Federal Government Must Not Let Up on Broadband Adoption, Advocates Tell Congress

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Agencies across the federal government must embrace broadband adoption strategies, with congressional prompting if necessary, some broadband adoption advocates told a Senate Communications Subcommittee hearing Tuesday. They highlighted where gaps still exist and discussed the role of public-private partnerships and ways companies have tried to close the digital divide.

California has moved ahead with a variety of programs and its own holistic approach, with a new law targeting affordable housing units with broadband. "It's not by chance we met those goals," Sunne Wright McPeak, president of the California Emerging Technology Fund, told us of programs in her state.

Congress must pursue goals and metrics and an integrated broadband strategy along those lines, especially important in our "era of limited resources," she said. NTIA's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program and "the big sandbox" of the FCC's USF are critical funding sources in promoting adoption, she said. The BTOP program "has built capacity in organizations around the country," and the federal government should capitalize on that with another "modest" round of funding, she said.

"The government can serve as a driver of demand," said Blandin Foundation Director-Public Policy and Engagement Bernadine Joselyn, another witness Tuesday, of such holistic approaches. Government should have an important role and "hard-target" goals in furthering broadband access and adoption, she told us. "Without a target, we will not have the urgency." She also talked about how communities are "stuck" as BTOP grants come to an end, underscoring the need for further investment. Her testimony (http://1.usa.gov/16HLtzr) emphasized the rural communities of Minnesota, where the foundation is based.

"As more employment, educational, and economic opportunities are available online, many Americans don't purchase broadband because they do not know how to use it," said Subcommittee Chairman Mark Pryor, D-Ark., in his opening statement. "Even as broadband has the tremendous power to increase social and economic mobility, many Americans feel they cannot afford it. While broadband is not a silver bullet for all our nation's challenges, its ability to connect and inform our citizens is unparalleled."

CETF's message to the government, McPeak told us, is "we need your help." Companies' efforts to encourage broadband adoption have shown "modest success at best," she said. "It's clear that's not sufficient." Congress can tell the FCC to be "as creative as possible" with how it doles out USF money, she said. "Comcast Internet Essentials is going to expire next year," McPeak said of the low-income service during the hearing when questioned. "They have not reached more than 8 percent of the eligible recipients. Eight percent is not a success, and we have all of these people offline."

Comcast Executive Vice President David Cohen said critics aren't "entitled to their own facts" and talked about how major industry players have helped close the digital divide. "The larger problem affecting many more Americans is the lack of broadband adoption where broadband is available," he told the subcommittee, noting the few gaps of access that do exist. "Comcast recently connected our one millionth Internet Essentials user," he said, saying it has connected more than 250,000 families to the Internet in the program's two-year history. "I understand you've gone above and beyond the conditions of the merger," said Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss. When Pryor asked if Internet Essentials is going away next year, Cohen replied, "I don't have an answer to that yet ... We love the program."

In his written testimony (http://1.usa.gov/HteQcT), Cohen described Comcast's demonstration of a network capable of deliver 3 Gbps down and a successful trial of the first 1 terabit connection last week. Cohen spoke approvingly of the possibilities of ConnectED, the White House five-year program to connect 99 percent of students to high-speed wireless Internet.

"The pace of broadband adoption has slowed substantially in recent years," said Aaron Smith, senior researcher at the Pew Research Center. But 70 percent of Americans have some sort of broadband connection at home as of May, he testified before the subcommittee (http://1.usa.gov/Hof0Te), far more than in the past.

Connected Nation Chief Policy Counsel Tom Koutsky argued the gaps in broadband adoption signify the need for federal leadership and more public-private partnerships. He didn't testify but attended the hearing and provided prepared testimony, which Wicker entered into the record. Koutsky called the partnerships effective and said converting non-adopters requires more than "broadband cheerleading."

Broadband for America Honorary Co-chairman John Sununu said broadband infrastructure is not "the be all and end all" but is the "foundation" for connecting people with broadband. "The investment then leads to competition — very important," said the former Republican senator from New Hampshire. He called the light-touch regulatory approach "very important" and also praised NTIA's digital literacy tool kit. He worried about harder mandates due to the rapid and ongoing evolution of technology.

The Telecommunications Industry Association wrote Pryor and Wicker urging they adopt a specific framework of broadband adoption. TIA sought universally available, high-quality and affordable broadband connectivity, consumers' ability to connect to the Internet, allow for operators to engage in "reasonable, precompetitive network management," competition that's tech-neutral, increased spectrum availability "in large and contiguous blocks for commercial services," regulation uniformity and reduction of needless regulation and "utilization of market-based mechanisms to drive spectrum to its highest and best uses," the letter said (http://bit.ly/Ht3Mwi). The letter called for tax incentives to promote investment, USF updates for broadband and more flexibility with the E-rate program.