

Broadband access opens doors to networking, economic development for rural areas

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Proactive policies are needed to facilitate broadband Internet access and adoption in rural areas so that rural hospitals, schools and businesses can drive social and economic development and better position themselves to compete, say Penn State researchers in a recently released report from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.

The report, "Broadband Internet Use in Rural Pennsylvania," examines broadband availability and adoption in four sectors -- health care, local government, education and business -- through case studies, interviews with key information-technology personnel and analysis of organizations' Web sites. While the report focuses on Pennsylvania, their recommendations hold true for any state with a large rural population, according to the researchers.

"Broadband services offer a huge opportunity for rural areas with significant payback in terms of economic development and community revitalization," said Amy Glasmeier, professor of geography and co-author of the report. "The Internet makes possible a whole range of processes which involve more than rapid access to information and which range from joint projects by municipalities and collaborations between schools to development of new business processes."

According to the researchers, while the number of rural users of broadband Internet services has been steadily increasing, access to broadband is not universal in rural areas, and in some places, dial-up remains the only affordable option. While dial-up allows for electronic

access to information, its slower speed and lower bandwidth capacity limit organizations from developing Internet-enabled processes and collaborations -- what the researchers distinguish as "transformative" uses.

For instance, with broadband Internet, rural hospitals could improve patient care by forging networks with urban hospitals to access their expertise and resources. Rural hospitals also could develop interactive processes such as online appointment scheduling, remote patient monitoring through biosignals and image data and videoconferencing between patients and doctors.

"Policy must consider ways to facilitate broadband deployment to do more than the status quo only slightly faster or with less face-to-face contact," Glasmeier said.

But policy makers also need to recognize that there is no single solution to the challenges of broadband utilization. Programs need to be specific to their sectors and linked to the specific challenges facing individual sectors, the researchers assert.

Some interactive processes -- such as streaming of public meetings, tax payments, conversation forums and collaborative software for curriculum development -- which broadband Internet can facilitate for local governments and school districts are less relevant for businesses and hospitals, for instance.

Source: Penn State

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