

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **PUBLIC LIBRARIES AUSTRALIA DEFENDS INTERNET STRATEGIES IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES**

Public Libraries Australia has strongly defended the internet safety strategies utilised by public libraries in response to the Federal Government's description of internet filtering strategies as "an abject failure" in its latest media release (10 August 2007) on the NetAlert – Protecting Families Online program.

Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, Senator the Hon Helen Coonan, demonstrates a high level of ignorance about strategies employed by Australian public libraries to manage the competing imperatives of free access to information and vigilance in matters of access to inappropriate material.

"The fact that there has been no consultation with Local Government, the primary provider of public library services in the majority of Australian states, combined with the assumption that the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) has the authority to direct public libraries – which it does not – speaks volumes about the lack of knowledge on how public libraries operate" said Robert Knight, Chairperson of Public Libraries Australia. "Of the 77,000 people who access the internet at public libraries every week throughout Australia, reports of access or attempted access to inappropriate materials are negligible" Mr Knight added.

Public Libraries Australia recognises the issues associated with internet pornography and would like to work with the Federal Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on community internet education strategies, however arbitrary application of filtering devices has serious implications for the capacity of libraries to fulfil their information provision role.

Libraries use multi-pronged strategies to ensure internet safety, including positioning of public access terminals in close proximity to staff stations and installation of sophisticated internet access management software. "Public libraries have been successfully managing internet access for almost a decade. Vigilance and duty-of-care to clients is not a new concept for public libraries" Mr Knight said.

In addition, Australia's 1,700 public libraries range in size and capacity from large and well resourced to very small and fundamental service providers. There are staffing, technology and capacity issues to consider – some small libraries may have only one public access internet terminal and a slow internet connection whereby installation of filtering software would be impractical and counter productive.

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Mr Knight said “The Federal Government has not given adequate – if any – consideration to the practical aspects of this plan, not the least of which is the initial and ongoing staffing costs associated with implementing a completely flawed internet filtering strategy. Local Government cannot bear yet another cost-shifting exercise from other levels of government – the NetAlert proposal for internet filtering in public libraries will be as expensive as it is ineffective.”

Public libraries have a longstanding commitment to client safety, and have established a range of policies and procedures to ensure that their duty of care to customers is met. Whilst every effort is made to maintain libraries as “safe places” for everyone, it is considered to be the responsibility of parents or carers to monitor how children access information. “Internet technology is a fluid environment and what is valid at 9.00 in the morning may be completely irrelevant at 3.00 on the same afternoon. The installation of internet filtering at home or in public libraries has the potential to lull parents, guardians, library staff and the general public into a false sense of security about the safety of the online environment” Mr Knight said. “Nothing will compare with a comprehensive strategy that includes user education, parental responsibility and vigilance by public access internet providers.”

It is critical that libraries retain the ability to respond to their information provision role without being constrained by the application of policies and practices which hinder their effectiveness.

Public Libraries Australia continues to work with its partner association the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) on supporting public libraries on a broad range of issues to optimise the outcomes for the sector.

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Further information regarding Public Libraries Australia is available from Robert Knight (Chairperson) on 0408 285724 or Lynne Makin (Executive Director) on 0418 287689.

See also the Australian Library and Information Association’s Media Release at:  
<http://alia.org.au/media.room/2007.08.10.html>