

California Receives \$205 Million for Broadband Projects, Launches Telehealth Network

Aug 20, 2010, News Report

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It might come as a surprise that in California - home of Silicon Valley -- there are still communities without access to high-speed Internet. But the state's geographic diversity -- from desert to mountain to coastal terrains -- poses challenges for broadband providers, leaving more than 44,000 square miles (about the size of Kentucky) unserved or underserved, according to Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund.

With more than 10 million California residents not connected, the FCC can't achieve its goal of giving 90 percent of American households high-speed Internet access by 2020 without closing much of the digital divide in California, she added.

"In Washington, D.C., they tend to perceive California as all urban, all connected and tech-savvy, McPeak said. "We may be tech-savvy, but we're certainly not all urban and all connected."

Now, with the state receiving \$205 million in federal stimulus funding for seven broadband projects, state officials believe California is one step closer to plugging those broadband gaps in the remote and rural areas.

The latest grants are part of \$1.8 billion in funds awarded by the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) to 94 broadband projects in 37 states. For California officials, the Aug. 18 broadband announcement by Vice President Joe Biden came right on time: This week, the state also launched the nation's largest telehealth system, a \$30 million joint-funding effort to connect more than 800 state health-care facilities through fast and secure broadband technology.

"The [California Telehealth Network] is a peer-to-peer network which enables providers to share X-rays and other diagnostic tests instantaneously, and view treatments and procedures from afar in distant emergency rooms or surgical centers as they happen," said Sandra Shewry, president and CEO of the Center for Connected Health Policy, in a press release. "The CTN also enables the sharing of information for continuing education/distance learning, disaster preparedness and access to new technologies -- all essential elements for the California health-care system's growth."

More Broadband Investment

After California received "only a few modest broadband infrastructure grants" from the BTOP in the first round, Congresswomen Doris Matsui, D-Sacramento, and Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, urged the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to be more generous with future awards.

"While California is more advanced in broadband initiatives than most states, we urge you to carefully consider each California BTOP application moving forward," they wrote in the letter to NTIA Assistant Secretary and Administrator Lawrence Strickling.

The formal request, it seems, paid off. McPeak attributes the latest awards to these efforts by state leaders who "very effectively communicated to the administration how big the need is in California."

The biggest chunk -- more than \$81 million - of the BTOP funding will help the California Broadband Cooperative with its Digital 395 Middle Mile project, a 553-mile fiber-optic network between Barstow, Calif., and Carson City, Nev. The project will provide broadband to 15 percent of California and create more than 1,000 jobs over two years.

More than \$50 million will support the San Francisco Bay Area Wireless Enhanced Broadband Project, a public-private project led by Motorola, which aims to expand broadband service for emergency responders and offer wireless Internet throughout the San Francisco Bay Area.

"These awards will assist both urban and rural communities throughout California in bridging the digital divide and ensuring that our citizens are able to be active participants in all aspects of society," Matsui said.

Other funding includes more than \$46 million to help build a 1,371-mile fiber-optic infrastructure through 18 counties in California's Central Valley and more than \$13 million to provide broadband service to underserved areas of Plumas, Sierra and Lassen counties.

The Foundation for California Community Colleges received \$11 million to provide outreach, training and learning support to boost digital literacy and broadband usage. And almost \$700,000 will be used to increase broadband adoption in rural Southern California from 17 percent to 70 percent among members of 19 Native American tribes.

"Getting broadband access to those in underserved areas is essential to promoting economic growth and spurring job creation," California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said in a statement. "The grants awarded to California today will supply that foundation."

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