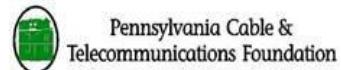




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April 8, 2019

CNBC

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Both the public and private sectors should contribute to bolstering rural broadband access in central Pennsylvania, where uneven connectivity limits economic development and growth, according to a survey of regional leaders this month.

Conducted with reader input by the Centre Daily Times, the survey found concerns that poor broadband access in outlying areas also inhibits access to health care and some students' ability to learn. Fourteen leaders chosen by the CDT received the questionnaire, asking what they see as the most important consequences of the broadband deficiency.

The respondents, including officials in higher education, government, health care and the nonprofit sector, are part of the Pennsylvania

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Influencer Project — a month-long effort by the CDT, its parent company McClatchy and the Knight Foundation to spur discussion around the state's rural broadband access. Many respondents to the survey — the first of three — voiced concern that rural areas are being left behind as the rest of the country joins the global marketplace. Rural residents without broadband not only lose out on social opportunities, but also have trouble accessing government services like Social Security and Medicare, filing their taxes and identifying and applying for jobs online, said Denise Sticha, executive director of the Centre County Library.

Vern Squier, president and CEO of the Chamber of Business and Industry of Centre County, said residents miss business opportunities because they can't access legal and accounting service providers and "a universe of vendors" that provide information and transactions that small businesses need to operate efficiently. This leads to businesses — and the people who work for them — to move elsewhere, or go under, he said.

Those obstacles extend to students, who are put at a disadvantage for completing schoolwork on time, applying to colleges or seeking out enrichment, respondents said. A [**Federal Communications Commission report**](#) in 2016 noted that some 23 million rural Americans — nearly 40 percent of residents in rural areas — lacked what the FCC considers high-speed access.

By contrast, 4 percent of urban Americans didn't have high-speed access, according to the report. "Access to the internet, enabled by adequate broadband, provides access to virtually all information known on this planet. Empowering students to have access to this knowledge, to learn and discover anything they choose, is incredibly powerful," wrote survey respondent Michael Kubit, vice president for information technology and chief information officer at Penn State.

A lack of broadband "creates a homework gap which sometimes impacts grades, thus making it harder to succeed and prepare for college," wrote Charima Young, director of local government and community relations at Penn State. "Therefore (students) come to college without all of the skills needed to start at the same level as their peers." Senior citizens suffer, too, without access to broadband, said Wayne Campbell, president of the Pennsylvania Grange. As a former driver for Rabbit Transportation, Campbell said many elderly people without good internet service spent hours of their day on shared bus systems like his to get to doctors' appointments. "These folks were completely exhausted till they got back home," he wrote. "... If they could utilize ... telemedicine it would make a doctor's visit much less demanding and economical ... if more visits could be done via the internet, those funds could be used in other places."

With the health care system advancing technologically and relying more on telemedicine for rural coverage areas, many respondents said broadband service must catch up with the need. "The healthcare industry is gearing up to leverage technology to address the healthcare needs of patients, address access, and engage patients in the management of their own care," wrote Matthew Nussbaum, associate vice president of regional operations at Geisinger Health System in State College. "Without access to broadband, it will be difficult to take advantage of technology and scale those solutions."

The solution, said most respondents, is a concerted effort among all levels of government and private industry to bring broadband to all Pennsylvanians. Margaret Gray, administrator for Centre County government, said local governments can help meet that goal by “fostering non-traditional partnerships between the private and public sectors to include broadband users for multi-benefit projects such as water/sewer authorities, natural gas industry, and the wind energy companies.” She also said governments could promote “the adoption of ‘dig once’ policies so that broadband fiber conduit is installed with other underground utilities.”

Tammy Gentzel, executive director of the Centre County United Way, suggested using 911 surcharges to install towers or enhance DSL in rural areas, employing infrastructure already in place. Gains have emerged in Pennsylvania, with the recent awarding of three contracts to companies to provide broadband to rural regions, but many respondents see broadband as a public utility that needs to be addressed immediately across party affiliations and levels of government and society. The CDT will conduct two more surveys with the 14 “Influencers” leading up to the Pennsylvania Priorities Summit: Focus on Rural Broadband Crisis on April 24 at The State Theatre in State College. [Register here to join the CDT](#) and its panel of Influencers for a discussion of challenges and solutions related to the rural broadband crisis. – *Centre Daily Times (State College)*

Imagine getting up early on election day having done your homework on the issues, educated yourself on candidates’ positions, and chosen whom to vote for, only to find poll workers who do not know how to turn on, set up, or assist you in using the voting machine. That is exactly the type of story we at Disability Rights Pennsylvania heard, along with a host of others, during the last presidential election in 2016 when we ran a hotline for disabled voters.

During the 2016 election, [less than 20 percent of polling places](#) were accessible to people with disabilities. [Some voting systems](#) rarely had instructions included, others lacked tactile buttons for people with low vision, and for some systems, the voters could not verify that the ballot reflected their choices. For these reasons, voter turnout for people with disabilities remains under 50 percent. According to the American Association of People With Disabilities, [16 million of the eligible 35 million](#) voters with disabilities cast a ballot in the 2016 election.

With election security on the minds of legislators, there is fear that changes to polling technology will only further disenfranchise citizens with disabilities in the coming election. [Pennsylvania Bills S.B. 411-419](#) have been introduced in the House and Senate to update and reform the election system. This comes as counties and the disabled across the state test new voting systems that create a paper trail through different formats.

Last April, [then-acting Secretary of State](#) Robert Torres instructed Pennsylvania counties to have a paper-verifiable voting system by 2020 and allotted \$14 million for the process. Many have taken official action toward acquiring new voting systems, either through a vote to purchase or lease a system, or a vote to approve funding. Torres also instructed counties to have selected the new voting system [no later than Dec. 31, 2019](#). [Some counties](#) have chosen or are considering hand-marked paper ballots. It has always been important that these types of changes not leave people with disabilities behind. Hand-

marked paper ballots make it nearly impossible for those with visual disabilities to vote using this system. At such polling stations, alternatives for disabled voters at each polling place would be separate from the system used for non-disabled voters.

Other proposals would further single out disabled voters, such as the idea to explicitly separate out accessible voting processes out of a desire to return to hand-marked ballots or punch cards. This creates a system whereby disabled votes would be tallied apart from those who didn't use the system. But as always, separate is not equal — and security does not need to come at the cost of accessibility. The shared goal should be voting reforms and systems that are modern, safe, secure, and always accessible to each voter. The law requires that people with disabilities be able to mark, verify, and cast a ballot privately and independently as do their fellow Pennsylvanians. Protecting these rights comes down to each system's details.

Of course, with any proposed legislation, it is these particularities upon which stumbles are made. For example, there is currently no provision that requires an electronic ballot delivery system be available to absentee voters with disabilities. This has the potential to leave behind those with dexterity issues, low visibility or blindness, learning difficulties, and more. All of these measures represent an important first step to election reform that hasn't happened in decades. But more work needs to be done to ensure that people with disabilities can vote privately and independently, and verify their vote. Casting a ballot shouldn't be an added exercise in disability discrimination.

Proven election reforms such as the implementation of [electronic poll books](#), voting by mail using a [no-excuse absentee ballot, preregistration](#) for youth, and more have been tried and tested in other states, garnering support from Republicans and Democrats alike. If the General Assembly finally wants to take up election reform, then it should take up the challenge of not just updating voting systems but making it more accessible to vote by mail and instituting early voting. With [35 million eligible voters with disabilities](#) across this country set to use their ballot as their voice in the coming election, the inability to address the access needs of disabled voters feels to many intentional and remains a symbol of who in this country counts, and who does not. As important as it is to make sure every vote is securely counted, it is equally important to ensure that voters have a voice — especially voters with disabilities who have been disenfranchised for far too long. — *Philadelphia Inquirer*