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Kentucky Nonprofit Maps, Tackles Rural Digital Divide

Joe Mefford, Statewide Broadband Director, Connect Kentucky, participated at the 2nd Digital Inclusion Roundtable at the Digital Cities Convention in Philadelphia (Dec. 5–6, 2006). He spoke with W2i during the event about mapping service provision in underserved communities to spur innovative solutions to provide broadband access to all Kentucky residents.



Q: How did ConnectKentucky get its start?

A: A couple of years ago, our governor embarked on a statewide initiative to ensure that every household has a form of broadband access by the end of 2007. And what makes that more difficult — wiring a community, providing wireless broadband — is our geography. We're talking about a state that has very hilly terrain and very few households per square mile, which makes a business plan very difficult in those rural areas.

But that was our mission. We're a nonprofit, and the governor asked us to oversee and facilitate that initiative on his behalf. We're now two years into that project.

Q: What's the broadband landscape like in Kentucky?

A: When we started, we had broadband availability to 60% of households, and today we stand at 90% through this initiative. And it's not just about providing broadband to those areas, it's about what you do with it when it's there. We're working at the community level. We have 120 counties in Kentucky, and we have local leadership teams in each one of those counties who have strategically planned how they're going to use that technology when it's there. By the end of 2006, each county will have its own individual strategic plan.

Q: How does this work at the local level?

A: We work with nine sectors in each one of those counties — from healthcare, to government, education, business. We use a template that says, This is how I use technology today, and they rank and benchmark themselves. When we have that data, we ask them, how would you like to use technology? And basically, they create their own strategic plan.

Q: How has the private sector participated?

A: We have had very good cooperation from all broadband providers in Kentucky—wireless ISPs, municipalities, cable companies, all the telephone companies. We have collected their coverage data and converted it to a GIS format, which makes it very easy to lay other layers of data on that map, especially census data. So once we have the coverage areas, then we can overlay census data in the underserved areas and know exactly how many households are in those areas. That is very important information for providers.

Q: So the maps are pointing the way.

A: Yes, we've gone from 60 to 90% broadband availability through private-sector investment. Now, to get from 90 to 100%, you're talking about some very remote areas, sparsely populated. Now we have to come up with unique business plans for deployment. And that involves public-private partnerships between local government and providers — both stepping up.

Q: Where have you found success?

A: There an example of seven counties in west Kentucky who had determined that they had gotten as much coverage as they were going to get from the private sector. They have decided they would partner with a provider, and we assisted them with an RFP for that purpose to get full coverage in those seven counties. There were very good responses to that RFP, and they have selected a wireless Internet service provider who will cover those seven counties. Local government will purchase the equipment, and the ISP will provide the back office, service provision, testing, installation, CPE, and there will be a profit share.

That model has worked there, and it has worked in a number of other counties. And all the comes from our ability to identify the households that are in these underserved areas.

Q: What do you think about the FCC definition of broadband?

A: This project uses the FCC's definition, which is 256 Kbps. Everybody knows we're moving way beyond that, but in some cases we have to walk before we run. I get e-mails from constituents throughout the state saying, I'm sitting here dying with 16K dial-up — anything would be better than that. Our intention is to get broadband in some form out there, knowing that technology upgrades will increase that bandwidth as time goes on.

Q: In addition to the governor, what support have you had?

A: In our last legislative session, we sponsored a bill that created a \$15-million pool — a low-interest loan and grant money — that would support this initiative,

realizing it's going to take some kind of public-private partnering to get coverage to those areas. We've got partners that offer a satellite solution at a discounted rate. Just identifying partners who want to step up and reduce prices, come up with some kind of unique business arrangement in those areas.

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