



December 12, 2005

The Honorable William Francis Galvin
Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
One Ashburton Place, Room 1611
Boston, MA 02108-1512

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write in support of the Commonwealth's adoption of the Open Document Format (ODF) as the standard for all electronic documents created by the executive branch on behalf of five national library associations: the American Association of Law Libraries, the American Library Association, the Association of Research Libraries, the Medical Library Association and the Special Libraries Association. These five associations collectively represent over 139,000 libraries in the United States employing 350,000 librarians and other personnel. Many of these libraries and librarians are in Massachusetts. These associations' mission is to foster global access to information for creative, research, and educational uses.

An important aspect of fostering access to information is ensuring that future generations will be able to read government information created today. Although digital technology has provided libraries and their patrons with new means of accessing larger amounts of information than ever before, it has also made libraries' preservation function significantly more complicated. Until the digital age, libraries needed to preserve only tangible items that deteriorated relatively slowly. Acid-free paper, for example, can last hundreds of years. Certain items like acetate films deteriorate more rapidly, but these more perishable items represent a relatively small part of the collections of a limited universe of research libraries.

Digital documents are far more evanescent than paper ones. Storage media become obsolete as technology progresses. Over the past twenty years alone, storage media have migrated from 5-inch floppies to 3.5-inch floppies to CDs to DVDs. Moreover, different word processing programs create documents in different formats. Thus, documents in relatively long-term storage such as the hard drives of servers can be read only by programs that have backwards compatibility. Such backwards compatibility may be difficult to achieve in 100 years because the developer of the program used to create the document may have gone out of business and the proprietary specifications of the document format may have disappeared.

In contrast, documents created in ODF will remain accessible in the future because any programmer will be able to find its open, nonproprietary specifications. Requiring all Commonwealth employees to create documents in ODF will make it significantly easier for libraries to ensure that patrons 100 years from now will be able to read these historically important documents.

For this reason, we applaud the Commonwealth's adoption of ODF. Since ODF applies only to plain text and databases, we look forward to the development of open standards for audio-visual materials, and we hope that the Commonwealth will adopt such standards as well.

We also strongly urge OASIS to work simultaneously to ensure compatibility standards for all users for whom barrier-free access to government documents is critical. In particular, steps must be taken to ensure compatibility for the disabled community and other users whose access may be compromised. Since the executive branch has until the end of 2006 to implement ODF, OASIS has sufficient time to adopt the necessary protocols to guarantee access to ODF files by the disabled community.

Finally, we believe that the Commonwealth's actions should serve as a model for other states to ensure that their citizens maintain the ability to access critical government information. We urge other states to follow the Commonwealth's lead.

Sincerely,

American Association of Law Libraries
American Library Association
Association of Research Libraries
Medical Library Association
Special Libraries Association



The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) is a nonprofit educational organization with over 5,000 members nationwide. AALL's mission is to promote and enhance the value of law libraries to the legal and public communities, to foster the profession of law librarianship, and to provide leadership in the field of legal information and information policy. <http://www.aall.org/>

Contact: Mary Alice Baish (202-662-9200)

The American Library Association (ALA) is a nonprofit educational organization of over 65,000 librarians, library trustees, and other friends of libraries dedicated to improving library services and promoting the public interest in a free and open information society. <http://www.ala.org/>

Contact: Lynne Bradley (202-628-8410)

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is a nonprofit organization of 123 research libraries in North America. ARL's members include university libraries, public libraries, government and national libraries. Its mission is to shape and influence forces affecting the future of research libraries in the process of scholarly communication. ARL programs and services promote equitable access to and effective uses of recorded knowledge in support of teaching, research, scholarship and community service.

<http://www.arl.org/>

Contact: Prue Adler (202-296-2296)

The Medical Library Association (MLA), a nonprofit, educational organization, is a leading advocate for health sciences information professionals with more than 4,700 members worldwide. Through its programs and services, MLA provides lifelong educational opportunities, supports a knowledgebase of health information research, and works with a global network of partners to promote the importance of quality information for improved health to the health care community and the public. <http://www.mlanet.org/>

Contact: Carla Funk (312-419-9094 x.14)

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) is a nonprofit global organization for innovative information professionals and their strategic partners. SLA serves more than 12,000 members in 83 countries in the information profession, including corporate, academic and government information specialists. SLA promotes and strengthens its members through learning, advocacy and networking initiatives. <http://www.sla.org/>

Contact: Doug Newcomb (703-647-4923)