

# Building Broadband Adoption Infrastructure

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by John B. Horrigan, Ph.D.

On Wednesday, U.S. Department of Commerce Assistant Secretary Larry Strickling gave a speech at the Brookings Institution discussing the progress of the Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP), funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Mr. Strickling runs the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the branch of Commerce which manages BTOP. ARRA funded three types of initiatives (http://www2.ntia.doc.gov/about) within BTOP:

- Comprehensive Community Infrastructure (CCI) projects, which consist of 123 grants totaling \$3.5 billion to build mainly “middle mile” broadband infrastructure to connect facilities such as schools, libraries, or hospitals.
- Public Computing Centers (PCCs), 66 projects with grants totaling \$201 million, which offers to the public (or certain sections of the public, such as seniors or the unemployed) access to broadband via public work stations along with education, support, and training on how to use the Internet.
- Sustainable Broadband Adoption (SBA), 44 projects with grants totaling \$251 million that seek to increase broadband Internet usage and adoption, including among vulnerable populations where broadband technology traditionally has been underutilized. Projects often focus on digital literacy training and outreach campaigns to increase the relevance of broadband in people’s everyday lives.

The most compelling parts of Mr. Strickling’s speech were stories about communities affected by BTOP programs. He described the North Georgia Network, which has installed 1,100 miles of fiber infrastructure that provide high speed connectivity to numerous schools and community anchor institution. Bruce Abraham, who runs the network, said reliable and fast broadband has allowed local manufacturers to expand markets and hire more people. In California, the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) has helped 2,600 people find jobs by using broadband connectivity to foster job-seeking skills. And CFY (formerly known as Computers for Youth) works closely with families to help them understand how high-speed connectivity can help in their children’s education. CFY has found that, after families go through the CFY program, they often subscribe to full-price broadband because they have come to understand its importance.

One common denominator in these stories is broadband’s role in changing expectations. In north Georgia, Mr. Abraham described how the network has had a “push effect” in getting other businesses to use broadband to improve their operations or expand their markets. CFY says that broadband changes families’ expectations about education. Moreover, according to CFY research, kids from families who pass through CFYs training watch a lot less TV than similar families who have not received the training. Among the 80% of children who watch TV 14 hours or more per week, the time per week drops by an average of

11 hours.

But NTIA has more than just anecdotes about its BTOP programs. In December, NTIA released a report entitled "[Progress towards BTOP Goals: Interim Report on PCC and SBA Case Studies](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/2012/progress-towards-btop-goals-interim-report-pcc-and-sba-case-studies)" (<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/2012/progress-towards-btop-goals-interim-report-pcc-and-sba-case-studies>). This report, written by NTIA consultant ASR Analytics, looks at PCC and SBA projects that try to increase broadband adoption through touching individuals. What is striking about the ASR report is its documentation of the impressive *reach* of BTOP grants in the PCC and SBA areas. ASR finds that the geographical reach of PCC and SBA grants is 55 million Americans or 18% of the nation's population. The geography covered by the grant has a disproportionately high share of people living in poverty and, says the report, "[n]early all of the grants targeted minority populations." Some 38.9% of the population in the grant areas is non-white compared with 25.5% for the entire nation. Given that minorities are less likely to have broadband Internet at home (NTIA finds (<http://www.ntia.doc.gov/report/2011/digital-nation-expanding-internet-usage-ntia-research-preview>) that, as of late 2010, 50% of African Americans and 46% of Hispanics have broadband, versus a 68% nationwide average), the PCC and SBA programs seem well tailored to the problem.

What do these findings suggest for a second term of the Obama Administration?

First, broadband adoption – in spite of the progress that BTOP has facilitated – remains a problem. Nearly one-third of Americans do not have broadband at home. Although smartphones help address access gaps, they do not currently *serve as substitutes* ([http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2031755](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2031755)) for home subscription plans due to their smaller screens and slower access speeds.

Second, the benefits to having more people online are growing. More and more key institutions in society – health care, government, education – are looking to use the Internet to deliver services as a way to cut costs and improve effectiveness. Maintaining legacy offline means to deliver service for a minority of non-broadband users is expensive – and unfair in that it deprives the non-broadband population of the benefits of carrying out tasks online.

There is some good news. Mr. Strickling said that NTIA will soon release a "broadband adoption tool-kit" that draws together lessons on what has worked in its PCC and SBA projects in promoting broadband adoption. In other words, communities that will *have to* continue the long-term undertaking to lure more people online do not have to fly blind. They will, however, need resources to do that. How to get those funds – in an era where federal funding is increasingly scarce – will be a challenge for all stakeholders, particularly for the private sector and the foundation community.

John B. Horrigan, Ph.D., is Vice President and Director of the Joint Center's Media and Technology Institute. To learn more about Dr. Horrigan and the Joint Center, please visit our [website](http://www.jointcenter.org) (<http://www.jointcenter.org>).

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1. *jimtobias* says:

[January 19, 2013 at 7:21 am](#)

Excellent article, and the idea of a broadband adoption infrastructure is exactly right: policymakers should be paying as much attention to patterns of non-adoption and underutilization as they do to the few remaining geographical gaps in the cable, fiber, and wireless networks. As important as they were, why were PCC and SBA programs limited to a few dollars per non-adopter? And where will new adoption initiatives find the dollars to follow up on those programs?

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