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Government Bridges to Cross the Digital Divide

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This is the second in a four part series of articles highlighting funding sources that help bridge the digital divide. The web site, The Digital Divide Network (1), highlights three primary categories of funding sources that can be accessed by those seeking to build bridges over the digital divide: funding from corporate sources, private sources, and government sources (2). In this column I will highlight a source of community-based government funding that provides money for innovative solutions to the digital divide.

Since the early 1970’s the federal government has been gradually shifting allocation and management of federal government funds to the local level. This move can be traced back to the Nixon administration and the passing of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1974 (CETA) (3). The Act had local officials managing a federally funded employment-training program. The policy change was based on the idea that communities and their leaders can identify their needs and allocate resources more efficiently than the federal government. In the 1990’s, during the welfare reform fervor, the federal government took even greater steps to change the way it allocated money to people and organizations at the local level. A centerpiece of this change was infusing the idea of the federal block grant program into a wide range of programs. The basis for implementing block grants from the perspective of the government officials who championed the cause was that it would: reduce the federal deficit; reduce growth in federal spending and in the size of government; and enhance policy efficacy and efficiency by moving decision-making closer to the intended beneficiaries or problem arenas (i.e., to the local level) (4).

As a result of this shift in policy, communities in economically distressed areas have gained more control over the amount and kind of federal money they receive. But to access some of these funds, they have also had to enter the federal grant writing arena. As a result, communities have had to hire people to write their grants or partner with other organizations who are familiar with the federal grant writing process. Communities that have been able to find partners have reaped
the fruits of their labor. Communities that have been unable to pay grant writers or find partners have been left behind.

A federal program that focuses on supporting local efforts to bridge the digital divide is The Community Technology Center Grant Program (CTC) (5). The CTC grants are a part of the No Child Left Behind Education program of the Bush Administration. Under this policy umbrella four key principles guide the creation of programs and the allocation of funds. They are: 1) increasing accountability for results; 2) focusing on what works; 3) reducing bureaucracy and increasing flexibility; 4) and empowering learners and parents (6). The CTC grants were created as a way to support parents. In fact, in this years competition, the applicants are required to have a component of their program that addresses adult education and literacy needs through technology.

The CTC grant program focuses on supporting local efforts to bridge the digital divide. In their words, “The purpose of the Community Technology Centers program is to assist eligible applicants to create or expand community technology centers that will provide disadvantaged residents of economically distressed urban and rural communities with access to information technology and related training” (7). A majority of people who use the centers that have been established during the past two years are people who have no access to technology at home or anywhere else.

The CTCs are supposed to provide technology that will support workforce development and employment information activities; pre-school and family programs; after-school activities; and adult education programs. The grants themselves can either be used to establish new centers or expand existing centers. The awards range in value from $75,000 to $300,000.

In my view one of the most valuable components of the CTC program is its strong support from an organization called The America Connects Consortium (ACC) (8). The ACC provides technical support for new and existing Community Technology Centers. Consortium partners include: CompuMentor, the Alliance for Technology Access, Education Development Center, Inc, CTCNet, Information Technology Association of America, Alliance for Nonprofit Management, and the National Alliance of Business. America Connects provides not only technical support but also information and assistance for sustainable development of the CTCs. Through the web site, the grantees can receive support for seeking funds for their continued development. In addition, the web site provides links to information resources for community members. For example the web site Yes I Can (9) is a resource to help Hispanic parents plan for college. The America Connects Consortium web site also serves as a meeting place for CTCs around the country. Internet communication tools and center locating links help to create community on the Internet.

The Community Technology Center granting program has and can be a great benefit to a number of rural and urban communities. The program itself is well supported with an eye on sustainable development. If communities who are interested in developing a CTC can find a partner to help them secure funds, the pilings for a bridge can be set.
References

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