

IMLS-LB21: CREATING RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BROADBAND ADOPTION

SUMMARY

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This project was funded through a planning project, *Creating Rural Economic Development Opportunities through Broadband Adoption*,¹ that was awarded by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services to the Information Use Management & Policy Institute² (Institute) of the College of Communication & Information at Florida State University. The Institute collaborated with leaders from Opportunity Florida,³ a regional economic development organization; the Panhandle Library Access Network (PLAN),⁴ a regional multi-type library cooperative; and other community organizations throughout rural northwest Florida on the project. The project's goal was to determine how best to educate rural librarians in order to maximize the benefits of broadband adoption in rural northwest Florida to identify strategies to promote education; instruction; and broadband (high-speed Internet services) planning in rural public libraries and other local community anchor institutions, and to create opportunities for local economic development.

The study team conducted a needs assessment survey of representatives of regional stakeholder organizations; participants were recruited via professional email lists, the project website, and the project's social media channels. The survey informed the project's Rural Broadband Summit which was held July 31, 2014 at Chipola College in Marianna, Florida. The Summit functioned as a seminar with a working lunch, presentations from key stakeholders, and a community discussion, and was designed to foster relationships among attendees and to produce strategies to support greater broadband adoption with new training and continuing education opportunities for rural Northwest Florida librarians, community representatives, and economic development leaders. Expert interviews with national and state broadband policy and

¹ <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/Research/Projects/2014-Project-Details>

² <http://ii.fsu.edu/>

³ <http://www.opportunityflorida.com/>

⁴ <http://plan.lib.fl.us>

deployment experts were also employed to identify the potential service roles of anchor institutions for promoting broadband and increasing adoption for northwest Florida residents.

Survey respondents represented a wide range of community groups, with the greatest number of responses coming from counties that had experienced previous outreach efforts. The majority of respondents work for organizations that serve county interests and respondents' organizations primarily serve populations of 30,000 or less. The majority of respondents believe that their organizations have high-speed broadband, but speed tests reported that their actual broadband capacity might not be sufficient for high-demand Internet applications. Respondents reported using high-speed Internet service for community improvement, education, and economic growth. The survey confirmed benefits and impacts of broadband service such as learning new job skills or continuing education, accessing E-government information and services, helping children in school, promoting digital literacy, and connecting communities. Multiple types of delivery platforms were considered acceptable for their own training, with face-to-face learning most preferred. Respondents expressed a perception of the importance of broadband training for rural northwest Florida counties and they reported that many residents in their service areas would be interested training to better use high-speed Internet features.

A resounding theme of the Summit group discussions was that deployment of broadband will encourage economic development only if funders and policymakers use their expertise and resources to facilitate all of the mechanisms required to realize the benefits of digital technologies in the rural communities. Increased funding and political savvy will be needed to deliver the collaboration of the various stakeholders involved. The expert interviews confirmed that a lack of capacity for broadband education and training in rural communities might hinder exploitation of broadband. Interventions are hard to implement without "insider" knowledge of the communities; internal champions are necessary and rural communities may need to work in regional partnerships and with a variety of institutions in the state to advance broadband deployment. A broader topic of "information technology use, deployment, and education" may be of more interest to rural communities.

A sustainability plan for continued communication and future collaboration in support of community anchor institution continuing education and community outreach broadband programs was developed based on feedback from project collaborators and expert interviews that resulted in a two-page letter of intent proposal submitted to the IMLS National Leadership Grants Program. This proposal incorporated findings from the planning grant including the geographic region to be targeted; a broadened scope to information technology use, deployment, and education; and including additional community organizations and local government.