

Chapter 8

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

A primary goal of this research has been to learn how the public sector could best support the mostly private nonprofit, community-based organizations that currently provide access to information technology (IT) for those who have little or no access elsewhere. Access to IT is a right, and government must help to ensure that that right is protected. According to Goslee (1998, v), “The design of the communications system through which we will talk to one another, learn from one another, and participate in political and economic life together is too important to be left to the free market alone.” Policymakers at all levels must therefore “play an active role . . .to ensure that the emerging networks meet the basic economic, social, political, and cultural needs of everyone, regardless of their ability to pay or where they live” (Goslee 1998, v). In short, people need access to information technology in order to

- work in today’s economy
- participate in democratic society
- communicate effectively with others
- obtain important information

This chapter makes specific recommendations about what government at the federal, state, and local levels can do.

FEDERAL-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Support Universal Access

As we discussed at length in the first chapter of this report, access to IT is becoming increasingly necessary for people to function as full citizens. According to Sue Beckwith (1999), “If government is going to be providing services on-line, then government by definition has a command to serve all people with some equal quality of service.” Toni Williams (1999) of the Austin Learning Academy frames the policy issue this way: “You need to decide: Do you want us to be equal? Or, don’t you want us to be equal? You need to make a decision, and it needs to be in the policy. Let’s talk about policies. Is it going to be a situation where this is what we want for everybody? Or, is this just for the elite?” Universal access serves democratic ideals.

The current conception of universal access needs to be broadened beyond the telephone and extended to computers and the Internet. Maxine Rockoff, founder of the IT Initiative at United Neighborhood Houses of New York, maintains that “our definition of

universal service should be expanded to include at least three new components: access to a computer with a World Wide Web browser, a personal Internet e-mail address, and the capability to make one's own information available via the Web" (Rockoff as quoted in Goslee 1998, 16). The most recent NTIA report states that "to be connected today increasingly means to have access to telephones, computers, and the Internet" (NTIA 1999, 77). Leadership for the creation of universal access to IT must come from the federal government. E-rate and TIIAP programs are a solid beginning, but these efforts must be greatly expanded upon if the goal of closing the gap between information "haves" and information "have-nots" is to be realized.

Support the Establishment of CTCs

Community technology centers are critical because they ensure access to new technology within low-income communities; they fill gaps left by other institutions and programs. Government programs already support schools and libraries. Many think that the public sector is therefore doing enough. However, just as the definition of technology must be expanded beyond the telephone, the definition of what kinds of organizations provide access must also be broadened. The advantages that are currently given to schools and libraries, such as the e-rate, must also be provided to CTCs. Data from the most recent NTIA survey show that "households with incomes of less than \$20,000 and Black households. . . are twice as likely to get Internet access through a public library or community center than are households earning more than \$20,000 or White households" (NTIA 1999, 78). Further, "the same households that are using community access centers at higher rates are also using the Internet more often than other groups to find jobs or for educational purposes" (NTIA 1999, 78). Continued support for the Department of Education CTC initiative is one way to broaden the federal definition to include community-based organizations. Support for CTCs will clearly be critical for narrowing the digital divide.

Educate Policymakers about the Importance of IT

Although the digital divide issue has benefited from increased publicity in Washington, overall awareness about the importance of this issue remains low. Few cities and states have thought about and implemented programs to the extent that our case study areas have. The federal government, and most likely the U.S. Department of Commerce NTIA, could play a central role in educating policymakers at the state and local levels about the importance of providing equal access to IT. Access is especially important because governments at all levels are increasingly putting information on the Internet. Candidates for public office also use the Internet as a way to reach voters. Hecht (1998, 7) states that "the provision of dense, useful information can increase community awareness and participation." Those who do not have access cannot be full participants in democratic society. Although we focus on government in this chapter, we cannot emphasize enough the extent to which grassroots organizations play a critical role in urging the public sector to become involved in closing the gaps in access to IT. At the

national level, too, CTCNet has been instrumental in making the Department of Education's (DOE) CTC program a reality.

Create Realistic Expectations for IT Policy

Community technology activists told us stories about policymakers and funders who get excited about the potential of IT but apply their support in wrongheaded ways. In Texas, for example, there have been hearings and debates about whether to replace textbooks with laptop computers. University of Texas professor Sharon Strover (1999) claims that this is an illustration of “the way in which the romance with technology just overrides anything practical. What’s going to be on the computers? Do we have ports where students could hook up to the Internet? How are we going to get the software? What software?” The emphasis on technology is quite pervasive. Trish Millines (1999) from TAF echoes Strover’s sentiments:

Almost anybody can be wired for computers, but what are you going to do with them? It’s like with some schools. They’re bragging about how wired they are. What’s on the other end of the wire? Nothing. . . . For some places, there’s something on the end of the wire but there’s no curriculum attached to it.

Access to IT is important—and it will progress in other areas where equity is an issue, for example, education, the jobs/skills mismatch, and urban/rural imbalances—but it will not solve these problems on its own. Policymakers will set up programs for failure if they create unrealistic goals for them.

Support a Variety of Different Program Types

Sponsoring multiple and different efforts is critical at this early stage in the development of community technology when experimentation among programs abounds. Although TIAP supports a wide range of efforts, these funds are extremely competitive. We heard, for example, that some organizations have been put off by TIAP’s arduous application process. One director of a CTC told us that the application involved so much work and that the program was so competitive that she did not think it was worth her time to pursue it. To some degree, the DOE’s CTC grant program provides another source of money that is more flexible. Hence, the DOE CTC program should be sustained and expanded.

Support What Works

Community technology activists reported that policymakers have begun to frame support around policy areas that already enjoy support; for example, welfare reform and workforce development. Although these areas may be important, the problem, according to Sisnett (1999), is that

It changes the mission of a lot of organizations and then they end up not doing it well or as well as a group that has that as its central purpose. And so then it's like, "Oh—see, that didn't work." So the monies are yanked and they take it elsewhere and they stop doing workforce development in the very communities that need it, you know what I'm saying? And then they think up something else. It forced people to be grant-driven as opposed to really being able to focus on what their primary focus is.

Kathy Schroerlucke (1999) likewise urges CTCs not to lose their primary focus:

You get these big programs like welfare to work and the housing authority and, you know, the huge programs, and all they're looking at is how fast can you get somebody a job, and they don't even look at whether it's a good job, whether it's a job somebody's gonna keep. . . . So they want to fund and support what I would call the factories, the training factories. And what I keep saying to some of the community groups and collaborations that are going on is that there are people and organizations that do that well—let's let them do that well. Let's send business to them. And in all these other centers, let's let them be learning centers. Where people can find that point where they're interested in you know, moving beyond trying to fit into somebody else's box. But it's hard to sell.

Nearly all of the current CTCs began as grassroots projects or spinoffs of existing community-based organizations. These local organizations are best equipped to understand the particular needs of the communities in which they work. CTC funding on the national level, and the broadening of the federal definition to include CBOs as eligible for universal discounts, will bring CBOs into the mix of organizations that provide access. Policymakers must understand the role of information in the community and the way in which it is accessed. Further, communities differ in the ways in which they use and access information, and these differences must be recognized and built into policy. CBOs are therefore better equipped to understand the goals that communities want to reach through technology.

Promote Policies that Enhance Competition among Computer Manufacturers and Internet Providers

Nearly 17 percent of respondents to the latest NTIA survey reported that they lacked Internet access because it was too expensive (NTIA 1999, 77). Competition among manufacturers of PCs has contributed to the decreasing prices of machines. Lower prices are clearly partly responsible for the increasing percentage of households that own PCs and have access to the Internet. Expansion of competition is likely to further increase access and ownership. According to the NTIA report, "Expanding competition in rural areas and central cities is particularly significant, as these areas lag behind the national averages for PC-ownership and household Internet access" (NTIA 1999, 78).

The Telecommunications Act was supposed to increase competition, but many community technology activists believe that the opposite has happened. Increased competition must be coupled with appropriate safeguards. We encourage competition as a means to reduce prices for hardware, software, and Internet services, but we also believe that the issue of access is too important to be left to the free market alone.

STATE-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

State Regulatory Commissions Must Play a Key Role

Given devolution and deregulation, the state and local policy arena is an especially important one in which to work. Public utility commissions (PUCs) are the key regulatory bodies and have considerable power to shape access at the state level. Chapter 3 describes cases in Ohio and California, for example, in which public interest advocates won significant victories for community technology programs in those states. Specifically, PUCs should do the following:

- Maintain and expand LinkUp and Lifeline programs; access to telephone service is still not universal.
- Include community-based organizations in universal service discounts; otherwise, the division in the universal service constituencies into “haves” and “have nots” is maintained.
- Ensure that benefits of universal service programs cover more than infrastructure investments and connectivity costs; PUCs should also support administrative costs, training, and capacity building.
- Place conditions on telecommunications companies seeking merger approval or renegotiate contracts that promote universal access. Such conditions could include capacity building and infrastructure development in underserved neighborhoods; new computer centers; assessments of community technology needs; and outreach and awareness of CTC programs.

LOCAL-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

Make Access to IT a Part of the Government Mission

Local government needs to ensure, as part of its mission, that citizens have access to and are literate in technology skills. In Austin, Pittsburgh, and Seattle, local government has to some extent recognized the importance of ensuring access to computers and information technology for all of the regions’ residents. In most places, that level of sophistication and awareness does not exist among local government officials. Community activists in many places are working to educate local officials on the digital divide and the importance of providing universal access. One example of this kind of action is the Ohio case, described in chapter 3, in which neighborhood

organizations influenced the decision of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO). Government officials must take some initiative to become proactive rather than simply reactive.

Use Franchise Fees to Fund Programs

Local government should use franchise fees from cable TV operators and other commercial telecommunications firms to support universal service programs and community technology initiatives. Seattle has successfully used franchise fees from cable television revenues to fund Citizen Literacy and Access projects and to employ a community technology planner. In Austin, cable franchise fees fund the Telecommunity Partnership Initiative. The City of Pittsburgh is currently negotiating its franchise renewal with TCI. Franchise agreements have typically had terms of 10 to 15 years; thus, franchise fees are one way to ensure a steady stream of funds to universal access and community technology programs.

Broker Relationships

In many cities, community technology efforts are quite fragmented. Certainly at the local level, but also at the state and federal levels, policymakers could do more to broker relationships, match organizations with resources, and encourage collaboration among existing efforts. All three of the cities we studied have local governments that are ahead of the curve when it comes to support for community technology. However, only one—Seattle—has a community technology planner on staff. The creation of this position gives community technology greater legitimacy in the region, with other policymakers and with potential funders. Also, the fact that it is the planner's job to connect organizations to each other and to promote partnerships frees already overburdened organizations to pursue other important activities.

CONCLUSION

Great potential exists for government at all levels to help broker universal access to information technology. Important precedents for how government can do this have been set, both through public-sector initiatives and through advocacy work. Greater support is still needed. The digital divide remains wide, and some aspects of it are growing. Understanding universal access to IT as a civil right calls for a stepping-up of public-sector efforts.