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Ending the Digital Divide

The digital divide is widening. Without public and private policy changes, we'll lose the battle for universal access.

Why is the digital divide such an intractable problem? Each year, new ideas to bridge the gap are proposed, new funds are allocated and new infrastructure is built in underserved areas – yet each year, the divide continues to widen, according to a new study published by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania (p. 36). The broadband haves are leaving the have-nots in the dust.

As the Red Queen in “Alice in Wonderland” put it, “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

This is true for both the rural digital divide – caused primarily by the high cost of building infrastructure in rural areas – and the urban digital divide, caused primarily by residents’ low incomes and low skills and, in some cases, by digital redlining.

Market research by RVA LLC, commissioned in part by Broadband Communities, demonstrates that the effort to “run twice as fast” is worthwhile. (See p. 28.) The survey respondents were low-income urban residents, many of whom began using the internet recently. Questioned about the benefits of internet use, they reported life-changing and often unexpected results. Internet use benefited their ability to earn an income, learn about the world, support their children’s education, stay in touch with their families, take care of their health, and be more independent.

FIGHTING MULTIPLE BATTLES

To guarantee these results for everyone in the United States requires fighting

battles on multiple fronts. Broadband must be available, affordable, accessible and reliable. Some of the steps needed:

- Actively marketing information about discount plans to low-income consumers and offering them more-flexible payment options.
- Providing training in using the internet effectively. (Only 1 percent of the low-income survey respondents were confident enough to gain the internet skills they needed without help.)
- Removing barriers to broadband competition by allowing nontraditional entities (municipalities, cooperative utilities and so forth) to enter broadband markets in every state.
- Allowing competitive providers to qualify for public support when they overbuild inadequate broadband networks.
- Most important, investing public funds only in future-proof networks, not in soon-to-be-obsolete (or already obsolete) technology. Investing in inadequate technology either fails to close the gap or, at best, defers the problem for a few years. Americans shouldn’t have to choose between mediocre broadband for all and good broadband for a few. We should allocate enough funding to provide future-proof networks to everyone. ♦

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