



No State Left Offline

A successful Kentucky program has spawned a national umbrella group to help states bridge the digital divide.

<http://statetechmag.com/events/updates/no-state-left-offline.html>

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Last year, when a Tennessee state task force on expanding broadband access began searching for another state's model to follow, it didn't have to look far.

Neighboring Kentucky had been widely praised for its ConnectKentucky initiative, which helped spur a 73 percent increase in broadband adoption over three years. In 2004, the Bluegrass State ranked 45th among states in home computer and Internet use. Through public-private partnerships, computer donations and the creation of e-community leadership teams in each county, Kentucky was able to increase the number of households with broadband access from 60 percent to 95 percent within three years.

Tennessee, which also struggled with broadband adoption and computer literacy, isn't the only state intrigued by Kentucky's story. In fact, publicity about the improvements in Kentucky led to so many informational requests that earlier this year the leaders of ConnectKentucky established Connected Nation Inc., an effort to expand the model nationwide. "The story started getting out about the success we were having," said Mark McElroy, the nonprofit organization's senior vice president for operations and communications. "We decided to form a vehicle that could be an umbrella organization that could facilitate and research this topic."

The Washington, D.C.-based group's first official offshoot is Connected Tennessee, a three-year, \$6.7 million effort by the state of Tennessee to replicate Kentucky's plan. McElroy says Connected Nation is in talks with several other states and large cities as well.

McElroy stresses that although Connected Nation lends support, Connected Tennessee "is a thoroughly Tennessee effort, structurally and culturally. We partner with the state, but it is an indigenous effort, with headquarters in Nashville and local people leading it. It has to be a local grass-roots effort to aggregate demand."

Michael Ramage, executive director of Connected Tennessee, said his organization's early mapping efforts found that while 86 percent of households in the state have access to broadband, only 43 percent actually take advantage of it and only 71 percent own a computer. "We think this shows the need for demand creation," Ramage says. Tennessee is going to follow Kentucky's model of distributing computers to low-income families and creating e-community leadership teams in each county to determine what kind of local online content would be most valuable.

Kentucky's No Child Left Offline program distributed refurbished PCs that had been used in state government to middle school children who are on schools' free and reduced cost lunch programs.

"The digital divide exists in homes, not in schools," says McElroy, whose children are in public school in Kentucky. "I get e-mails from their teacher about their homework. Their progress reports are all online for us to access, so we don't have to wait for report cards to come home at the end of a semester. Plus, the kids come home with assignments that ask them to use the Internet to do research."

McElroy compares the effort to expand broadband Internet access across the country to the rural electrification movement of the early 20th century. "Every state faces the challenge of achieving widespread broadband," he says. "When manufacturers are looking for a new setting, the existence of broadband in the area is the very first thing they ask about. Even before tax incentives."

Ramage stresses that availability of broadband is really just the first step. "Once broadband is available and being used, he says, "then we can really shift gears and look at the applications that can make a huge difference in people's lives, such as e-health."

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