

## **Building Opportunity through Broadband**

### **Hearing with Congressman Bennie Thompson, Jackson, Mississippi**

*Remarks by Warigia Bowman*

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When considering the issue of building opportunity through broadband in the Mississippi Delta, the following issues must be kept in mind: access, sustainability, capacity and production.

Home access to broadband services is desirable in poor rural areas in the long run to reduce the digital divide. However, the benefits of public access should not be overlooked. Public access provides many benefits. Access at libraries, schools and churches is often free or very low cost. In addition, community technology centers can build social capital. They can help users build new personal relationships, provide a sense of belonging, and ensure benefits such as mentoring. Given that poor rural areas are usually low adoption areas, community access helps increase adoption rates, and also provides demand aggregation, giving companies an incentive to put broadband in at least a few public facilities in each community. From there, the technology exists to boost the signal to homes that want it.

Capacity is the key ingredient to ensure broadband sustainability in rural areas. It is not sufficient just to have broadband infrastructure in rural areas. That infrastructure must be usable, and care should be taken that it does not go obsolete. A reminder: broadband infrastructure is expensive, and it is delicate. The infrastructure must be maintained, or else an expensive investment has been made, which will lose its utility quickly. Ideally, maintenance, repair, and training should be conducted by persons from the Mississippi Delta. This is a role which universities such as Jackson State and Delta State have a crucial role to play.

Finally, production: as people of color and African-Americans, we must move away from being passive consumers of technology and move towards becoming producers. The Delta, and Mississippi in general, have low labor costs. This low cost of labor can be an asset. If training and capacity are addressed, the Delta could become a location for call centers for companies like American Express or A T & T. In addition, perhaps the Delta could become a center where computer components and telephone components can be built. Some examples of components that could be manufactured in the Delta could include parts for the i-phones, and the new i-pad. Finally, the Delta can produce content. Blues sales can be done as e-commerce, tourism can be promoted online, and local goods, such as the beautiful pine needle baskets typical of the region can be manufactured and marketed.

So, in short, we have an opportunity here to turn our weakness into a strength. Part of this process is creating robust policy networks of universities, non-profits, and private sector organizations. These networks should include engineers, educators, entrepreneurs and activists. The focus of these networks should be turning broadband into an engine of economic opportunity, not just bringing broadband to the Delta. Making sure that there is community support, buy-in, and understanding of the importance of broadband will help to ensure that the technology is sustainable, affordable, and useful; not just a technological white elephant.