



CONGRESS BLOG

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Create economic prosperity by closing America's digital divide

By Kathleen Annette, M.D.

Every community across this country has its haves and have-nots, those with or without the digital literacy and access needed to put the Internet to work for their lives. America's digital divide remains far too real. It is more important than ever to talk about getting all of us up to speed.

Why is this important? Workers looking for temporary employment are struggling how to learn how to get online just to land a day job. Small business owners might be able to buy things online, but too often don't have the speed necessary to sell online. Just imagine if you are an immigrant, trying to get connected when the training only is available in English.

Thus, the new haves and have-nots.

At a policy level, the conversation needs to be about making sure that everyone has access to robust (high up- and download speeds, affordable, reliable) Internet. And, it's about broadband adoption.

That's exactly what Blandin Foundation shared with Congress this week in testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet. For 10 years we have been at broadband adoption in rural places. We know, from our own experiences and through millions of dollars of our own investment, that there is no replacement for local community leadership on broadband, yet policies at all levels play a role.

Minnesota arguably leads the country in rural broadband adoption, despite spotty access. Why? Because we have knit together whatever resources available—partnerships, money, leadership—to get the job done. We have no interest in being left behind by a global economy. Our children have the same desires to learn and be successful as children anywhere. By tackling broadband, we can connect to the world and still live in the places we love and call home. And we do whatever we can to get the job done.

One of Blandin Foundation's first rules of community leadership is, "You have to do it yourself, but you can't do it alone." Never has this been truer than when it comes to broadband. Despite our fierce independence out in the countryside, we know that we can be so much more successful on broadband access and adoption with the support of our fellow Americans, via Congress.

Blandin Foundation administered a federal grant that fueled a statewide coalition of 30 partners. The Minnesota Intelligent Rural Communities (MIRC) initiative put communities in the driver's seat, supporting local leaders as they imagined and claimed futures fully enabled by technology. Federal dollars made possible technical support, capacity building, grants to help fund innovation and experimentation, and dedicated researchers to benchmark and measure their challenges and progress.

MIRC was one of 44 sustainable adoption grants awarded nationwide through the federal Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP), using funds made available through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Between 2010 and 2012, we moved the needle in rural Minnesota—especially among those unemployed and seeking employment, and small businesses.

Among the hundreds of MIRC projects was small business training in the small, tourist-dependent town of Akeley, Minnesota. Going into an Internet marketing workshop, sole proprietor Kristin Fake couldn't imagine how technology might benefit her home staging business. At the workshop she quickly discovered that her clients were being misdirected by Google maps, how keywords drive inquiries, and how she might use a smart phone to dramatically improve her customer service. She is poised to take her business to a new level as Akeley continues to recover from a very tough economic patch.

As a Native American, I always will remember touring the telepresence room at the Deer River High School and seeing students there connected to students in a Remer high school class and learning the Ojibwe language through the MIRC project. High-speed broadband and digital literacy made it possible for these beautiful children to connect to elders and students across northern Minnesota to learn their ancient language, my ancient language. Oh, the possibilities!

That's our idea of progress. And it doesn't stop there. Stories like this one continue to roll in from communities all across rural Minnesota, where adoption is not just a policy imperative, it is a community imperative.

Broadband is the indispensable infrastructure of the 21st century. It is absolutely clear, however, that the promise of the Internet lies as much with investing in human capacity as it does with investing in technological capacity.

Blandin Foundation will continue to work with policymakers at the national level to ensure that communities across the country benefit from the lessons we have learned in Minnesota. It's time to narrow the economic divide between those who can use broadband and those who can't.

Annette is the CEO of Blandin Foundation, one of only a handful of private foundations in the nation focused exclusively on strengthening rural communities.