

Networking the nation

Funds available to libraries and community groups

For years libraries have played a pivotal role in bringing communities together, sharing information, and often 'breaking in' new technologies. More often than not, many people had their first taste of on-line databases or their first surf of the Internet at their local library. Now, of course, Australia is witnessing a remarkable change in the way we communicate with each other, in the way we work and play.

Thanks to the convergence of new information technologies and rapid advances in telecommunications, Australians can speak to anyone, almost anywhere, at any time, and can access information on virtually any subject through on-line services. Unfortunately the vast distances which divide Australian communities has meant that many Australians living in remote, rural or regional areas are not experiencing the full benefits of the 'communications revolution' — indeed, some people are still waiting for a decent telephone line, let alone access to the Internet. Many libraries in non-urban Australia are hampered by slow access to data and poor local information networks — and yet there is an expectation that libraries should be the on-line focal point of a community, especially school libraries.

The Commonwealth Government recognises there are significant gaps in the quality and cost of communications services between metropolitan and non-metropolitan Australia. A recent report by the Information Policy Advisory Council, titled 'rural & regional.au/ for all', contained many recommendations aimed at encouraging the development of communications infrastructure and services to minimise such differences. While it is hoped the re-

cent liberalisation of the telecommunications market will assist in meeting this objective, in the short term there is a need to help bridge such gaps. To this end, the Government has introduced a five-year \$250 million program called 'Networking the nation', which will provide funding for regional, rural and remote communities to identify their communications needs and develop projects that meet those needs.

The scope of projects that may be funded through 'Networking the nation' is broad. Examples of the types of projects which could be considered for funding include: one-off capital funding to improve the quality of telecommunications infrastructure; funding for trials or pilots of innovative technology; funding to assist in identifying community needs for particular telecommunications services and uses, as an element of an overall project; service access such as funding to establish Internet hubs, or remove the STD charge for rural and remote access to the Internet; funding for elements of an overall project aimed at increasing community awareness or creating demand for on-line and related communications services; training elements of broader projects, or funding for academic or training groups as part of a co-ordinated proposal; and start-up or relocation and training costs to help establish communication network assistance services, such as operator assistance services for phone companies and information services for industries such as airlines, insurance and so on.

This is not a program for individuals but rather it targets groups such as local councils, incorporated organisa-

tions, organisations of councils or community groups, local government associations or State or Territory governments. Libraries also have the capacity to play a role in bringing such groups together to consult with the community, in order to identify needs and solutions. Libraries may also have a role to play in ensuring communities know about the opportunities available through 'Networking the nation'.

In some centres it may be possible that the creation of a tele-centre connected to a library or improved on-line services at a library will be the focus of a community's funding proposal.

A total of \$50 million is available for the program and its administration each year until 2001/02. All proposals must be registered with 'Networking the nation's' secretariat at an early stage. The secretariat may then suggest ways of developing proposals into funding applications, including the possibility of applying for development assistance funding. State and Territory Governments will be consulted on proposals. Final applications can be submitted at any time and will be considered by 'Networking the nation's' Board on a regular basis. Applicants will be notified in writing of the board's decision. For consideration at the next board meeting, applications will need to be submitted by 3 September 1997. If you want to know more, contact the secretariat on phone: 1800 674 058 (toll free), fax: 06 279 1078, e-mail: rtif@dca.gov.au; or post to Reply paid 853, Networking the Nation, Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund, Department of Communications and the Arts, GPO Box 2154, Canberra ACT 2601. ■

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