Grant funds broadband adoption and access plan in San Joaquin Valley

Posted by Melanie Glover on April 19, 2012 in News | 0 Comment

San Joaquin Valley Regional Consortium (SJVRC)—a public-private entity made up of telecommunications providers, government, private businesses, nonprofit and health agencies—is honing its plans to accelerate broadband deployment, accessibility and adoption within Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Tulare Counties.

The three-year project is supported by a $450,000 California Advanced Services Fund (CASF) Rural and Urban Broadband Consortia grant approved by the California Public Utilities Commission in Dec. 2011. Six other consortia received CASF funding in order to bring broadband infrastructure to un-served and underserved areas in the state.

"[SJVRC] has three work focuses: digital literacy, telehealth and infrastructure," said Christine Nutting, Associate Director for the Office of Community and Economic Development at California State University, Fresno, the organization administering the consortium.

The "hybrid" project will address gaps in the region's broadband Internet infrastructure and focus on access and adoption for both un-served and underserved areas in the valley. A major emphasis for year one—for which $150,000 was allotted—will be research, adoption and digital literacy, according to Nutting.

"What we are learning is that adoption will lead to access, rather than using the mindset of 'if you build it, they will come,'" she said, noting that more digital literacy training and data on the demand for access showcases a growing market in these areas to providers.

Appealing to providers and alleviating their barriers to extend access is a major challenge for broadband projects in lower populated areas, according to Gladys Palpallatoc, Associate Vice President of the California Emerging Technology Fund, which is lending technical assistance, support and resources to regional consortia in California.

"That's why a lot of regional consortia present research on the broadband use of an entire community—the public and private sector—not just residents," she said. "In rural areas, [regional consortia] have to prove that there is a business case, or find a way to subsidize the network build."

SJVRC assists providers and stakeholders by making them aware of funding through CASF's Broadband Infrastructure and Revolving Loan Accounts. The deadline for the first application window for un-served area projects was extended to October 1, 2012, while underserved area and hybrid (both un- and underserved) areas have a new deadline of February 13, 2013.

Nutting said that this extension has given them time to fine-tune their research, assist more providers with the grant applications, and focus heavily on digital literacy—providing resources to communities at easy, centralized locations like libraries, where access is free. Curriculum focuses on computer-based job skills, information on how to use a computer, where to get one at a reduced rate, and more.

"You cannot survive in this day and age without a computer," she said. "The ability to impact the community at the individual level is something anyone can be passionate about."

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