read and send electronic mail to distant grandchildren and friends, to visit the websites of organizations dealing with their hobbies (chess, gardening, etc.), to check their investments using on-line tools, to use software packages for financial planning, and to read local electronic bulletin boards for news of cultural events in their communities and for volunteer opportunities.

Older adults tend to participate more frequently in the political process than do other age groups. They are among the most active citizens and their voter participation is among the highest. Libraries have long and well earned reputations as impartial agencies where information on all issues can be found--where, as Librarian of Congress and NCLIS Commissioner James H. Billington has said, books espousing opposite views live peacefully side by side on the shelves.

Now, with the advent of the Internet--that great connector--and its increasing use in libraries, these public institutions are expanding their traditional role as impartial keepers of information to become information locators and "convenors of the community." What we see today is the library serving as the electronic gateway and information lifeline for many seniors, and this is something that will grow as our senior population grows.

The elderly are using the libraries' access to the Internet to keep up with the activities of their local and state governments, to visit the homepages of their governors, mayors, and city and town councils, and their Senators and Members of Congress, and to register their opinions via electronic mail with their elected representatives.

Putting computer terminals into public libraries, offering free public access to the Internet, offering free classes on the World Wide Web, classes on electronic mail, and courses on word processing, are effective ways to demonstrate to seniors that their tax dollars are of direct and immediate benefit to themselves.

The Senate and the House have excellent websites, full of information on the workings of the national government; the websites of the individual Senators and Members offer multiple links to free information in the states and Districts. The information available from the Social Security Administration and the Health Care Financing Administration are just two examples of the essential on-line resources of special importance to seniors, funded by the federal government and freely available through the Internet.

The Congress has appropriated many millions of dollars to the Library of Congress, the Government Printing Office, the National Archives, the Smithsonian museums, the White House and other agencies to provide free information covering the nation's legislative process, its history, culture, treasures, and government services. The National Archives offers an online exhibit hall www.nara.gov/exhal/exhbts.html that opens its collections to citizens throughout the nation, not just in Washington, DC. One of my favorites is the Powers of Persuasion: Posters from World War 11. This collection includes Norman Rockwell's famous posters on the Four Freedoms, and an audio clip from President Roosevelt's address to the Congress that inspired Rockwell.

Making the quantities of useful information available from the Internet freely available to all Americans through their public libraries leverages the money the Congress has appropriated over the years. To assist in the development of public policy on America's public libraries and the Internet, the Commission has sponsored a series of surveys. I have brought a summary of the findings with me today for the Committee. [The 1997 National Survey of U.S. Public Libraries and the Internet: Summary Results, November 1997]

Building on these surveys, the American Library Association, in conjunction with the Commission and the Gates Library Foundation, conducted a study between April and June of this year to determine the extent of Internet connectivity in public libraries. I am happy to share the preliminary results with the Committee, with the caveat that these results were compiled as data collection drew to a close at the end of June. While these findings are preliminary, I believe that the data fairly accurately depict the current situation in America's public libraries. I expect the final report in the fall and will be pleased to provide copies to the Committee.

The survey covered the 15,718 public library branches and main libraries. Although 83.8% or 13,166 of these are connected to the Internet, only 73% or 11,402 offer public access to the Internet. This sounds better than it is since 27% of America's public libraries cannot yet provide their patrons with even one computer work station that connects them to the Internet, and adequate service to the public probably requires more than one computer work station and high speed access.

Even with limited speed and graphical capabilities, the investment of tax dollars in public library Internet access pays off. Despite the remaining 27% gap, public libraries are doing a wonderful job assisting seniors and other citizens with their Internet access. In fact, according to the MCI LibraryLink Alternative Points of Access Study (April 1998), the public library was the single most used point of access other than home, school or work, accounting for 44.7% of such access. Most of the senior population is not at school or work, is less likely than the rest of the population to have a computer at home, and therefore, they are more likely to rely on the public library for their Internet access.

As the Committee deliberates on the issue of Internet access for the elderly, I hope you will find these statistics useful. As you can see, there is a vital connection between Internet access for the elderly and the ongoing national policy debate on Universal Service Fund support for public libraries.

Here are a few examples of what local libraries are doing to help seniors navigate the Internet. The State Library of Iowa maintains an extensive list of library homepages all over the state, so that Iowa residents can link at the click of a mouse to libraries in their community, whether public or academic. If you look at the Des Moines Public Library homepage [www.pldminfo.org/elder.htm], you can get immediate information on the library's elder services, from classes offered on how to use the library's automated catalog, to schedules for them to bring the grandchildren to story hours, to Information on blood pressure checks offered at the library, to book discussion groups, to travelogues.

I am on the Board of the Library Media Project (LMP), which evolved from the MacArthur Foundation Library Video Project. Founded in 1988 when video collections in public libraries were in their infancy, the project has become a leader in assembling and providing curated collections of high-quality video materials to public libraries. The LMP works with over 2,175 public libraries, which service more than 208 million people. In 1991, the LMP in collaboration with the Retirement Research Foundation, arranged to provide videos on aging issues to almost 2,000 public libraries across the country.

In 1998 and early 1999, the international Year of Older Persons, with major funding from the Retirement Research Foundation, the Library Media Project is developing an award-winning collection and an interactive website that will focus exclusively on aging: the wellness and illness issues, the economic and pragmatic aspects, and the healthy and productive views of aging. The website will include mentored chat rooms for discussion with the film makers, librarians, seniors, and other interested local and global visitors [<http://librarymedia.org>]. The collection includes independent documentaries, fictional portrayals, training and medical videos and covers topics ranging from Alzheimer's disease to retirement. The Project is developing a toolkit for public libraries to generate grants from local communities to acquire the video collection. The toolkit will include programming and discussion guides for intergenerational and general use by libraries and community organization.

In the last year, the Ouachita Parish Public Library, Louisiana, has presented a series of Internet workshops for three types of library patrons: seniors, business people, and the general community. In this small community, in the last six months, over 200 seniors have attended the hour-long presentations, which cover a brief history of the Internet and the World Wide Web, a glossary of terminology, how to get Internet-ready at home, search engines, electronic mail, and on-line sites of specific interest to seniors, like American Association of Retired Persons [www.aarp.org]-. Social Security Administration [www.ssa.gov]. Monica King, the librarian running the classes, has observed that while seniors attend workshops for businesspeople and for the general community, they participate much more actively in the forums just for seniors. They were more inclined to ask questions and to seek clarification when they were with their peers. So Monica is planning to add more workshops reserved for seniors. One senior commented on the evaluation form after taking the workshop, "Excellent, very informative--even for those on the bypaths instead of the highway. What a wonderful resource available to us!"

The library website [www.monroe.k12.la.us/~oppl/] list a wide range of local events from making scented bath salts to getting a job, including a special page for Library Outreach to Seniors (LOTS) to advise seniors of upcoming programs specifically for them.

A senior named Dick Ridley is teaching other seniors how to use the Internet in the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, North Carolina. A retiree from Michigan, Mr. Ridley has volunteered almost full-time at his adopted public library for the last eight years. Putting to use what he learned at the library's computer lab, he has created a CD-ROM of African-American history in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County from the 1940's to the present, and is now working to upload it to the Internet. He is also working on a history of the county which will go onto the Internet and is eagerly awaited by the seniors doing genealogy and local history research at the public library. Mr. Ridley sees

himself as giving back to the community what he got from the community library--a felicitous closing of the circle, for sure.

In Muncie, Indiana, the Muncie Public Library has created a Cybermobile. Formerly a traditional bookmobile, the vehicle was retrofitted with six computer workstations, all with Internet access. The library, serving over 70,000 people, will take the vehicle on the road in its east central service area in the pilot stage. The project is funded by a \$50,000 grant from the Federal Library Services and Technology Act awarded to the local library by the Indiana State Library. The Cybermobile allows the library to teach Internet skills to seniors and others by driving the technology to the door steps of senior centers and other locations. This puts a new and literal spin on the phrase, "the Information Superhighway." This brief video clip is a news broadcast from an Indianapolis television station, showing the Cybermobile with Senator Lugar on board during the recent American Library Association convention here in Washington, DC.

In Suffolk County, New York, at the Talking Books Program, the librarians are knowledgeable about assistive or adaptive technologies of growing interest to seniors. Many seniors can use the help that these software and hardware products offer for those who need some physical help in accessing the Internet. For example, there is software for people who cannot use their hands to type: the technology converts voice into data. For hearing impaired users, software exists which will make the computer use flashing lights instead of beeping to get your attention; for the visually impaired there are technologies which will speak the text that appears on the computer screen or use extra-large type. Some of these packages cost hundreds of dollars, so equipping public libraries with adaptive technology creates economies of scale and expands the traditional role of the regional libraries for the Blind and Physically Handicapped. The Suffolk County library shares its expertise through its website. "Talking Books Plus [www.suffolk.lib.ny.us/tbp] is a page that describes available services and provides "Tech Tips"--online resources for computer users who are blind or visually impaired.

One final example: the Toledo-Lucas County Public Library has a section of its website specifically for seniors. Starting with the familiar look of a card catalog, one drawer is labeled "For Older Adults" [www.library.toledo.oh.us]. Selecting that drawer leads to a screen that lets the user contact an "Older Adult Specialist" or go on to another page that offers Internet links to sites on many topics of interest to seniors, including finance, health, travel and genealogy. As so often happens, these links take the users to many other places like:

- Senior Law [www.seniorlaw.com];
- Elder Hostel [www.elderhostel.org];
- An organization that rates consumer electronics for their ease of use by seniors [friendly4seniors.com]; and
- My fellow Commissioner, Mary Furlong's SeniorNet [www.senornet.com]

I thank you for your attention and for the opportunity to talk about how seniors are using the Internet, and how America's local public libraries continue to meet the challenge of helping seniors and others to navigate the Internet efficiently.

The Congress must have been prescient in 1970 when it created the Commission to help it formulate national information policy. You must have seen the Information Age fast approaching, with its fascinating but thorny issues like filtering, and the Universal Service Fund. The Commission is active in this and a number of issues which bear on the well-being of seniors. We can provide information on these and other policy questions whenever you ask, in formats ranging from traditional to high tech. I hope you will continue to call on us for information and assistance. Thank you.