Communities along the Gulf Coast that lost public libraries in the hurricanes last year will get up to 22 bookmobiles or temporary library buildings under a $12.2 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that was announced yesterday.

In addition, up to eight libraries will receive $5 million for repairs and reconstruction from the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, which was founded by two former presidents, George Bush and Bill Clinton, to help the Gulf of Mexico region recover. The libraries will be chosen by the Americans for Libraries Council, a nonprofit group that is administering the rebuilding grant.

After the hurricanes, "public libraries were absolutely vital, literally a lifeline for people," said Allan Golston, president of the Gates foundation's programs in the United States, noting that storm victims had used the Internet at libraries to find family members, apply for federal aid and look for housing and jobs. The foundation has a longstanding commitment to help libraries offer free Internet service.

But almost 50 libraries in Louisiana and Mississippi remain closed because of storm damage, and 500 library computers were destroyed, according to the Southeastern Library Network, which will administer the grant.

Some communities will share the bookmobiles, "although we're calling them book-and-tech-mobiles, because access to technology is as important as access to books," said Kate F. Nevins, executive director of the library network.

Staffing for the temporary buildings will be paid for by a $500,000 grant from a federal agency, the Institute for Museum and Library Services.
The foundation's grant will also help damaged libraries come up with rebuilding plans and fund-raising programs.