

# Online Public Access Initiative



**Virginia Walsh**

**Executive director**

**D**uring January we can expect to see the release of the program guidelines for the Online Public Access Initiative (OPAI). This program aims to support initiatives which will improve public access to online services, such as the Internet, in public libraries and similar institutions. \$2 million will be made available during the 1996/97 financial year by the Federal Government for individual projects and the process of allocating funds will be administered by the Department of Communications and the Arts.

While the details of the program are yet to emerge, it is critical that immediate consideration be given by public libraries and others in the library community to potential projects which could be eligible for funding. Once the guidelines are released there will only be a brief period in which to develop written applications. Given the current funding regime within government which brings down a budget in August for a financial year which has already commenced, there will be some urgency about allocating funds to successful projects within a short space of time (this process will be changed with the budget set down for 13 May).

Draft program guidelines have been circulated for discussion to a number of organisations including ALIA, ACLIS and State libraries. A number of non-library associations such as the Consumers Telecommunications Network are also being consulted. As I write, this process is still underway and therefore it is impossible to be certain of the final outcome. However we have had a number of discussions with officials within the Department of Communications and the Arts over the last couple of months which suggest that the general thrust of the draft document will be followed. With this caveat in mind the following information is provided to stimulate ideas for projects which could be funded under OPAI.

Eligible organisations include non-profit community organisations such as public libraries or non-profit consortia with a specific charter to provide community services. Project proposals are likely to be assessed against a number of criteria. These include the development of strategies for improving access which are technically sound, which will serve as models of best practice and which demonstrate innovation. It is probable that funds will be provided by the Commonwealth on a dollar-for-dollar basis which means that organisations will need to fund the project in part from within their own resources or secure a partner organisation which is prepared to make a financial contribution or a contribution in kind. Some consideration will be given to organisations which cannot secure matching funds but they will need to demonstrate disadvantage and lack of capacity to find the money.

Projects will need to show the support of the community and/or government and/or the relevant industry association to be eligible. Proposals will also need to be soundly researched and well documented. Those of us with experience in preparing documentation for funding well know how much time and thought is required to prepare a document which is attractive to the decision makers. The project needs also to be capable of completion within a limited time frame as funds will not be available for ongoing research or development. Projects must also identify performance measures which can be used to monitor and evaluate success.

The draft document identified the sorts of activities/bodies that could be funded, these included online public library services; community information and networking; regional networking and development; education and training; health and human services; communication or networking for indigenous peoples; disabilities groups; youth or aged organisations; multicultural organisations; and arts and cultural groups.

This list is much broader than we encouraged in our earlier advocacy efforts, however there remains considerable scope for the involvement of libraries and library organisations.

Grant funds may extend to cover the following purposes: research and development components of projects; content design or re-design; systems or software development; reasonable installation and training costs; assistance towards the promotion and operating costs in the set-up period; assistance for groups with an initial community consultation phase; participation in training programs associated with the project; facilitating liaison and sharing of experience between groups; computers and software, appropriate telecommunications equipment and salaries may be funded in some circumstances if they are integral components of projects.

Details about the call for submissions will be made available on the Department's web site at <http://www.dca.gov.au>. A link to this information will also be made from ALIA's home page (<http://www.alia.org.au>). Have a look for this information about the middle of January. Alternatively, contact ALIA National Office and we will make sure that the information is posted out to you as soon as it becomes available. Speak to Jane McCarty on (06) 285 1877 or send an e-mail directly to [jane.mccarty@alia.org.au](mailto:jane.mccarty@alia.org.au).

OPAI represents an opportunity to proceed with or enhance much-needed research, development and implementation of online access programs. Such access is as important to meeting the information needs of all Australians as it is to the future direction of public libraries. ■

*... it is critical that immediate consideration be given by public libraries and others in the library community to potential projects which could be eligible for funding*