

High-speed Internet now in more rural, low-income areas

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Delivering broadband Internet service to rural and low-income Tennessee residents has its challenges, but a recent report by a group tasked with promoting that delivery shows progress is being made.

Statewide, residential use of high-speed Internet service - typically delivered by phone companies as DSL, cable and some wireless providers - increased 14 percent over the past year, compared to 12 percent growth nationwide, according to results of a residential survey conducted by Connected Tennessee.

Connected Tennessee is a nonprofit, public and private partnership that encourages adoption and expansion of high-speed Internet service. The organization focuses particularly on promoting broadband usage among poorer families and in more rural parts of the state.

In Tennessee's rural areas, home broadband usage expanded by 30 percent over the past year, according to the survey, and the adoption of broadband service by low-income families with children grew by 124 percent.

"This survey shows that we are starting to see a significant impact in the areas we have identified as counties that are ripe for technology advancement," Michael Ramage, Connected Tennessee's executive director, said in a statement. "It is rewarding to realize that we are making a real difference in Tennessee's technology landscape."

Work on the ground ranges from education and community organization to delivering computers to kids in the state's foster system, said Steve Buttry, program manager for the organization's East Tennessee region. He said the increase in broadband usage is a combination of local awareness and Internet service providers expanding their networks.

"We're seeing people that already have had access but didn't see the need or the use of subscribing to broadband," he said. "But we've also seen some buildout in rural areas."

While research indicates the importance of high-speed Internet connections to education, health care delivery and economic development, community members have to understand how specific applications can benefit them before they're likely to demand the service, he said. In rural counties, Connected Tennessee pulls local leaders from nine sectors, including education, business, agriculture and local government, to identify particular areas of need that broadband might serve. This group serves as a springboard for educating the local community about what broadband connections can deliver and generates demand for the service.

As a result, Internet providers "are more likely to provide that service if they're going to see the demand," Buttry said.

The organization also helps communities with specific needs such as updating a chamber of commerce Web site, education or applying for federal distance learning grants to improve education opportunities within rural school systems. Buttry said he helped Hancock, Union and Johnson counties obtain grants.

"Literally, a teacher can be at another school and teach a class to students (in another part of the county)," he said. With recruiting experienced math and science or advanced placement instructors often difficult in these outlying counties, video instruction can boost a school's curriculum and help prepare students for postsecondary education or job opportunities, Buttry said.

"We're actually educating kids for jobs that don't exist right now, and technology's going to be part of that even more so," he said. "You can bring the classroom to them."

Another program, Computers 4 Kids, works with private partners to put new computers in the hands of economically disadvantaged children or those in the state foster system. This year, the program disbursed 1,100 computers to Tennessee children. Connected Tennessee also works with businesses to set up computer labs targeted at children through Boys & Girls Club organizations and after-school programs.

The organization also helps facilitate economic development directly.

"I know a lot of communities are focused on getting broadband to their industrial parks," Buttry said. Because Connected Tennessee has nondisclosure agreements in place with communications providers statewide, the group often is asked to provide information regarding the availability and redundancy of local telecommunications networks, he said.

A separate business survey released by the organization showed that while overall Internet usage has not risen in the past year, broadband connections have grown 60 percent, showing that more businesses are switching from dial-up to high-speed connections.

Computer and Internet use increased among Tennessee businesses in the manufacturing, agriculture, mining, construction and utility sectors, while computer and Internet use declined in the health care sector, according to the report.

Businesses in Tennessee's urban and rural areas saw the largest jump in broadband use over the past year, with a 12 percent gain in rural counties and a 16 percent gain in urban counties. Statewide, 47 percent of Tennessee businesses have a Web site, a 12 percent increase from July 2007.