

BROAD BASE of Broadband

States Work to Spread High-Speed Internet Access



States are recognizing the importance of broadband expansion, and many are taking steps to guarantee access to all their residents. But many involved in the effort to expand broadband say the federal government also must get involved.

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Wolunteer firefighters in the rural community of Berry, Ky., found some much-needed firefighting training manuals on the Internet. But they couldn't download them; their Internet connection was too slow. "We had to go to Georgetown to the coffee shop over there to do any downloads or research for the fire department," firefighter/engineer Donald Adams Jr. said. That entailed a 35-minute trip one way to Georgetown, a small town 15 miles north of Lexington, Ky.

After a state partnership effort helped bring broadband to the small Harrison County community, the department can now download large files easily and has the capability to participate in live Web training classes.

"I believe it's going to do some good," Adams said. "I do know there are more people utilizing computers (now) because they just didn't want to do anything with dial-up (before)."

The situation in Berry isn't unique—many rural areas across the country face the same lack of broadband access. Some rural communities can't get broadband even if residents can pay for it because of the cost to build the infrastructure in sparsely populated areas.

"This is equally or more critical to our economic competitiveness as railways, electricity and highways were in the past," said Brian Mefford, chief executive officer of Connected Nation, a nonprofit organization that works to help states and communities make broadband available to more people.

"Our economy was shaped around the rail system as it developed. The places where the rail bypassed foundered until the highways came along."

It's the same way with broadband, he said.

"Communities that don't have access (to broadband), but don't continually invest to ensure they are served by the best technology, are going to be faced with the same challenges as people bypassed in the past."

In Competition with the World

Communities today face competition from more than just neighboring states and communities—their competition is the world. And the changing economy demands high-speed connectedness.

"We've largely exited from an industrial manufacturing economy that was the pulse of our business activity in the 20th century," said Derek Turner, research director for Free Press, a national nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C., working to reform the media. "We've entered into an era of digital economy, an era where geography doesn't matter as much. You can conduct similar business activity anywhere in the world if you are connected at a high enough level."

The problem is that's not happening as quickly in the United States as it is in other developed countries. The U.S. ranks 16th in the world in broadband penetration, far behind the top three—Iceland, Korea and The Netherlands, according to the 2006 Free Press study, "Broadband Reality Check II."

Part of the problem, said Robert Atkinson, president of the Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan think tank Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, is that the U.S. does not have a national broadband policy. So states have stepped up to the plate.

"The problem with the states doing it alone is that they don't have enough resources to do it," he said. "This is a nationwide challenge. I do think there's an important role for the states, but I think we need that federal leadership."

In addition, federal policy should govern interstate commerce and infrastructure, Turner said. "Ultimately, you don't want 50 disparate programs that have their own nuances," said Turner.

Absent federal leadership, states are confronting the challenge of trying to get broadband Internet access to far reaches of the country, including the most rural areas.

"The states have to be in the game,"

said Doug Robinson, executive director of the National Association of State Chief Information Officers. "They just can't sit back and let the marketplace dictate and define what the future is going to do."

But that involvement varies from state to state, Robinson said, and the debate continues about the role states should play in broadband initiatives. According to Free Press, state plans range from simply trying to identify areas with no access to broadband to developing a complete roadmap in an effort to become an "e-state."

"The state role in broadband," Atkinson said, "is becoming more about promotion and less about regulation."

Governors have embraced that reality, and several have included broadband initiatives as goals in their State of the State addresses.

Mapping Broadband Access

Most broadband advocates agree that to get broadband to new areas, states must first discover where access isn't available. That was a key component in the roots of Kentucky's efforts.

"The first and most important step is identifying the gaps," said Mefford. "That tells us where the work needs to be done."

Mefford's company started as ConnectKentucky, which began as a public-private partnership with state government to help support the research and strategic development for broadband in the state. The nonprofit expanded to a national effort after it received numerous requests for startup assistance from other states, Mefford said.

To develop the broadband inventory map, ConnectKentucky worked with telecommunications companies across the state to determine where the service existed. Kentucky's map has information from 81 providers, Mefford said, but every state will have a different number and types of providers.

Inventory maps are crucial to expanding service, Mefford said, but many states don't have them.

“Once the gaps are identified ... we can begin working in those gap areas to determine what’s the best way to get broadband service there,” said Mefford.

He said it’s important to get community members on board to show providers they would have enough subscribers to generate a good return on investment by expanding service to the area.

“We’re generating that demand ahead of that investment,” he said.

Generating Demand

Turner of Free Press said the demand for broadband lately has been strong. The adoption rate for the technology has been much faster than the adoption rates of television, telephone and cable, he said.

Broadband was once considered a luxury, but no more, according to Robinson. “People are realizing now that broadband is a de facto necessity to conduct your daily business in some places,” he said.

Atkinson points out that “up until three years ago, there weren’t many people using broadband. Now that broadband has become more prevalent, people are aware of how critical it is.”

That was evident in ConnectKentucky’s early efforts. The nonprofit brought together companies from various sectors, representing health care, automotive manufacturing, telecommunications and technology, as well as state and local government officials.

“We had the public sector talking about policies along the lines of e-health and e-government, as well as distance learning and online education,” Mefford said. “We were talking about e-health, yet only half of our doctors had the ability to subscribe to broadband. Only a fraction was using broadband.”

That illustrated the need for a major effort in Kentucky.

New York officials helped feed the need for broadband by fully embracing the e-government concept. The state offers everything online from applications for services to webcasts of government meetings.

The state’s broadband initiative has several components, one of which is the build-out of broadband to serve every New Yorker, according to Melodie Mayberry-Stewart, New York’s chief

information officer and director of the Office of Technology.

“Another component of the strategy is to increase the digital literacy level of underserved and rural communities that are the last to receive broadband access,” she said. “Our model is unique in that we also have a component to increase the use of e-government.”

The state also has instituted a \$5 million grant program to help facilitate the expansion of a broadband network and provide universal broadband Internet services for underserved rural and urban areas, according to a fact sheet about the grant program. The program also looks for open access environments promoting competition and providing consumer choice, as well as efforts to increase digital literacy in unserved and underserved areas.

“Digital literacy is equally important to the infrastructure build-out,” Mayberry-Stewart said. Nonusers, she said, need to have the skills and understand why it’s important to learn to navigate the Internet.

Increased use is also a focus of California’s effort. The California Broadband Task Force in January released its final findings and recommendations after a yearlong study. The report, “The State of Connectivity: Building Innovation Through Broadband,” includes maps of current broadband availability and speed, recommendations to achieve universal access and increased use, and a timeline to meet those goals. Among the recommendations: Building a high-speed broadband infrastructure to serve all Californians; increasing the use and adoption of broadband and computer technology; and creating a statewide e-health network.

“Implementing these recommendations will create jobs, improve public health and safety and expand educational opportunities,” Dale E. Bonner, co-chair of the task force and secretary of the state’s Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, said in a press release announcing the report.

Bonner’s co-chair, Silver Lake managing director Charles Giancarlo, said the recommendations “provide a detailed roadmap for California and the rest of the country to maintain our economic competitiveness and technology

Policy Workshop: Rural Broadband

Don’t miss the policy workshop on rural broadband from 10:30 a.m. to noon May 30 during The Council of State Governments 75th Anniversary—Spring Conference.



A 2006 study, “Measuring Broadband’s Economic Impact,” by researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Carnegie Mellon University found that between 1998 and 2002, communities in which mass-market broadband became available by December 1999 experienced more rapid growth in employment, the number of businesses overall and businesses in information technology-intensive sectors.

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leadership through increased broadband deployment.”

Other states have recognized the importance of broadband access to economic development, as well as to providing better services to their residents.

“As the global economy becomes more and more digital, jobs are more and more mobile,” Mefford of Kentucky said. “So at a minimum, we have to ensure as states that our people are the most competitive people in the world when it comes to having the technology-based skills and literacy relative to the global work force. We can’t expect people to have those skills unless they have access to the technology in their homes.”

Expanding Services

But it all comes back to access.

While states can play several different roles in bridging the broadband divide, they need help from the private sector to build that bridge.

“The whole strategy is based on driving public-private partnerships,” Mayberry-Stewart said of the New York model. “It’s

critical to sustain coverage. It’s got to be community-based.”

That’s one reason for the broadband grants. The response has been overwhelming. “We have more demand than we have funding available,” she said. “There are a lot of needs out there.”

There are also some federal grants to help meet needs across the states. The Department of Rural Development in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for instance, provides Community Connect grants to expand broadband access.

ConnectKentucky has directed providers—including the telephone company that expanded service to Berry, Ky.—to funding opportunities, and helped to gather information and support for service expansion, according to Mefford. Those services can include everything from DSL through telephone lines to wireless Internet.

But Turner with Free Press believes the private sector investment will only go so far, even with grants, because of the cost and return on investment. “In the long run,” he said, “some of these areas, especially rural areas, aren’t going to get broadband.

What you’re going to need is some type of public infrastructure investment.”

In addition, Turner says some of the expansion focuses too much on DSL and not enough on the true two-way communication model Congress envisioned in setting the national broadband policy. Most providers, he said, are existing telephone and cable television companies, and they are relying on older technologies that offer slower speeds and come with a higher price tag.

But Mefford said the need is here now, and U.S. citizens need to have access to broadband to remain competitive.

“Philosophically, we’re all for more and bigger broadband,” he said. “We sort of deal with the reality too, though, that we have to begin somewhere. In those unserved communities, if it’s a matter of an intermediate solution today and an upgrade tomorrow ... when you don’t have broadband, the intermediate step to get broadband is welcome.”

—Mary Branham Dusenberry is managing editor of State News magazine.

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