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Press Release*- for immediate release -***Public libraries with free Internet access open their doors to visitors through the Biblionet program**

Beginning today, 235 public libraries in 12 counties will open their doors with free public access computers and Internet to serve an estimated population of 5 million people. The first library with public Internet access as part of the Biblionet program, Ocnele Mari in Valcea County, will host a ribbon cutting ceremony to introduce modern services to the public.

The local community, county representatives, and guests from other libraries will attend a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the library and test the new services with assistance from the librarians trained through the Biblionet program.

Over the next four weeks, 994 desktop computers with the Microsoft Windows operating system and Microsoft Office productivity software will be delivered to the 235 public libraries included in the first round of the Biblionet program. The 12 participating county libraries have already received 132 laptop computers that have been used to train 330 librarians in IT and library management skills. The first round selection process has shown both librarians' enthusiasm for participation in the program and local governments' commitment to supporting this effort for change in their communities.

The Biblionet program will provide increased access to information for Romanians by helping libraries better serve their communities. Over 70 percent of citizens, many of whom live in rural areas, currently have no access to the Internet. For this reason, many of the country's citizens cannot reap the economic and social benefits of access to the Internet, including e-government, job searching, health information, e-banking and online business management, or even communication with relatives abroad. Through the Biblionet program, more than 1,500 public libraries in Romania will receive public computers through a competitive selection process and over 2,500 librarians will receive training in using the new technology to benefit their communities.

The ***Biblionet*** program, which aims to help develop a modern public library system in Romania, is funded by a five year, \$26.9 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Biblionet is a partnership between IREX, the Ministry of Culture, Religious Affairs and National Heritage, Educating for an Open Society (EOS) Foundation, the National Association of Librarians and Public Libraries of Romania (ANBPR) and public libraries across Romania. Microsoft Corporation will donate approximately \$15 million in software over the five year grant period to selected libraries, as part of its global citizenship commitment to bring the benefits of relevant and accessible technology to communities.

IREX congratulates the library directors, program coordinators, librarian trainers, and librarians in Bacau, Braila, Bihor, Constanta, Galati, Harghita, Iasi, Maramures, Neamt, Salaj, Suceava, and Valcea for their efforts in successfully implementing the first round of the Biblionet program.

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