The Connected Community Engagement Program: Empowering Communities for the Future

September 2015
The Connected Community Engagement Program Addresses the Need for Technology Use and Education

Broadband is the lifeblood of businesses and communities, so it is essential for communities to have open dialogues about the state of broadband among their residents; communities must understand where broadband is available, who is using broadband, and how broadband use can be expanded. With that goal in mind, Connected Nation began developing the Connected Community Engagement Program in 2011 to help communities learn about broadband technology, to help them see where they excel, and to help them overcome obstacles that may be preventing households and businesses from experiencing the benefits of broadband service.

Communities Need Broadband

Experts agree—making broadband accessible, and providing residents with the skills to use it, are vital to a thriving community. Consider the findings from a survey of economic development professionals in South Carolina:1

- 78% say that broadband availability is important for sites to attract new businesses;
- 67% say businesses “always” or “often” consider the technical skill level of the community’s workforce when deciding whether to move to or expand in an area;
- 76% say businesses “always” or “often” consider the availability of nearby opportunities for employees to learn the necessary technical skills when making decisions.

In addition, nearly two-thirds of these economic development professionals (64%) say a community would be more attractive to businesses if it were certified as having high-quality broadband service and a digitally-skilled workforce.

The Goal of the Connected Community Engagement Program

When communities participate in the Connected Community Engagement Program, local leaders volunteer to evaluate the community’s current state of broadband adoption, access, and use. This process helps communities determine where they are in terms of broadband access, shows them where improvements can be made, and helps start a dialogue among community leaders about improving access to broadband technology for all their constituents. You can read about some of the latest Connected projects at www.connectmycommunity.org/#projects.

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1 Source: Connect South Carolina, Broadband as an Economic Development Tool.
At the end of the evaluation, if the community has reached certain benchmarks, it may be certified as a Connected community, a nationally recognized award for communities that are excelling across all of the broadband metrics. All participants receive a detailed report on how their community compares to others, access to information from broadband thought-leaders from around the country, and specific recommendations on ways to increase technology access, adoption, and use among their residents.

How Communities Have Benefited

For participation in the Connected Community Engagement Program to be considered a success, a community must be able to see a positive impact for its residents. To this end, Connected Nation measured employment growth in counties where at least one community had participated in the program long enough to see a measurable impact (at least one year). That growth was compared to employment trends in similar counties in the same states that had not participated in the program at all, or had not participated long enough for any reasonable impact to be visible (less than one year). Through propensity score matching, Connected Nation compared unemployment rates in the 91 counties that met that one-year participation benchmark with the same number of similar counties that did not meet the benchmark.

Between Q2 2012 and Q2 2013, employment grew by nearly 54,000 total new employees in counties that had participated in the Connected Community Engagement Program for at least one year, compared to fewer than 32,000 in similar counties that had not participated at all, or had not participated long enough to see an impact. Overall, that represents a 2.2% rate of employment growth in participating counties, compared to just 1.1% in non-participating counties.

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2 States include Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee and Texas.
3 Counties were matched based on the number of business establishments, average household size, and the racial/ethnic diversity of the county’s population. Other factors that could reasonably impact employment numbers, such as the number of households, the percent of households with children or adults age 65 or older present, education levels, and household income levels were shown to be collinear or have high levels of correlation with the selected variables and were thus excluded.
4 Employment numbers come from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Reports, Q2 2012 through Q2 2013 (the latest quarterly data available at the county level at the time of the analysis). Demographic figures come from the United States Census Bureau’s 2012 county population estimates.
5 This report categorizes counties as participating if the county government, or at least one community within the county, had participated in the Connected Community program for at least one (1) year at the time of the analysis. “Non-participating” counties are those where neither the county government nor any communities within the county had participated in the program at all, or had participated less than one year.
Table 1. Employment Growth by County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County Groups</th>
<th>Total Employment Q2 2012</th>
<th>Total Employment Q2 2013</th>
<th>Rate of Employment Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participating Counties</td>
<td>2,466,761</td>
<td>2,520,707</td>
<td>2.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Participating Counties</td>
<td>2,900,844</td>
<td>2,932,741</td>
<td>1.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, that represents 593 more jobs in each participating county, compared to 351 in non-participating counties, a difference of 242 jobs per county. Even if all 242 of those jobs only paid the minimum wage, that represents an average of **$3.5 million** in additional annual wages for each participating county.⁶ Across all 91 counties, that totals more than **$319 million** for Connected communities.

While this does not prove that participation in the program caused this additional growth in employment, it highlights the fact that when communities promote technology use and the development of digital skills, businesses have greater opportunities to open and expand.

**Participation in the Connected Community Engagement Program**

Connected Nation works with communities across the nation to help identify technology adoption and use assets, as well as areas where broadband adoption and use can be increased. The certification process consists of four steps:

- **Identifying and empowering a community team leader and a diverse team of residents who are interested in promoting technology in the community;**
- **Assessing key community technology resources, guided by Connected Nation’s Connected community portal and based on broadband adoption, access, and use;**

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⁶ $7.25 per hour minimum wage (source: United States Department of Labor) x 40 hours x 50 workweeks per year x 242 new jobs per county.
Bringing together community leaders from all walks of life to develop a community Technology Action Plan and implement recommended actions that will lead to certification as a Connected community;

Once a community is certified, local leaders are encouraged to share their success stories and best practices with other communities that are looking to achieve the same goal of being recognized as a technologically advanced community.

How a Community Begins the Assessment Process

The Connected Community Engagement Program works with communities to build a comprehensive action plan for developing a technology-ready community. As part of this process, Connected Nation works with communities as they review their technology landscape, develop regional partnerships, establish local teams, and conduct a thorough community assessment of broadband access, adoption, and use across a variety of sectors.

Not every community earns the Connected community certification, but every community that participates benefits from the assessment process that helps initiate discussions about the importance of technology. The assessment process also identifies opportunities and challenges in meeting technology needs both today and in the future.

For communities that earn the distinction of being certified as a Connected community, earning the certification proves to be an honor that helps attract employers. As Iowa Governor Terry Branstad said at the certification ceremony for Manchester, Iowa, “The communities that will thrive in this new economy are those that take every opportunity to organize and plan to continually improve their technological capabilities.”

For more information about the Connected Community Engagement Program, visit our website at http://www.connectmycommunity.org/. You can also start your community on the track to becoming certified by contacting Eric Frederick at efrederick@connectednation.org.