



Ottawa County Libraries Awarded Grant for Mobile Broadband Hotspots for Patron Check-Out

Access to the internet is a necessity in today's world. It opens doors to education, employment, and opportunity. With just the click of a mouse, the world is at our fingertips. For well over a decade, Ottawa County has experienced an impressive growth in broadband coverage resulting in the majority of people in the County being connected. Despite this widespread coverage, a technology gap still exists. Ottawa County survey data shows 22% of county households do not have a fixed broadband connection, and 35% say home internet access is unaffordable.

Together, area libraries and Ottawa County officials are bridging that information resources gap with a pilot program: the Mobile Hotspot Device Lending Initiative. Mobile hotspots are small, portable devices that provide wireless Internet access for any device that can connect to a wireless signal, such as a laptop, smartphone, tablet, or gaming device. Now, all nine libraries within Ottawa's borders have been awarded a Library of Michigan Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant, which is administered at the federal level by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, totaling \$81,450 to go toward expanding the program. The need is clear: three of nine Ottawa County libraries (Herrick District Library, Howard Miller Library and Coopersville District Library) have offered mobile hotspots on loan free-of-charge to patrons for several years. These three libraries cite a continuous waiting list as long as 30 people for use of the hotspots.

"Herrick District Library launched their respective Mobile Hotspot Device Lending Initiative in 2016," Herrick District Library Director Diane Kooiker said. "It's been an overwhelming success. The numbers speak for themselves – I can't stress enough how valuable this service is to our patrons."

With the LSTA grant money and matching funds, Ottawa County will work with local libraries to fill the void in internet accessibility and affordability. Starting in October 2019, 100 T-Mobile hotspots were acquired and distributed, making the devices available for loan to the county's more than 283,000 residents through all local libraries.

"For more than a decade, Ottawa County has been involved in numerous broadband expansion programs. We're thrilled to partner with our libraries and offer valuable resources to support the Mobile Hotspot Device Lending Initiative," Ottawa County Planning & Performance Improvement Department Director Paul Sachs said. "We're confident the initiative will greatly benefit the libraries, their patrons and the community as a whole."

Split over three years, the total cost of the program will be \$119,850; the grant will cover about 2/3rds of the expense. LSTA funds will be divided among the first two years of the program – \$43,050 the first year, \$38,400 the second. The final \$38,400 will be funded the third year by the participating library districts. If the pilot initiative proves to be successful, each library has committed to funding the initiative in year four and beyond. The Ottawa County Planning & Performance Improvement Department will evaluate the program by collecting survey data from library patrons who borrow the hotspots.

"These devices will make it possible for users to expand their educational opportunities, complete online schoolwork, search and apply for jobs – the benefits are endless," said Loutit District Library Director John Martin. "A large section of Loutit's service area has no high-speed access – so supporting this initiative is imperative."

For more information on the Mobile Hotspot Device Lending Initiative, contact plan@miOttawa.org or your local library. To learn more about Ottawa County's other broadband-related initiatives, visit miottawa.org/broadband.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services is the primary source of federal support for the nation's libraries and museums. They advance, support, and empower America's museums, libraries, and related organizations through grantmaking, research, and policy development. Their vision is a nation where museums and libraries work together to transform the lives of individuals and communities. To learn more, visit www.ims.gov and follow them on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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