

## Director's Report

**Broadband Grant Launch event.** The event funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was designed to engage community members, introduce statewide partners, and communicate the goals of the grant. The first day included a pre-launch lunch with key stakeholders and partners. Attendees included Lieutenant Governor Jari Askins, Education Cabinet Secretary-designate Phyllis Hudecki, Friends of Libraries in Oklahoma (FOLIO) president Carolyn Klepper, Deputy Commissioner for Workforce Development at the Oklahoma Department of Commerce Norma Noble, ODL staff, ODL Board Chair Hannibal Johnson, and statewide partners. The lunch was a very successful opportunity to brief key stakeholders on the OkConnect grant. Jaime Hoard, senior program officer at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was present to provide the context for why the Foundation has chosen to invest its philanthropic funds in public libraries and their vision of how increased broadband access will advance the goals of the Foundation.

The afternoon program included Jaime Hoard, a video on the benefits to library customers of having broadband access in their local public library, Commissioner Jeff Cloud who serves as Vice-Chair of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, Chancellor Glenn Johnson of the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, Secretary of Commerce Natalie Shirley, and others. Also in attendance were Secretary of State Susan Savage, Representative Lee Denney, chair of the House Education Appropriations Committee, and representatives of the telecommunications industry in Oklahoma. One of the most exciting and perhaps most long term outcomes of the event was the challenge Commissioner Cloud issued to Representative Denney for the legislature to revise the language in the statutes providing each school, library, and hospital a 56 kbs connection to the Internet to reflect the current reality of the need for higher broadband speed to a T-1. In fact, Representative Denney has introduced HB 1460 which will do just that. If enacted into law, many more public libraries will be able to upgrade to a fiber connection not just those in our OkConnect grant. The bill will increase funding available to public libraries from state e-rate funds making sustaining the OkConnect Internet upgrades much more affordable to grant participants and others.

The launch event was time consuming and required a great deal of coordination, follow up, and hard work. It was particularly challenging for the ODL staff who were also working on the grant implementation for OkConnect. I want to recognize Vicki Mohr, Judy Tirey, and Cathy Van Hoy for their exceptional balancing act of grant implementation and OkConnect launch planning. The timing of the event and the participation of key stakeholders will help ODL not just with the OkConnect grant but also position us to be seen as supporting economic and community development in the coming legislative session.

I was particularly appreciative of the number of ODL Board members who were present at the event. It was only one week after our last Board meeting but many of you went above and beyond by committing even more of your scarcest resource, time. I feel fortunate indeed to have such an engaged and contributing Board. Thank you so much!

**Legislative Session underway.** Even though the formal start of the legislative session in Oklahoma is the first Monday in February, it actually begins much earlier with performance reviews with the Education Appropriation committees in the House and Senate as well as providing information to the governor for consideration in the governor's budget recommendations. There is a new slate of statewide elected officials but the chairs of the Education Appropriations Committee were continued in the current legislature which is very helpful. The presentation to the Senate Education Appropriations Committee was held on January 13<sup>th</sup>. The committee was very generous in allowing us an hour to orient committee members to the work of our agency, answer questions about how the agency would handle additional budget reductions, and talk about the importance of public libraries to their communities. The House presentation was scheduled for January 26<sup>th</sup> but had to be postponed until later due to a scheduling conflict with party caucus meetings. The Senate Education Appropriation committee was very positive and cordial and I expect the same in our presentation to the House committee as well.

A number of bills have been introduced in this session that may impact your service on the ODL board. In the bill tracking list included under tab d are some of the bills we are monitoring. There is interest in reorganizing state agencies, changing taxing levels for sales and property taxes which fund libraries, and education reform. It will no doubt be an interesting session.

**Hail and farewell.** I want to note the coming retirement of Freda Chen, head of technical services at ODL on January 31<sup>st</sup>. Freda has been an employee at ODL for 32 years. She is retiring to focus on being a primary caregiver for her grandson while her daughter returns to school to complete her master's degree. Many of you know the great joy and hard work in being a grandparent. I anticipate that Freda will be just as focused and hard working in this new role as she has been in her work at ODL. She will undoubtedly have rewards and benefits that paid employment cannot offer. I wish her well and commend her hard work and level of professionalism she demonstrated while at ODL.