

Moving UP USA

Addressing Rural Poverty Through Broadband Expansion

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This post was written by Jason Newman, State and Local Policy Director for the Democratic Leadership Council.

Yesterday, Governor Deval Patrick (D-MA) signed legislation that will create a \$40 million incentive fund to stimulate private investment and bring broadband to un-served communities in his state.

Broadband has the potential to help families in rural areas by creating high-quality, high-paying jobs and giving citizens access to a wide variety of services that are typically only available to people who live in more populated areas. Yet, too many rural areas do not have access to high-speed broadband due to the large distance between homes and high costs of deployment. For example, much of the un-served areas in Massachusetts lie in the western, rural portion of the state, as this map shows.

Last year, I wrote about the need for the presidential candidates to commit to a national broadband strategy and highlighted several state initiatives as examples of successful public-private partnerships that expand access to broadband. For example, in Virginia then Governor Mark Warner, initiated a public-private partnership to bring broadband to Southwest Virginia, an area of small towns and rural areas very similar to western Massachusetts. The Virginia initiative brought access to nearly 700,000 Virginians and more than 19,000 businesses that were unconnected and created 1,560 new jobs.

Universal access to broadband is essential to the long-term health of rural communities. High-speed internet can help ensure that businesses remain competitive and allow children to take full advantage of the connected age.

Universal broadband access will not only benefit the local economy, but can also address a whole range of community challenges. A recent report from the Alliance for Public Technology documents that broadband can transform communities by improving health care, opening educational opportunities, stimulating economic development and more. The report outlines specific examples including a program in rural Arkansas that allows expectant mothers to receive advanced prenatal care from specialists in Little Rock over high speed networks.

Whether these types of benefits reach western Massachusetts is now a matter of when and not if.