

How California Is Advancing Digital Equity

Policy expert discusses the state's approaches to expanding broadband access

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Although much of the conversation around broadband has focused on increasing connections, experts and advocates have long known that the availability of high-speed, reliable internet is only the first step: Ensuring access will require that consumers can afford their service and acquire the skills to benefit from being online.

Sunne Wright McPeak knows these challenges well; she's the president and chief executive officer of the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF), a statewide nonprofit foundation dedicated to closing the digital divide by accelerating the deployment and adoption of broadband.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What can you tell us about the California Emerging Technology Fund's work in addressing California's broadband challenges?

A: For 15 years, CETF has led major statewide digital equity initiatives, including providing grants to community-based organizations to help low-income households adopt broadband; groundbreaking survey work to identify root causes of and solutions for the digital divide; leading and managing School2Home, a program designed to integrate technology into teaching and learning and close the achievement gap in middle schools in low-income neighborhoods; and promoting state and national public policy to achieve digital equity.

We serve as a catalyst for action, bringing together stakeholders to reach agreement on policy and strategies to accelerate broadband deployment and adoption and mobilizing partners to build a world-class internet network that can promote public safety, economic prosperity, and quality of life.

Q: How and when did the organization come about?

A: It was established in 2005 at the direction of the California Public Utilities Commission, the CPUC, as a condition of the CPUC approving two corporate mergers: SBC Communications acquiring AT&T and Verizon acquiring MCI. The CPUC wanted to ensure that the public would benefit from these consolidations, so it required SBC, which became AT&T Inc. after the merger, and Verizon to each contribute \$60 million in seed capital to launch our organization, CETF.

As a quasi-governmental nonprofit formed to advocate for the public interest in pursuit of closing the digital divide, we're not governed by the CPUC, but state law requires us to report annually to the Legislature through the CPUC. And, by virtue of another state law, we're the [only non-state-agency member of the California Broadband Council](#). In that unique role, we have expanded public reporting responsibilities, which make CETF more transparent and accountable for quantifiable results than most nonprofits. But we're also able to operate with greater agility and innovation than the typical government bureaucracy.

Q: As a non-state agency, what perspective do you bring to the broadband council?

A: We're technology-neutral; we use "broadband" as a generic term for high-speed Internet infrastructure including wired and wireless networks. We advocated for the same technology-neutral view to be the official definition of broadband in state statute—which it now is. This is one example of CETF shaping public policy.

We also recognize that technology is only a tool—a powerful and empowering one—that's most readily embraced (or adopted) by digitally disadvantaged residents only when the relevance to their lives, in terms of saving time and money, is made clear. So, we've launched and led major statewide initiatives on the leading edge of bridging the digital divide. For instance, we helped secure an executive order from Governor Gavin Newsom in 2020 that, among other things, expanded broadband adoption programs for low-income families across the state. We also helped found the California Telehealth Network, a consortium focused on increasing access to telehealth, telemedicine, and health information systems and secured the [governor's executive order on digital literacy](#).

Q: CETF has conducted surveys about broadband deployment and adoption in California since 2008. What's your methodology?

A: The California Statewide Survey on Broadband Adoption aims to set a baseline of data and track progress in achieving broadband adoption and use at home. Since 2008, we've partnered with four different independent research partners to conduct the survey and analyze the results, the most recent being the University of Southern California. We collect a scientifically reliable sample of all residents by dialing 1,600 randomly selected household phone numbers—90% are cellphones—and conducting the survey in five languages. And we use data from the Pew Research Center to benchmark our data against national trends.

Q: And what have you learned from the survey?

A: We use it mainly to focus policymaker attention on the digital divide and direct investment of resources. It has shown that targeted outreach accelerates broadband adoption and that less than 1% of households today say they don't want to be online. Further, the survey shows, once adequate high-speed Internet access is available, the biggest barrier to adoption is cost—which includes the affordability of both internet service and an appropriate computing device.

Q: So if the biggest barrier to broadband adoption is cost, what has your organization done to address this challenge?

A: We've developed and managed programs to overcome the three primary barriers to broadband adoption by low-income households: cost, relevance, and digital literacy.

We make grants to community-based organizations to reach out to low-income communities and vulnerable populations to address those three barriers. These outreach efforts are conducted in the language, and with the cultural awareness, of the targeted communities and include helping households secure low-cost internet service, computing devices, and digital skills training. To increase adoption rate, we also provide collateral materials, sponsor advertising, and train and coach the community-based organizations.

Q: Related to affordability, one of CETF's major initiatives is the "public benefit" approach. Can you help us understand what that is and how it works?

A: CETF is part of a long history in California, going back to the CPUC being established to break up the railroads, to ensure that markets operate in the public interest. We participate in state and federal regulatory proceedings on issues such as broadband affordability and corporate consolidation among internet service providers (ISPs). For instance, California law requires that CPUC ensure there's a public benefit before approving corporate mergers and acquisitions, and we have contributed to that by negotiating commitments from ISPs to provide appropriate benefits. As an example, the agreements we secured with Frontier, Charter, and T-Mobile, combined, require ISPs—as part of gaining CPUC approvals—to reach 99% of households with high-speed internet infrastructure, offer affordable service of \$15-\$20 a month to low-income households, increase adoption by 875,000 households, install 125 public Wi-Fi locations, and provide \$76.5 million for digital inclusion policy and programs.

Q: As state lawmakers across the country work to expand access and affordability, what would you tell them about designing and implementing broadband policies?

A: Public policy needs to be rooted in research and evidence from on-the-ground experience. Lawmakers must set quantifiable goals with accountability for results in specified time frames. It is key to integrate digital inclusion in the culture of public agencies and human service organizations, and strategies and programs should be designed in consultation with community-based organizations as trusted messengers. This is the foundation for [our groundbreaking collaboration with Pew and top internet researchers at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism](#), which will conduct important new research to identify effective and sustainable models for providing households in need with affordable broadband.

Q: You've worked at the state level, the local level, in the private sector, and the public sector. With that wealth of experience, how would you characterize the digital divide?

A: The digital divide is just another manifestation of the country's economic divide and opportunity gap. The most digitally disadvantaged residents are trapped in concentrated and persistent poverty, which is rooted in systemic racism. It takes a comprehensive approach to overcome all the interrelated factors and forces that we call the wall of poverty—with digital inclusion being just one of the essential interventions. So digital equity will be achieved sooner, and with greater impact, if digital inclusion is integrated with all strategies and initiatives to address economic disparities and racial inequalities.

Q: Recently, adoption and affordability have become more central to the national broadband conversation. Based on CETF's 15 years of experience, how would you recommend that policymakers tackle these challenges?

A: Policymakers must recognize that closing the digital divide requires addressing both supply—the deployment of infrastructure—and demand—the adoption of the technology. Effective public policy and investments must address both challenges.

Broadband infrastructure is necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve digital equity. So, for the highest return on public and private investments in ubiquitous high-speed internet infrastructure, policymakers must require all internet service providers to offer affordable,

quality Internet service to low-income households and to partner with community-based organizations to get everyone online.

The federal government should also work with states that have comprehensive plans and partnerships with internet service providers, as well as with organizations such as CETF that can efficiently engage experienced community-based organizations.

Digital access is a 21st century civil right. And digital equity is an imperative for 21st century global competitiveness. Fortunately, this is an unprecedented moment in time: Working together, we can close the digital divide for everyone.

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