

The Availability of and the Needs for Adoption Programs In Mendocino County

Introduction

There are many reasons people fall on the wrong side of the Digital Divide, including lack of access, lack of computer literacy skills, lack of financial resources and language barriers. The lack of affordable access is the major reason residents in Mendocino County are without broadband, but lack of literacy skills also plays a role, although how big is unknown. For this report, the focus is on assessment of digital literacy programs that are currently offered in the county and public access to free use of computers and Wi-Fi. Public access to computers is important due to the fact that even in areas that are served by some level of internet access, there are many people who cannot afford access, whose access is unreliable, who live in un and underserved areas around these communities, or for all of these reasons.

Survey

The following chart shows the results by area from a phone survey of the major anchor institutions in all the cities and towns in Mendocino County to determine whether they offer public access computers/Wi-Fi, and/or classes. All of the non-profits in the county were contacted with a request that they respond to an on-line survey. Other sources were also utilized to try to find information about individual areas. Populations typically include the areas around the town or city that utilize its services.

Changing uses of technology

Most residents are using their cellular smart phones to access the internet to some extent or another. The Broadband Alliance sees mobile connectivity as a compliment, rather than as a replacement for fixed broadband connections, and as such focused on these fixed connections and programs for this report. To determine the amount, extent, and uses of such mobile connectivity, a county-wide survey of residents would be needed. The North Bay-North Coast Broadband Consortium did however do extensive ground truth testing of cellular connectivity at 58 “priority area” locations in Mendocino County, and most came back as “unserved” or “underserved.”¹ These results show that better cellular coverage is also needed for the various uses of mobile technology, such as the ability to call 911 and other public safety uses.

¹ <http://www.mendocinobroadband.org/reports-and-newsletters/>

CITIES		
City/Town/Population	Computer Class Sites	Public Access Sites – Computers/Wi-Fi
Ukiah (inland) 17,205	High School · Community College · County Office of Education - ROP Business School · Senior Center · Boy's and Girl's Club, for kids	Community College, students only · Public Library computers and wifi · Youth Resource Center, 5 computers and wifi · Family Resource Center, 8 computers for parents to use with children, wifi · Boys and Girls Club, computers for kids · Indian Senior Center, wifi · Senior Center, 3 computers and wifi · Public Wi-Fi hotspots provided by the City: Civic Center, Conference Center, Municipal Golf Course · Municipal Airport; business wifi spots: 5 coffee shops, 3 restaurants, 1 fast food
Fort Bragg (coast) 7,237	High School · Senior Center, basic instruction by appointment · Community Center, classes (including Spanish)	Community College, students only · Public Library, computers & wifi · Family Resource Center, wifi · Senior Center, 10 computers, wifi · Community Center, computers · Enterprise Center, laptops for clients; business wifi: 2 coffee shop, 1 fast food
Willits (inland) 4,888	High School · Community College 1 semester · Family Resource Center, informal classes/Spanish · Senior Center, classes	Community College students only · Public Library, computers and wifi · Family Resource Center, 3 computers and wifi · Senior Center, computers and wifi · business wifi spots: 1 coffee shop, 2 fast food
INLAND TOWNS		
Leggett - 508	High School · No adult classes	None
Laytonville - 1,227	High School · No adult classes	Family Resource Center, 3 computers and wifi · business wifi spot: 1 coffee shop
Round Valley/Covelo 3,500	High School · Community College 2 semesters · Family Resource Center informal support	Public Library, 8 computers and wifi · Family Resource Center, 2 computers
Potter Valley - 646	High School · No adult classes	Community Center, 1 computer and wifi

City/Town/Population	Computer Class Sites	Public Access Sites – Computers/Wi-Fi
Calpella - 697	None	1 coffee shop, wifi
Boonville – 1,605	High School	Senior Center, wifi · 1 café wifi
Hopland – 1,697	None	None
COASTAL TOWNS		
Caspar - 509	None	Community Center, wifi
Mendocino - 894	High School · Art Center, digital art classes for a fee	None
Point Arena – 1,346	High School · Adult Education, occasional classes at the high school	Public Library computers and wifi · Senior Center, wifi
Gualala – 2,093	Family Resource Center, informal instruction, occasional formal by appt.	Family Resource Center, 5 computers and wifi · 1 café, wifi

Assessment of Availability

The largest population area – Ukiah, has fairly good access to digital literacy classes for a range of ages, for free or a low fee. Ukiah also has a good range of free sites to access public computers and wifi. All of the other communities do not rate well on either available classes or free internet access.

Classes: The 3 areas that are served by the Community College – Ukiah, Willits and Round Valley, currently offer consistent classes for adults for a fee. In all of the other areas, classes or informal instruction for adults are very limited or non-existent. Many of these areas are remote and traveling to Willits or Ukiah is a burden.

Public Access to Internet: The public libraries are the most consistent places for people to access free use computers and Wi-Fi, including 2 remote locations (Round Valley/Covelo and Point Arena). The 2 smaller cities have fair public access to the internet. All of the towns have very little or no public access. For example, Hopland, and Boonville, both with populations around 1,600 have almost non-existent public access.

Difficulty in Assessment: Overall, it is difficult to assess accurately the rate of adoption in homes and businesses because the majority of Mendocino County data for adoption and penetration rates from the California Broadband map are withheld. For those areas that do have data showing, most show rates of around 45-65%.²

Addressing Need

An important factor to consider in Mendocino County, when evaluating solutions, is that the poverty level for the county is 20% with another 14% at the low income level.³ For most of these households, it is out of reach to own a home computer and to maintain payments for internet service.

Classes: It is important to have free classes even in the areas with classes for a fee (Community College), due to the high number of low-income residents. The public libraries are a good fit for offering classes in the cities and towns they are located in: Ukiah, Willits, Fort Bragg, Point Arena and Round Valley/Covelo. The head County Librarian is very interested in partnering to provide free classes. Throughout the county, 14 organizations indicated an interest in offering classes if they had funding support. The Hispanic population is significant in parts of the county, but except for one small Family Resource Center in Ukiah that offers informal instruction, there are no computer classes taught in Spanish. The Adult Education program in Fort Bragg has identified computer programs in Spanish as a critical need. The lack is a barrier to education training such as GED tests that are now only offered on the internet. We plan to apply for a CASF grant for adoption programs, to address this need, working directly with individual organizations and entities to provide funding for digital literacy classes.

Public Access Computers: Throughout the county, 19 organizations indicated a need for new computers to offer access to the people who use their services or to the general public. They all lack funding to purchase computers. Some of these groups have a few or very old computers, while some have none. The CASF adoption program grant application that will be submitted. will also include funding for computers for public service sites.

Comcast Internet Essentials: An option for internet access and training for low income households is available in the limited areas of the county that are within the Comcast footprint, such as Ukiah, Willits, and Fort Bragg. The Comcast Internet Essentials Program offers basic internet service for \$10/month (download rates of 5 Mbps), a computer for \$150, and internet training for households in their service area who qualify with the following: 1. Have at least 1 child who is eligible for the National School Lunch Program (under \$43,568 for a family of 4); 2. Haven't had Comcast service in the last 90 days; 3. Do not have any debt to Comcast. In Mendocino, according to the last data available from 2012, the total number of eligible students in Comcast's service area was 3,572 or 1,180 households. But, there were only 137 applications (11.6% of eligible households) and only 114 activations (9.7% of eligible households).⁴ It's not clear why there is such a low adoption rate among eligible households, although factors may include too many barriers to entry, lack of knowledge of the program, or it may provide

² California Broadband Map maintained by California Public Utilities Commission
<http://www.broadbandmap.ca.gov/map/>

³ 2010 Census information

⁴ According to data provided by Comcast in 2013

too few benefits. Another reason that this program has not had much impact on overall adoption rates in the county is the fact that many families that need internet service live outside the Comcast service areas where the program is not available. The program also ignores poverty level and low income households that do not have children in elementary through high school.

Perceived Lack of Relevance: Recent research has identified another significant reason for the lack of adoption among some groups including lower-income households, and older and rural Americans. It has been found that “neither price nor availability of broadband are the factors that most determine why some of these groups are still behind the adoption curve. Instead, research has consistently shown that over the last five years non-users are more likely to identify a perceived lack of relevance of broadband internet in their lives as the main reason not to adopt”.⁵

Summary

Overall, Mendocino County’s adoption rates are among the lowest in the state⁶ which is partially due to the lack of consistent and affordable internet access. In areas where internet access is available, the adoption rates can be improved through offering funding support to local organizations to increase the number of free public access computers and to offer formal long-term computer literacy classes. These classes will also become an important place to make a case about the relevance of broadband for each community, to allow community members to make informed decisions as to how their community would be better served with better access. Ukiah, the largest population area, is currently the best served for public access and computer literacy training options, although there is a strong need for Spanish-language classes and continued growth in programs offered. The areas of greatest concern due to higher population levels and almost total lack of public access and instruction are Gualala, Hopland and Boonville. The smaller towns of Mendocino and Leggett are also areas of concern with no public access computers, Wi-Fi or classes. Working with all of the libraries to add free classes in Ukiah, Willits, Round Valley/Covelo, Fort Bragg and Point Area will be an efficient and well distributed solution. The Digital Divide is a very real problem that negatively impacts the well-being of Mendocino County residents. It is recommended that improvements in both access and digital literacy programs be developed in all towns and cities to address this growing need so that local residents are prepared for the economic and educational realities of the 21st century.

⁵<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/wp/2015/03/23/did-the-national-broadband-plan-spur-innovation/>

⁶<http://www.cpuc.ca.gov/NR/rdonlyres/0E08E45F-0DE2-447A-9BBB-A69496FF698C/0/CABroadbandReportUpdateasofJune2012FINAL.pdf> ; California Economic Policy, Volume 3, No. 2 July 2007, p. 13; Public Policy Institute of California; http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/cep/EP_707JKEP.pdf