



California Emerging Technology Fund Helps Bridge the State's Digital Divide

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[Austin Allen](#), Reporter, Broadband Breakfast

WASHINGTON, November 19, 2014 – Although some believe that the [digital divide is not a problem](#), there are Americans who have not adopted broadband due to the cost or lack of access. Some states have played an active role in getting their citizens online, and one such organization is the California Emerging Technology Fund, which has been working since 2008 to help increase broadband adoption among Californians.

CETF currently has more than 15 active projects, mostly in rural and low income communities. The foundation's latest campaign, [Internet for All Now](#), reminds people that the digital divide is still real and that affordable Internet access for rural and low income individuals is essential for participating in our society and the modern economy.

The campaign urges Americans to tell the FCC to include social benefit clauses in the conditions of its approval of the proposed Comcast-Time Warner merger, which would hold "Comcast accountable for improving and expanding its existing affordable Internet offer, Internet Essentials." Comcast is actively opposing it, CETF Senior VP Susan Walters told Broadband Breakfast, and is sending representatives out to school district board meetings to urge members to not sign on to CETF's initiative.

CEFT was created in 2006 by the California Public Utilities Commission as a condition to their approval of the telecom mergers of SBC with AT&T and Verizon Communications with MCI. The parties channeled \$60 million — \$45 million from SBC and \$15 million from Verizon — into the new foundation.

Although CEFT was created by the state PUC, the entity operates as a separate, non-profit foundation with the goal of closing the digital divide in a sustainable way to keep the state competitive.

"You can take all of the terrain where people live and didn't have broadband, it would be the size of Kentucky," said Susan Walters, senior vice present of CETF, on California's broadband adoption rate in 2008

CETF's work started in 2008 with its first annual survey that measured the digital divide across the state by measuring adoption rates of home broadband. It found that the state adoption's rate was 55 percent. Los Angeles had one of the lowest rates at 48 percent. In order to find out where the gaps were located, CETF started to look at the state's demographics. They worked to find ways to make it cost effective for companies to build out infrastructure in the different areas of the state. Over the past six years, CETF has helped to increase the adoption rate to 75 percent.

The foundation has used a multitude of tactics to help further their goals. In rural areas that lack adequate or any broadband infrastructure, CETF has helped to connect and bring together civic leaders and volunteers to organize 14 different rural consortia, who have come together to take a look at the needs of their community and help market that information to the telecom companies.

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They have also funded one infrastructure project. But limited funds have steered them more towards adoption projects. In areas that already have infrastructure but have low adoption rates, they offer adoption grants and require matching funds from other organizations or individuals.

Another barrier to adoption was fear of the internet, so CETF started a public awareness campaign called [Get Connected](#) that funded digital literacy training. The campaign provided information on what the internet was, why it was relevant and how to use it –but also how to afford it, how to get a low cost computer and how to save money once they were online.

The Comcast-Time Warner merger “is a prime opportunity to get an affordable [broadband] package out there now,” Walters told Broadband Breakfast. Without this package, she fears rural and low income folks will be fall far behind those who can afford high-speed broadband, since so many services and modes of our economy are moving to the Internet. “In five years, these folks won’t just be five years behind, they’ll be ten or fifteen years behind in internet speeds.”

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