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INSIDE CALIFORNIA'S $11B GOVERNMENT IT MARKET

Broadband Adoption High, but Local Agencies Aim to Improve Access

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Statewide broadband adoption is within 2 percentage points of an overall goal, according to a survey by a nonprofit charged with expanding usage and availability of high-speed Internet, but disadvantaged populations lag behind and two major population centers have slipped below previous levels.

"Internet Connectivity and the 'Digital Divide' in California — 2019," is a statewide survey done by the Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) Poll through IGS and the University of California, Berkeley for the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF). The new study, released Tuesday, found broadband Internet connectivity up slightly in California households, in comparison with 2017, the study's previous edition. The number of California households with broadband connectivity via smartphone, desktop, laptop or tablet rose 1 percent from 2017, to 88 percent, while the number of unconnected households fell 1 percent to 12 percent. (CETF set as a goal 90 percent overall adoption statewide by 2022.)

But another key metric in the survey, which has been done since 2008, showed a marked decline: Internet connectivity at home via smartphone only — a survey definer of being "under-connected" — fell 8 percent from 2017 to 10 percent, while the number of people connecting via desktop, laptop or tablet rose 9 percent to 78 percent. Other key points include:

• The 8 percent drop in smartphone-only broadband users is good news, said CETF President and CEO Sunne Wright McPeak, calling it the "first significant decrease" in the underconnected population, and hailing the 9 percent rise.

"The very people who need more digital literacy skills to participate in the digital economy, the disadvantaged, are the ones who don't have the multiple devices," she said.

• McPeak credited "school-based strategies" as a big part of the reason more families have multiple devices. Households with children were more likely to be "connected through a computing device" versus a smartphone, at 86 percent compared to 75 percent with no children present. And 52 percent of those surveyed indicated their student had an "assigned computing device at school," with 28 percent being allowed to take it home.

"That is a huge message of support or reinforcement to state policy-makers and school districts throughout the state," McPeak said.

• Two major metropolitan regions, the Los Angeles and Bay areas each saw declines in overall broadband adoption from 2017 to 2019. Adoption around Los Angeles fell from 88 percent to 84 percent and adoption around the Bay area fell from 93 percent to 88 percent during that period.

McPeak said the fact that both areas are significant points of entry for people from other states and nations may affect Internet adoption. Jeanne Holm, deputy CIO for the city of Los Angeles and senior technology advisor to Mayor Eric Garcetti, said the

city has identified similar, albeit smaller, decreases in the underserved neighborhoods of Watts and south Los Angeles. The city has asked telecommunications companies to build out broadband service "faster than you would normally in those areas so that we can lift everybody up faster."

Inspired by the CAL acronym of Connectivity, Accessibility and Literacy, L.A. has worked with community-based organizations to give away nearly 4,000 new and refurbished computers and Internet access through OurCycle LA; let residents check out mobile hot spots or computers through public libraries via Tech2go; and partnered with businesses to get them online safely through LA Cyber Lab. Los Angeles, Holm said, will be a pioneer 5G city.

"We've done that intentionally and with a lot of forethought in working with the telecommunications providers. Because there's great stuff that will come from 5G, but from this perspective, the most important thing — we will have 10,000 new connectivity devices in the city, which is huge. And that means that the ability for people to get basic connectivity will increase without us having to pay more as a city because the telecommunications companies are just doing what they're doing," she said.

• People with disabilities, low income households and Latino households had lower adoption rates than the overall statewide rate, at 79 percent, 81 percent and 86 percent respectively. And an overwhelming majority of 73 percent of low-income residents said they were unaware of discount Internet service available. Holm said Los Angeles has a regulatory office that oversees pacts with cable Internet providers, who are required to provide information in multiple languages and ensure low-income access to services. It's also compiling a ZIP code-based resource list that, like most of the city website will be available in 117 languages.

San Jose Chief Innovation Officer Shireen Santosham said more needs to be done to educate her city's residents about low-cost Internet service, and the muni will work with broadband providers through its new $24 million Digital Inclusion Fund, administered by CETF, to get that word out. To date, the city has connected 50,000 households to broadband and will start this year offering $1 million in grants to community-based organizations, ramping up to $2 million per year and partnering with industry to "get people more connected and skilled up."

"Today, there is no single resource or source of funding for nonprofits and public agencies to address connectivity issues for the community. Again, this is the first program of its kind in the nation," Santosham said, adding: "We will be the first city in America that aims to completely close the digital divide."

• Libraries were a key source of broadband connectivity for the 32 percent of those surveyed who connected to the Internet outside the home; 13 percent of that subset indicated they connected at or near a library. Los Angeles County Library CIO Binh Le told *Techwire* a Corporation for Education Network Initiatives in California (CENIC) grant will let the library upgrade its infrastructure to provide high-speed Internet. County libraries provided more than 1.72 million Wi-Fi sessions and 1.8 million computer sessions in 2018.

"In an attempt to meet customer needs, L.A. County Library has already increased the number of computers at many locations and worked toward simplifying the Wi-Fi login process. The library plans to offer speeds of up to 1 GB per second with the E-Rate funding. The network installation is phased for completion, end of 2019," Le

said via email.

L.A. County Library began improving Internet speed and connectivity last fall through the Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate Program. It received about $5 million via the California Research and Education Network, operated by CENIC.