

What has happened since legislation to establish the National Research and Education Network was signed into law last December? The NREN is the smaller part of the High-Performance Computing Act, with about 15 percent of the \$3 billion authorized over a five-year period. The larger part is the National High Performance Computing Program. The NREN is an expansion of the existing array of research and

education networks known as the Internet, with NSFNET (sponsored by the National Science Foundation) as its backbone. The NREN is a high-capacity, high-quality computer network to link research institutions, education institutions, government, and industry. Several federal agencies are participating in the further development of what is already called the "interim interagency NREN" with the goal of transmitting data at one gigabit (or 1 billion bits) per second by 1996.

Unlike most legislation which must wait a year or two after enactment for actual funding, some funding was already in place for the administration's High Performance Computing and Communications Initiative in FY 1992. Funding requested for FY '93 totals \$803 million, of which \$122.5 million would be for the NREN component, spread among eight federal agencies. The National Science Foundation, which is responsible for the NSFNET backbone, would receive \$45 million of the NREN total.

Passage of legislation provided a long-term commitment to NREN development and a broadening of the constituencies to be served. This broad vision, encompassing all levels of education and libraries, is closer to the original intent of key sponsor Sen. Albert Gore Jr. (D-TN). However, early versions of the legislation offered a narrower sci/tech research orientation reflecting the original intent of NSFNET to provide remote access to supercomputer sites. Broadening the legislation was resisted by the administration and certain mission agencies which preferred maximum flexibility in the operation of the program and maximum autonomy for agency networks carrying out their missions.

Despite the inevitable compromises among all the interests at stake, the library and education communities gained specific inclusion of libraries and schools in the legislation. The NREN is to provide users with access to libraries and to the electronic

Washington Hotline

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information resources maintained by libraries, and federal agencies are to work with libraries, etc., to ensure user access to the network. The National Science Foundation has primary, but limited, responsibility for assisting libraries to connect to the NREN.

Other gains include NREN linkages to every state, use of the NREN to provide for improved dissemination of federal agency data and electronic

information, the addition of library and information science to the list of specialties in which education and training is authorized, a small but specific role for the Department of Education, and retention of provisions for promoting development of NREN information services and training of users.

These gains represent meaningful improvements achieved despite considerable resistance, but they lack specifics, including funding, to make them happen automatically. The current federal investment in the network is estimated at only 10 percent, with the rest coming from industry, individual institutions, and other levels of government. Given these realities, libraries will need to mine every possible funding source for NREN connections, as well as for training and for projects to help make the network easier to use, including federal library programs under the Higher Education Act and the Library Services and Construction Act.

The options are increasing for library access to the Internet, especially dial-up options for libraries on smaller campuses or those not housed in a parent institution of higher education or research. Commercial providers offer one option, as do the not-for-profit regional networks seeded by the National Science Foundation. Some library networks are exploring partnerships with the NSFNET networks in which Internet connections would be made available for libraries, and the library network would provide technical support and training. For instance, the CLASS library network of California offers Internet connections to library members through CERFnet. NYSERNET in New York has a New Connections program which is aggressively seeking Internet connections for smaller institutions, including libraries. ■

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