

e-Connectivity for Rural America



National Cooperative Extension Service's Role in Promoting e-Connectivity

Nationally, the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) has played many roles in communities as they more solidly step into the technology age. From the initial steps of raising awareness of the opportunity, through planning, and adoption and use, Extension can assist community members with the transition. Extension is well positioned for this endeavor with over 100 years of experience in disseminating innovation, facilitating community planning, and educating clientele at the local level. Currently, the Southern Rural Development Center is leading a national team of CES professionals to develop and/or refine materials to support communities along the continuum of access.

Overview: Issues related to e-connectivity range across a number of points in the broadband access process. These issues have led to a digital divide which refers to a gap between those who have access, can afford, and possess know-how to leverage digital technology to improve their quality of life versus those who do not have access, cannot afford, and lack know-how. The digital divide is a major threat to community economic development in the 21st Century.

Scope of Work: A national team of CES professionals are working with communities to expand broadband access and use along a continuum:

- **Awareness of Relevance** – raising awareness in communities about the benefits of broadband to encourage them to consider strategies to gain or improve access. CES facilitates community conversations to foster thoughtful consideration of the possibilities broadband would bring to their community
- **Access & Availability** – working to help a community gain or increase access to broadband. CES convenes partners, leads strategic planning, and/or facilitates community conversations.
- **Adoption** – helping people/businesses/government within areas that recently acquired broadband access to understand and take steps to access the service. CES provides education to help people learn how to access and why to access services.
- **Utilization** – taking people/businesses/government from access to the initial stages of usage. CES provides education and technical support to aid people in gaining initial skills for using broadband access to meet their needs.
- **Policy** – work on local, state or national policy that influences broadband adoption. CES conducts research to inform/guide policy decisions related to broadband access.
- **Evaluation** - CES can serve as evaluators and community coaches, collaborating with key stakeholders/agencies to gauge success, chart next steps, and document/share lessons learned.

Current Initiatives: The national team is working to build capacity within the CES system nationally to expand this work even further. The three focus areas for these efforts are:

- **Connecting communities** –helping communities organize and develop options for increasing access (building on previously developed curriculum and local facilitation expertise)
- **Promoting digital literacy** – aiding people, businesses, governments in expanding their abilities to use broadband access once it is available (updating and expanding previous curriculum)
- **Strengthening and establishing partnerships** – reaching out to partners at the federal, state, and local levels to strengthen joint efforts to promote e-connectivity and usage in underserved areas.
- **Conducting Relevant Research** – identifying and addressing the most pressing research questions around broadband adoption and use

National e-Commerce Extension Initiative: http://srdc.msstate.edu/ecommerce/learning_center.html

Sample Curriculum:

- A Beginner's Guide to e-Commerce
- Connecting Communities
- Direct Marketing Food Specialty Products
- e-Commerce as a Strategy for Improving Business Vitality - Case Studies
- eTailing Curriculum
- eStrategies for Local Governments
- Helping Artisans Reach Global Markets
- Internet Strategies to Improve Farm Business Management
- Marketing AgriTourism Online

Rural Broadband and Infrastructure

The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development assisted the USDA Economic Research Service and Farm Foundation to organize a conference to evaluate the economic impacts of infrastructure investments, including broadband, highways, bridges, etc. The Center is working with federal agencies and private entities, including the National Association of County Organizations and the National Association of Development Organizations, to identify opportunities for increasing broadband availability in rural communities. In addition, the Center is conducting research on the benefits of broadband availability for small business growth.

High Speed Internet: The Power of Working as a Region

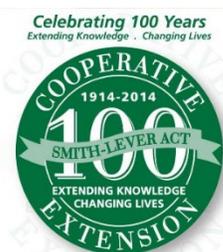
A number of regions engaged in the Stronger Economies Together (SET) initiative identified gaps in broadband access as a significant concern for their regions. For example, the five county Kerr Tar Region, North Carolina, is working collaboratively to ensure broadband access across the region. Person County has already allocated \$4 million for the county-wide installation of new broadband towers county-wide, Vance County is currently surveying for gaps in service, and Granville County has established a Digital Infrastructure Committee to initiate its data collection. In addition, the Southwest New Mexico region received \$150,000 from the New Mexico Broadband Program to help expand broadband access in the region.

4-H Tech Changemakers

National 4-H Council and Microsoft, in partnership with the Southern Rural Development Center, the National Digital Education Extension Team, and University of Georgia 4-H, are working together through the 4-H Tech Changemakers program to empower teens to create opportunities for people to participate in today's increasingly digital world. Through this program, teens in almost 100 communities are working to identify needs and create action plans for using digital skills.

Rural Online Initiative – A Rural Workforce Development Pilot Program

The Western Rural Development Center's Rural Workforce Development Initiative Team collaborated with Utah State University Extension and two of Utah's county commissioners to secure funding for a three-year pilot program leveraging Extension's well-established infrastructure to serve Utahns in rural communities as they develop skills needed in the growing freelance/independent contractor economy. The pilot program will begin in communities with the highest unemployment rates through public meetings and assessments of local needs/assets; skill-based workshops, one-on-one mentoring, webinars, and other training tools. The program also plans to bring together individuals with complementary skills to increase their earning potential, and offer incentives for businesses contracting with Utah freelancers.



Regional Rural Development Centers: www.rrdc.info



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