

For Immediate release

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Hewitt, TX. — The Federal Communications Commission announced that the Hewitt Public Library would be awarded \$184,231.00 from the Federal Emergency Connectivity Fund. The Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) is an initiative included in the American Rescue Plan approved by Congress in March. It is designed to help schools and libraries across the country provide critical online resources to students, staff, and library patrons, by addressing needs for remote learning. The announcement came at the end of the second wave of funding. To date, the FCF has awarded funds to 516 public libraries across the nation.

Connectivity is an important role that libraries play within their communities. The library's role as a technology resource exploded in 1996 when only 28 percent of libraries offered Internet access. Today, almost all public libraries offer visitors free access to computers and the Internet.

Studies from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation show that people from all walks of life use library computers to perform routine and life-changing tasks; from emailing friends to finding jobs, sometimes they need assistance from a librarian or temporary access in an emergency.

Waynette Ditto, Library Director, said she is grateful for the opportunity to purchase two hundred Chromebooks and one hundred Wi-Fi Hotspots to loan to Hewitt Public Library patrons. "These devices will make a major dent in closing one of the hardest parts of the digital divide that came to the forefront during the pandemic. The shutdown was a disruption, but in disruption comes opportunity."

During the shutdown, HPL offered services such as curbside pickup, virtual programming for all ages, grab-and-go kits, summer reading, dial-a-story, and 3-D printing. But the one service that patrons needed most was located inside the library and could not be loaned. The service was computer and internet access. The HPL's parking lot became a place for parents to bring their children to do homework, small business owners to work, jobseekers to fill out an application, or those filling out unemployment applications while connected to the Library's Wi-Fi.

According to a Pew survey published last year, less than two-thirds of Americans in rural areas have a broadband internet connection at home, and four out of 10 don't have a computer, and three out of 10 don't have a smartphone.

Seeing the need and listening to the stories firsthand, Ditto searched for grants and partnerships to fund computers and hotspots to circulate outside the library. Ditto said, "I applied for several grants and was turned down, but I would not stop searching, and now, Chromebooks and Hotspots will be put into circulation and made available to Library cardholders and community partners to use outside the library walls. The new devices will expand services to address the technology gap being felt by students and adults studying and working remotely."

Through the Emergency Connectivity Fund, the Federal Communications Commission created an opportunity for millions of Americans, and the Hewitt Public Library is proud to be recognized for providing these critical services and devices to our patrons. ###