

Broadband and Citizen Engagement

City governments increasingly use broadband to deliver essential services. To be effective, often they must help their citizens access and use broadband.

By Julia Pulidindi / *National League of Cities*

At a February 2013 broadband summit held by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), national experts, academics and community program leaders discussed U.S. progress in providing and taking advantage of broadband access. The major challenges to broadband adoption have traditionally been access to broadband services, how and why to use that access, and cost. However, communities have made significant progress in learning how to increase broadband adoption despite these barriers, and city leaders are guiding efforts to improve quality of life for their constituents through increased access.

Access to and adoption of broadband services enhance social and economic development while creating other positive outcomes for communities, such as improved communication and enhanced engagement between elected officials and residents. Cities are uniquely poised to support and sustain access and adoption efforts because of their ability to influence and shape local policies around broadband. Ultimately, the goal of broadband policy is to help people take advantage of broadband's potential to improve their online experiences, whether for business development, improved health care, education or recreation.

The nation is rapidly moving toward widespread broadband access, and ensuring that access is available for all is the responsibility of elected officials. When private telecommunications companies fail to provide access, implementing municipal broadband networks can meet the demand for high-speed

Internet. Though cities face obstacles that range from state preemption to the lack of effective plans and business models to sustain municipal broadband services, building a municipal network is a viable consideration a city can explore.

Community involvement is a key component in understanding local needs, educating communities on how broadband access can meet those needs, and ensuring the staying power of municipally owned and operated networks. When Bristol, Va., created a municipal network, city leaders spoke to community groups about the need for broadband access and ways it would affect community development. Chattanooga, Tenn., followed a similar process of engagement by educating people about what a fiber network could do for them and asking community leaders to help raise awareness about the network.

TARGETED ADOPTION PROGRAMS

Once access is in place, strategically developed adoption programs are vital to ensure use. Consider the following examples of targeted programs from around the country that cater to the specific needs of various segments of communities.

Connect.DC, Washington, D.C.

Connect.DC was formed as the Washington, D.C., digital inclusion initiative. It provides services to help increase digital literacy, such as mobile technology labs and free Wi-Fi in select locations and public computing centers. The Digital Inclusion for Returning Citizens

Bostonians use a mobile app to report road conditions to the city. “Engaged residents are interested in being part of the chain of value of information,” says a Boston official.

program, a partnership among various city offices, takes advantage of existing resources to provide educational tools to formerly incarcerated residents, or “returning citizens.” The Office of the Chief Technology Officer, the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs, the University of the District of Columbia Community College and the District of Columbia Public Library work together to provide technology assistance and digital literacy training to returning residents living in the city. Connect.DC offers a staffed computer lab with 20 refurbished computers and access to high-speed broadband. Participants take part in a comprehensive training curriculum and, upon completion, receive a refurbished desktop computer and one year of free broadband service.

KEYSPOT, Philadelphia

KEYSPOT, powered by the Freedom Rings Partnership, is Philadelphia’s initiative to open and expand computer centers in health and social service agencies, shelters for homeless people, affordable housing locations and recreation centers in low-income communities. The project brings together city agencies, grassroots organizations and universities to increase broadband adoption rates in the city. Seventy-nine KEYSPTS across Philadelphia have trained more than 20,000 participants and have provided 281,000 clients with free computer access.

KEYSPOT courses are geared toward the needs of specific constituencies: parents, kids, seniors and youth at all proficiency levels. Many courses reward each successful participant with a free

netbook computer. For example, the Intergenerational Computer Course, taught under the auspices of the Philadelphia Housing Authority, bridges the digital divide within families where children are digitally literate but parents are not; it teaches basic computer skills to parents, guardians and high-school-aged children and provides training in researching and applying to colleges.

Connect Brownsville Brownsville, Texas

The Connect Brownsville program reflects the understanding that addressing unemployment will improve economic development. It aims to use broadband and computer awareness, access and education as tools to enhance workforce skills. The project entails increasing the town library’s broadband speeds, providing 176 new library computers and deploying a mobile lab. In partnership with Texas Southmost College, the program plans to provide an additional 30 laptop computers for residents. Connect Brownsville also works with the United Way of Southern Cameron County and the Brownsville Literacy Center to provide additional services to citizens.

ONLINE ACCESS FOR E-GOVERNMENT

Local governments are using technology solutions available through robust broadband networks to improve the management of such services as transit operations, utilities and public safety and help relieve strained municipal budgets, according to the 2009 Economic Development Survey conducted by the National League of Cities and the International City-County Managers Association. Many

cities are moving services online, including permit applications and fee payments. Other technology solutions include installing fiber optic networking and cable for managing city services and providing Internet access to residents.

Improved consumer devices, such as handheld computer terminals used in permitting and inspection processes, are used to leverage broadband and computer systems. They require less labor and reduce overall costs to the community. This allows local governments to become more transparent, making it easier for constituents to understand how taxpayer dollars are being spent. Local elected officials report that being more transparent opens the door to criticism but makes it easier to educate the public about policy decisions.

“We find that engaged residents are interested in being part of the chain of value of information,” says Nigel Jacob, co-chairman, Mayor’s Office of New Urban Mechanics in Boston. Mobile technologies are a way to engage people and are becoming increasingly efficient. Boston’s Street Bump app requires only minimum user engagement. Created in partnership by the city of Boston, researchers and private firms, the app uses mobile technology to send data on road conditions to a central server that provides real-time data to the city. This information gives the city a better sense of road conditions and the types of problems that exist, which, in turn, helps officials plan ahead and develop better operation and maintenance plans.

Technology in cities spans the front end through services for residents or users of the system and back-end operations that improve services and meet overall environmental goals for a city. Santa Monica, Calif., has developed a citywide vision that integrates land use and mobility to encourage walking, using mass transit and biking as ways to reduce greenhouse gases. The city’s transit management system allows signal priority for buses and sends real-time travel information straight to mobile devices. A fare box system at bus



Mayor John Marks of Tallahassee, Fla., addresses city leaders at a National League of Cities conference about Tallahassee's smart grid program.

stops supports multiple pass types and payment options that include cash, credit and even smart phones. Santa Monica has an advanced traffic management system that smooths traffic flow and reduces congestion by upgrading traffic signals, traffic signal controllers, traffic signal cameras and wireless devices. Additional system upgrades are being implemented for pedestrian and bicycle facilities.

BROADBAND SOLUTIONS FOR PUBLIC UTILITIES

Technology solutions are also being used by public utility services, through both basic and advanced efforts in Tallahassee, Fla. The city of Tallahassee's Neighborhood REACH program audits homes and then provides a variety of basic energy efficiency measures, including installing weather stripping, caulking, HVAC air filters and low-flow showerheads, to approximately 2,250 homes in underserved neighborhoods. Citizens not only learn about ways to save on

energy costs but also "love you for it," says John Marks, mayor of Tallahassee, underscoring the value of residents' seeing local governments as resources and true advocates for citizen needs.

Tallahassee also features the first electric, water and natural gas smart grid in the country; it offers customers more choice, flexibility and control in managing their energy usage. Interactive tools enable customers to adjust thermostat settings remotely via the Web, and home energy monitors help customers track and manage their energy usage with real-time data. The tools not only help households save money and meet environmental goals of reducing energy consumption but also create a new environment of allowing consumers to modify behavior, an innovative approach to service delivery.

Services and technology go hand in hand, and all signs point to residents' increasingly wanting local leaders to proactively identify solutions that can work for their communities and

have a lasting impact on economic, environmental and social development. As Carl Nylan, state and local government manager of geographic software vendor Esri, notes, "This isn't a passing fancy; this is here to stay."

The broadband challenges of yesterday are challenges people still face today. Cost is a huge deterrent to disconnected populations in realizing the value of broadband in everyday life, and a lack of digital literacy is an obstacle. However, these problems can be solved by understanding the needs of the populations being served. Broadband adoption still has a way to go in the U.S., but for many communities, the path to ensuring that citizens are connected in ways that improve their quality of life is more clearly defined. ❖

Julia Pulidindi is a senior associate in the Infrastructure Program at the National League of Cities' Center for Research and Innovation. You can reach her at 202-626-3176 or pulidindi@nlc.org.