

The National ConnectHome Summit

PD&R Expert Convenings Summary Report

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Summary Report

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Introduction

On August 18 and 19, 2015, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in partnership with the White House and EveryoneOn, a national nonprofit working to eliminate the digital divide, hosted the National ConnectHome Summit in Washington, DC. The event brought together more than 100 representatives from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are committed to turning the vision of ConnectHome into a reality.

President Barack Obama and Secretary Julián Castro announced ConnectHome on July 15, 2015, as the next step in the Obama Administration's efforts to increase access to high-speed Internet access for all Americans. The initiative builds on ConnectED, which aims to connect 99 percent of K–12 students to high-speed Internet in schools and libraries by 2018. ConnectHome will bring the opportunity for high-speed home Internet access to low-income families across the nation, including an estimated nearly 200,000 children. Through public-private partnerships, nonprofits, businesses, and Internet service providers (ISPs) will offer high-speed Internet service, devices, technical training, and digital literacy programs to residents of HUD-assisted housing in 28 pilot communities, including the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma.

Key Takeaways

The National Summit marked the beginning of the implementation phase of ConnectHome. Over the course of two days, city and public housing agency (PHA) leaders from the 28 pilot communities engaged with their peers, White House and federal government staff, EveryoneOn, nonprofits, and businesses about proven strategies, best practices, and available resources for closing the digital divide. The event also provided an opportunity for local officials to interact with HUD staff and ISPs and receive guidance on organizing local summits and tracking outcomes as they prepare to implement ConnectHome in their communities. Some key takeaways included the following:

- As Secretary Castro asserted, high-speed Internet access at home is an essential means to help all children access the opportunities of the 21st century.
- Both national and local collaborations are necessary to expand digital opportunity and measure our progress. Sharing and employing data and lessons from other communities are critical.
- Communities can be most successful in expanding at-home Internet access when they take proactive steps and implement long-term plans.

HUD's vision for ConnectHome calls for accelerating the adoption of high-speed Internet by promoting not just at-home Internet connections, but also access to Internet-ready devices, digital literacy training, and educational and workforce-related content. Summit participants identified some key strategies that communities can employ to ensure that low-income households are equipped to take advantage of residential high-speed Internet access:

- Local schools and libraries can help implement digital literacy programs. Residents who successfully complete courses may also be able to provide support for their peers and neighbors.
- Placing digital literacy training offices in areas where other community services are offered, such as homeless shelters, clinics, and libraries, can help instructors reach low-income individuals. Existing computer labs in PHAs may make it easier for residents to participate in digital literacy programs. In addition, using caseworkers from other HUD programs for residents, such as Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) or Resident Opportunities and Self-Sufficiency (ROSS), can help build trust among residents.

- Connecting with residents on a personal level and tailoring the digital literacy curriculum to their interests and needs can improve adoption rates among both students and their parents.
- Offering a device at the conclusion of a digital literacy training program may motivate individuals to attend.
- Preloading educational content on devices that is available offline can help sustain interest and help both parents and children prepare for school.
- Institutions that regularly replace devices, such as colleges, can contribute refurbished devices.

Session Summaries

Day 1

The Summit opened with **Rob Diamond**, Special Assistant to the President and Director of Private Sector Engagement at the White House Office of Public Engagement, and **David Edelman**, Special Assistant to the President for Economic and Technology Policy, White House National Economic Council, welcoming attendees to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Diamond and Edelman described the potential of the ConnectHome initiative and the need to invest in high-speed infrastructure to improve employment and economic outcomes for the nation.

HUD Secretary **Julián Castro** then highlighted the role that high-speed Internet access can play in increasing life opportunities for low-income children. He noted that through ConnectHome, communities can help everyone — regardless of their ZIP code or the color of their skin — connect to the tools of the 21st century and thus ensure that the United States remains the undisputed land of opportunity.

Robbie Greenblum, Senior Policy Advisor to Secretary Castro, and **Zach Leverenz**, EveryoneOn's Chief Executive Officer, discussed the importance of communication and collaboration in implementing the ConnectHome initiative. At the national level, HUD and EveryoneOn will provide communities with technical assistance and organizational support. Greenblum and Leverenz also stressed the need for collaboration with state and municipal governments, local nonprofits, foundations, schools, and ISPs to accelerate the adoption of high-speed Internet access.

To help prepare communities to implement ConnectHome, **Chike Aguh**, EveryoneOn's Chief Programs Officer, further explained the roles of each of the contributing stakeholders and laid out the timeline for the ConnectHome pilot. EveryoneOn provided each community with a packet that included a list of commitments already made to the community, a guide for communicating with key stakeholders, the goals and expectations for each community, and potential quality-of-life outcomes for evaluation purposes.

Norma Fernandez, Regional Manager for EveryoneOn, moderated the first panel discussion, *The Austin Experience*. The panel featured **Sylvia Blanco**, Executive Vice President of the Housing Authority of the City of Austin (HACA); **Catherine Crago**, Strategic Initiatives Manager for HACA; **Rondella Hawkins**, Telecommunications and Regulatory Affairs Officer for the City of Austin; **Dr. Ben Kramer**, Vice President of Education at KLRU-TV, Austin PBS; and **Robin Medina**, an instructor at Austin Free-Net. Panelists described how HACA has leveraged a public-private partnership with Google Fiber, the city, and community organizations to create the Unlocking the Connection program, which began in November 2014. The program provides Internet access for residents of Austin's public housing properties. Through Austin Free-Net, residents also have access to digital literacy training and devices with which to connect to the Internet. Panelists focused on lessons learned from the program's implementation. Austin will continue to share their experiences as a peer mentor to participating ConnectHome communities.

Local leaders then met with ISPs that have committed to serving low-income residents in their communities with free or reduced-cost high-speed Internet access. In these breakout sessions, representatives from Google Fiber, Sprint, Cox Communications, and CenturyLink provided details and answered questions about their commitments.

For example, Google Fiber representative **Erika Swanson** led the discussion with representatives from five cities slated to receive broadband access through the provider. Swanson reiterated Google Fiber's commitment to providing high-speed Internet at zero monthly cost and no installation costs to residents of select HUD-assisted properties and described how the ISP will work closely with local communities to meet connectivity goals. EveryoneOn met with representatives from Choctaw Nation to discuss the commitments made by Pine-Net, SuddenLink, and Vyve Broadband. EveryoneOn also met with communities for whom ISPs are still being identified to discuss their options.

The second panel, *Innovative National Commitments*, was moderated by **Zach Leverenz** and included **Andrea Wood**, Senior Manager of Community Relations at Best Buy; **Dr. Rebecca Palacios**, Senior Curriculum Advisor at ABCmouse.com; **Juan Sepulveda**, Senior Vice President for Station Services at the Public Broadcasting Service; **Larra Clark**, Deputy Director of the American Library Association; and **Nate Hill**, Executive Director of the Metropolitan New York Library Council. The panelists discussed how each of their organizations will engage communities and support ConnectHome by providing educational content, digital literacy training, technical support and training, and devices. For instance, Wood spoke about leveraging existing resources and partnerships, including Best Buy's Teen Tech Centers, to reach out to public housing residents.

Megan Smith, U.S. Chief Technology Officer for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, provided the day's closing remarks. Smith began by recognizing two groups of people who innovate in ways that are different but not mutually exclusive: those who are using the Internet to collaborate and make advances in fields such as medicine and technology, and those who are creatively utilizing available resources, and possibly working multiple jobs, to provide for their families. After highlighting the technological innovations that have taken place since the advent of the Internet, Smith noted that by enhancing connectivity for low-income households, ConnectHome can help unlock additional talent.

Day 2

Lourdes Castro Ramírez, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for HUD's Office of Public and Indian Housing (PIH), opened the second day of the Summit by reiterating the potential impact of expanded high-speed Internet adoption and discussing how HUD will support ConnectHome. PIH will be creating a new position to serve as a point of contact and provide technical assistance to the 28 participating communities.

Kurt Peluso, New Jersey Regional Manager for EveryoneOn, then hosted the *Local Digital Inclusion* panel, which featured **Preston Prince**, Executive Director of the Fresno Housing Authority; **Luis Yataco**, Information Technology Officer for the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles; **Leilah Powell**, Chief of Policy for the City of San Antonio; **Dan Noyes**, Co-Director of Tech Goes Home; and **Seth Wainer**, Chief Information Officer for the City of Newark. The panelists described the challenges and successes that they experienced in their digital inclusion programs. The discussion included efforts to expand high-speed Internet access, provide residents with computers or other Internet-accessible devices, and train community members in digital literacy. Panelists suggested that cities and PHAs should be proactive in using right-of-way privileges, retaining rights to access points, and creating long-term plans for high-speed Internet adoption. The panelists agreed that the biggest challenge to achieving high-speed Internet adoption goals is the cost for implementing and, more important, sustaining relevant programs.

Following the panel, city (or equivalent) and PHA leaders met with HUD subject-matter experts to discuss how existing HUD programs could be used to support different aspects of the ConnectHome initiative. Staff working on the FSS, Housing Choice Voucher, Choice Neighborhoods, Community Development Block Grant, HOME Investment Partnerships, and Rental Assistance Demonstration programs detailed how each program could help localities develop their high-speed Internet infrastructure and expand service for low-income households. City representatives also heard from HUD Office of Public Affairs staff on strategies for telling the story of ConnectHome during various implementation phases.

The Connecting America panel, moderated by **Andrew Buher**, a White House Fellow at HUD, included **Colin Register**, Special Advisor for the White House National Economic Council; **Dr. Rob Seamans**, Senior Economist for the White House Council of Economic Advisers; **Karen Hanson**, Manager of Partnerships and Interagency Affairs for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration at the U.S. Department of Commerce; **Dr. Calvin Johnson**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Research, Evaluation, and Monitoring in HUD's Office of Policy Development and Research; and **Camille Acevedo**, Associate General Counsel for Legislation and Regulations in HUD's Office of General Counsel. Panelists discussed the geographic, economic, and racial factors that influence the digital divide and considered methods for evaluating the initiative and its outcomes. Several panelists also underscored the importance of disseminating data, information, and success stories related to ConnectHome, both among participating cities and with partners, such as universities, that could help evaluate the program. Acevedo discussed proposed HUD rulemaking that would require the inclusion of high-speed Internet adoption in the Consolidated Plan process and in new construction and substantial rehabilitation projects.

Blair Levin, a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution who formerly served as the Executive Director of the National Broadband Plan at the Federal Communications Commission, concluded the Summit by placing the Internet within the context of other historical innovations. Levin remarked that the ConnectHome initiative is a team effort — one in which cities may be the most appropriate leaders — to ensure that digital progress does not widen the digital divide.

Next Steps

The National ConnectHome Summit sustained the momentum for participating communities as they begin to implement ConnectHome. By October 2015, each pilot community will hold a local convening, including city (or equivalent) and PHA staff, the local technology community, community anchors, contributing stakeholders, and other interested parties. These convenings will have five objectives:

1. Understand the national commitments made to their community and identify a plan to fill any gaps.
2. Agree on ambitious and feasible goals for adoption.
3. Set timelines for implementation.
4. Divide roles and responsibilities among local and national stakeholders.
5. Outline a clear communications strategy.

In short, the goal of the local convening is to bring together an initial team in each community to begin local implementation.

Communities will submit their first quarterly progress updates in December 2015, which marks the end of the first phase of implementation.