

Congressional Testimony

I am Bunny Sanders, Mayor of the town of Roper, NC, population 625. Roper is located in Washington County, which has a population of 14,000. Washington County is the 5th poorest county in North Carolina. There are 16 counties in the northeast region, of which 11 are Tier I. This is the state's designation for the most depressed counties in North Carolina. There are approximately 45 incorporated municipalities in the northeast region that have less than 1500 people. Many of these communities do not have public access to computers and High Speed Internet. In fact, many of them do not even have public libraries.

Approximately 5 years ago, the town of Roper assisted with the organization of the WOW e-Community Development Corporation (WOW e-CDC). It is the only e-CDC in North Carolina. The mission of the e-CDC includes the preparation of the Washington County labor force for 21st Century employment and entrepreneurial opportunities; and to ensure accessibility to computers and the Internet to the citizens of Washington County and Northeastern NC. The town of Roper received federal grants for construction of the Windows on the World Technology Center which is operated by WOW e-CDC. The technology center houses a digital library with 20 computers connected to high speed Internet; a digital literacy classroom with an additional 25 computers; a video conference equipped classroom for

distance learning; and a 100 seat auditorium/classroom for distance learning. WOW e-CDC also operates an e-business incubator where workers can maintain and upgrade computers. For more information on the Windows on the World Technology Center and the WOW e-CDC, you may visit wowe-cdc.org

Pursuant to its mission, WOW e-CDC develops and promotes a variety of computer and Internet related enterprises that create some of those 20th Century employment opportunities. To date, it has provided training for indigent residents in computer maintenance and repairs, A+ and Network + Certifications; and electronic health records. It operates a computer repair and maintenance enterprise; Is a vendor for conversion of paper medical records to electronic health records (EHR); Develops, maintains, and hosts web-sites; Has developed web-sites for 38 small towns in eastern North Carolina at no cost to the towns; and is a wireless broadband ISP. WOW e-CDC recently conducted a study of 21 eastern North Carolina communities which revealed that almost 40% of the households do not have access to broadband.

The North Carolina General Assembly, recognizing the necessity to offer direct engagement for information technology in remote rural, designated the WOW e-CDC as the Technology Resource Center for the 16 counties located in the northeast region. It specifically charged the CDC with development, maintenance, and hosting of municipal web sites for small towns; developing computer and Internet public access points for these communities;

Initiatives that increase the urgency of digital literacy; and operating a wireless ISP to service the more remote communities that telecommunications companies can not profitably reach. The CDC uses municipal and county water towers on which base stations or access points are placed. These antennae project the signal out to remote communities. We believe that the only way to provide affordable broadband to the more remote communities is wirelessly, and through non-profit Internet Service Providers.

Pursuant to its mission of ensuring access to computers and the Internet to citizens and children in remote communities of northeastern North Carolina, WOW e-CDC has requested computers from as many businesses and others entities as possible. Necessary upgrades are done by graduates of the computer maintenance and repair program, thus creating technology related employment in a community where there is no technology related industry.

Proposed Legislation

It is very important to understand the nature of the small towns and rural communities that these computers are intended to serve. The day to day operations of many of the towns with less than 1000-1500 people are run by the town clerks with part time volunteer mayors who have other employment. The towns often do not have the human resources or funds for shipping the computers, nor can they do the necessary upgrades. More importantly, many towns do not even know about the program.

Efforts to access computers through the state are all but impossible for a small town to navigate. In North Carolina, the process will require a trip to the state capital on Fridays. Most communities in eastern NC are at least 2 to 3 hours from Raleigh. You would “inspect” the items on which you would bid. Computer cases may not be opened during the inspection time, which is between 9am and 2 pm. Item descriptions indicate internal components and what the state knows about the item. Often, the condition of the items is unknown. The process assumes that the bidder, in our case, the town, has someone who would know about internal components of a computer doing their bidding, which is highly unlikely. Small, low wealth communities can not afford technology savvy staff. Unfortunately, the bidder must assume ALL risks. Needless to say, small low wealth communities cannot take the time, nor afford the trip, nor take the risk that the computers will require extensive upgrades. This process really eliminates federal and/or state surplus as an option for small low wealth communities. Neither towns nor regional centers such as Windows on the World Technology Center can afford this process. The cost of purchasing, shipping, and upgrades put the computers out of reach of the very communities that need them the most. When we were able to get computers from USDA in the past, WOW e-CDC distributed the computers to local schools, small towns, and non-profits who paid only the cost of the organizational expenses related to bulk shipping and upgrading. This process made the computers more affordable and more accessible to low wealth communities.

I would assume that there are other non-profit regional technology centers like the Windows on the World Technology Center, located in rural communities throughout the United States that are charged with addressing digital literacy and access to computers and the Internet. These centers would have the documented capacity to upgrade the surplus computers and ensure distribution to communities and low income families throughout rural America. In addition, these non-profit regional centers could also use the surplus computers to establish public access to computers and the Internet in remote communities, thus creating a network of digital libraries in rural America. These digital libraries could be established in churches, community centers, and other non-profit facilities where there is a commitment for volunteers or state and/or foundation funded operations.

In the 21st Century, digital literacy and Internet proficiency are as important as the ability to read and write. We must accept the idea that the 21st Century library is digital, and those capable of using it are those who have digital literacy. The reality is that in rural America, where remote communities often do not have access to affordable broadband, public access is critical. I serve on the Board of Governors of the NC University System. The system is increasingly utilizing on-line studies as a means of reaching remote communities with higher education. Without access to computers and the Internet, distance from the community college and/or the university will continue to be a deterrent to higher education in rural America. Preparation for

participation in a knowledge based global economy cannot stop at 3:30 pm Monday through Friday. We have an obligation to ensure that young people all over this country have equal access to the tools that enable and empower them to be productive citizens. For this reason, I urge you not to allow government red tape to prohibit thousands of communities throughout the United States from accessing surplus computers that could very well make the difference between citizens who are self-sufficient and those who would lack the necessary skills to function in 21st Century America.

The proposed bill should make federal surplus computers directly accessible to any entity that can document the capability of upgrading and distribution of computers to schools, non-profits, and libraries in rural low wealth municipalities, and documented low income families; or that could establish public access points for computers and Internet.

Further, the language of the bill should be clear regarding direct availability of surplus computers for non-profits whose mission is related to digital literacy, public access to computers, computers for small towns, and IT training. This will ensure that there will not be any misinterpretation of the intent of the legislation by those who administer the program.

I have brought the procedures of the North Carolina State Surplus Property Agency for your review and consideration.

