WIRED AND WIRELESS BROADBAND:

What's at Stake for Rural Communities?

Introduction

From June 28-30, more than 300 rural leaders from across the United States met in St. Paul, MN, for the 2011 National Rural Assembly. The event included work sessions, roundtables, networking opportunities, and panel presentations for stakeholders who represented the diversity of rural America in geography, race/ethnicity, and public policy interests. Participants strategized about how to create a nation where rural communities can thrive and contribute to the nation's success.

Rural Broadband Listening Session

On Tuesday, June 28, 2011, the Center for Media Justice brought together 20 individuals from 17 organizations across the country to examine the role of wired and wireless broadband access in rural communities, discuss what's at stake in broadband policy, and determine what can be done to improve policy conditions through collaborative advocacy.

The session, held prior to the National Rural Assembly, was designed to address the unique conditions that rural communities face and encourage participants to:

- Consider the conditions created by existing broadband policy in rural communities
- Investigate the social impacts of existing broadband policy on rural communities
- Identify community-based strategies for change
- Create a broad and intersectional base of support to address wired and wireless broadband issues

Rural Needs and Assets

What Rural Organizations Need to Address Wired/Wireless Broadband Inequity

- Research that illustrates the predatory practice of media and telecommunications corporations in rural communities
- Materials and curriculum that tie media policy/telecom issues to core quality-of-life concerns such as education, health care, employment, and public safety
- A clear communication channel with D.C. policy makers and regulatory bodies that oversee policy arenas that affect rural communities
- Geographically relevant and community-specific information on the impact of media/telecom policy in rural areas
- Quantitative data from well-respected research institutions that demonstrates the economic impact of affordable broadband adoption in ways that can be shared with elected officials
- Funding to develop and launch coordinated statewide campaigns for sustainable broadband adoption
- Model legislation designed for county-level implementation in small towns and rural communities
- More opportunities to bring together underserved and unserved rural and urban communities to innovate collaborative solutions to similar issues

Rural Communities' Existing Assets and Strengths

- Community members and institutions who understand that a healthy digital ecology is directly tied to the survival of rural communities
- Local and diverse broadband networks (i.e., nonprofit, municipal)
- Community anchor institutions that are invested in the health and well-being of the community
- Stories of what's working and what's not working
- Trusted relationships with community institutions and local elected and appointed officials
- Deep commitment to local self-reliance and ownership

Strategic Breakout Session Report Back

Following our popular education activity, participants were divided into two breakout groups that provided time and space for participants to identify the conditions created by existing broadband policy in rural areas, investigate the social impacts of those conditions, and identify geographically relevant community-based strategies for change. Below are some of the top-level discoveries from the breakout groups.

What's at Stake

- Quality health care
- Next Generation Emergency Services (NGES)
- Sustainable employment
- Civic participation
- Business/workforce training and education
- Access to information
- Rural enterprise and micro-business development
- Community connections/cohesion
- Access to government services
- Quality education
- Small town/city government efficiency
- Rural community survival

Challenges

- State legislation that prohibits municipal broadband networks
- State eligibility requirements for broadband funding
- Universal Service Fund eligibility
- Cost
- Complexity of federal funding process
- Uneven federal funding distribution
- Right-of-way issues
- Limited infrastructure
- Lack of choice and competition
- Low digital literacy

What Can Communities Do?

- Increase public involvement
- Join state broadband task forces and commissions
- Secure technical assistance from trusted providers
- Connect broadband infrastructure to workforce development
- Advocate for policy at state and county level
- Advocate for comprehensive state strategies
- Highlight rural success stories
- Educate local officials on telecommunications/ internet issues

Policy Recommendations

Define broadband as community infrastructure. Many small towns and rural communities lack basic public service and must rely on private companies for their needs. Yet deployment of broadband networks is at the mercy of corporations' profit interests, and communities are often powerless to stop the provider from charging outrageous fees. When communities understand that broadband infrastructure is community infrastructure, they can better understand how it has the potential to shape their socioeconomic destiny and can then advocate for network ownership and operation that provides competitive options and prices that are in everyone's best interest.

Recognize broadband service as a public utility. Much like electricity, broadband should be considered a "general purpose technology," i.e., a necessary technology or utility that enables human innovation and productivity across a wide range of issues. Just as electricity reshaped the world, high-speed broadband is reshaping our economy and our lives. The economic benefits of broadband go hand in hand with social benefits and the potential for improved quality of life for all Americans.

Reform the Universal Service Fund. Reforming the Universal Service Fund (USF) so it may be used to make broadband service as universal and affordable as possible will help close the digital divide, foster economic growth and democratic engagement in the poorest communities, and improve the quality of life for historically marginalized communities. We must reform the USF to:

- Subsidize networks to make broadband connections possible
- Directly subsidize the households that can't afford Internet connections through vouchers
- Ensure that broadband is treated as a public service, not just a commercial service
- Ensure that USF is directed toward broadband adoption, build out, and maintenance
- Ensure that all networks and models (including municipally owned and nonprofit networks) that support cost-effective broadband services are eligible to receive USF subsidies

Support public ownership and community broadband networks. In many rural areas, the only option for broadband is an absentee company unlikely to invest in networks that are comparable to those available in urban areas. Local governments (particularly county, in rural areas) are increasingly investing in next-generation networks that provide universal access at competitive rates. Unfortunately, some states have limited local authority to decide whether such a network is a necessary investment for the future of the community. It is essential that rural communities have all available options to build the networks they need.