

# California Broadband Advocacy Group Testifies Before U.S. Senate Committee

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On Tuesday, broadband advocates including the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) [testified](#) before the U.S. Senate's Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, saying that broadband access remains unfinished in rural and remote areas, particularly for tribal nations, and that broadband adoption among low income, senior citizens and tribal communities remain a challenging issue. The key issue was the proper role of the federal government, with some parties urging Congress to "connect the dots" and partner more closely with states, localities, community groups, and NGOs.

From the California perspective, CETF's President and CEO Sunne Wright McPeak asked the senators to "connect the dots" and optimize broadband technology in all their programs, including housing, education, and health care. McPeak recommended Congress set specific goals with hard metrics to guarantee results, a suggestion that seemed to have traction with the senators. She asked for partnerships between the federal government and the states, the private sector and community based organizations, noting that the Department of Commerce's NTIA group has a wealth of knowledge about what works and relationships with key broadband contacts in the states and NGOs after the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act \$7.2 billion broadband grant program. McPeak further advocated for a Broadband Lifeline program similar to the telephone Lifeline program at the FCC. California Congresswoman Doris Matsui (D-CA) has introduced legislation (H.R.-1685) to establish a broadband Lifeline program as part of the FCC's Universal Service Fund programs.

McPeak asked the senators to lead on broadband issues, as California has since 2006. She emphasized the strong commitment that the Golden State had made to broadband access and adoption issues, ranging from the Governor's office, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and the State Legislature. She lauded milestones such as the Governor's Broadband Task Force, the CPUC's California Advanced Services Fund broadband infrastructure and adoption program, the Governor's Digital Literacy Executive Order, and recent state laws that put the CASF fund in the law and expanded broadband connections in government subsidized housing. She reported that through these concerted public efforts, California had increased broadband adoption by 20% for low income households, 18% for Latino households, 20% for persons with disabilities, and that rural adoption of broadband at home has caught up to urban households adoption figures. She said the current challenge in California remains the urban poor and rural residents with no or very slow Internet access.

Comcast Corporation's Executive Vice President David Cohen touted Comcast's Internet Essentials program which provides \$9.95 home Internet service, low cost \$150 computers and digital literacy training to families who have at least one child on the free or reduced lunch

program. He announced that Comcast had just connected its one millionth user to the Internet Essentials program, which represents 250,000 families that have been connected to the Internet, most for the first time. He reported on a survey of the Internet Essentials families which showed 98% of the customer's children used the Internet for homework, 94% said Internet access had had a positive impact on their children's grades, and 59% said the Internet connection had helped someone in the household find a job.

Cohen emphasized Comcast's support for an improved role for broadband in education, stating "every student deserves access to an integrated, always on, digital learning platform, a continuum of connectivity that begins in the classroom, follows the child to after school programs, and ends with connectivity in the home." He praised updates to the E-Rate program which he noted was implemented in an era of different technology. He also spoke approvingly of the Obama Administration's ConnectED initiatives which he said will advance these goals while being cost efficient. ConnectEd is a program initiated from the Obama Administration that proposes to connect 99% of students to high speed wireless Internet at school.

McPeak and Cohen sparred when McPeak told the Committee that the Comcast Internet Essential program was due to expire next year, and that this program has been critical to broadband adoption of low income families in California. "They have not reached more than 8 percent of the eligible recipients," McPeak said. She praising the corporate program but said there has been "modest success at best." Comcast's program only provides Internet access at home to families with children and other low income persons without school age children and seniors are not eligible. This prompted Senator Mark Pryor (D-Ark.) to ask Cohen whether the program would continue. Cohen replied, "I don't have an answer to that yet . . . We love the program."

Aaron Smith of the Pew Research Center testified that 70% of Americans have some sort of broadband connection at home (wired or wireless) which is a significant uptick that prior years. He stated that the pace of broadband adoption has slowed in recent years.

Former Senator John Sununu, appearing for Broadband for America, made the point that competition best leads to investment to improve broadband access, and that "light touch regulation" is the best way to achieve success given the high cost of investment in broadband infrastructure. He said that the E-rate program and Universal Service Fund needed refocusing given changes in technology. Bernadine Joselyn, Director of Public Policy and Engagement for the Blandin Foundation in Minnesota, described the importance of broadband connections for tribal schools in her state, saying it gave these students a chance to have a world class educational opportunities including physics classes, advanced English courses and language classes. She also made the point that libraries play a very important role in giving access to computers for job seekers.