

**Rural Telecommunications Policy Briefing:
“The Impact of Technology Transitions on Rural Communities”
May 12, 2015**

2:00pm – 3:00pm

Rayburn 2203

Sponsor: Congressman Jared Huffman (D-CA)

Background

The traditional phone network is a great success story in the history of communications service in the United States. Its ubiquity, affordability, reliability, and openness stimulated economic growth, helped those in need reach emergency first responders, facilitated civic engagement, and allowed millions of people to keep in touch with loved ones regardless of their physical distance. Americans have come to trust and depend on the telephone network, but the network is now changing. This process is called the “Technology Transition.”

Telecommunications providers have used copper wires to bring voice and broadband services to homes and businesses. Today, telecommunications providers have begun to switch the technology they use – from copper to fiber, wireless, or VoIP. This switch in technology has important implications for rural communities and their residents.

As technologies evolve, we have the opportunity to make sure any transition in technology is a step forward for all Americans. The National Rural Assembly’s Rural Broadband Policy Group, Center for Rural Strategies, and Public Knowledge invite policymakers and stakeholders to reaffirm the fundamental values of our communications network – universal service, reliability, consumer protections, public safety, and competition. Join us in a conversation about the various issues implicated in the technology transitions and how they impact rural communities.

Technology Transitions Policy Issues

- **Service Availability** (State bills, 214(a) Process)
A change in technologies could change the services available to consumers. A provider might want to stop using its copper lines and offer wireless or Internet-based voice services. But, many rural consumers live in areas with spotty cellphone reception or where Internet service is not available. Retiring copper lines has been a central focus of both state legislation and the Federal Communications Commission’s Tech Transitions efforts. What process should a carrier follow if it wants to retire its copper lines? What services will be in place for rural consumers if their carrier decides to change technologies? *Speakers:* Mimi Pickering, *Appalshop*, Kentucky; Jodie Griffin, *Public Knowledge*, Washington, D.C.
- **Network Resiliency** (Backup Power, 911 connectivity, additional devices)
Copper wires are able to carry electricity, which allows telephones to continue to work during a power outage. This characteristic makes the traditional phone network resilient, particularly during emergencies and natural disasters when Americans need it most.

Today, new technologies (fiber, wireless, VoIP) do not carry their own electricity, and some cannot guarantee a connection to 911 or additional devices such as medical alarms, home alarms, and ATMs. In addition, the new technologies might require consumers to be responsible for securing backup power. **Speaker:** Randy McDonald, *The Broadband Alliance of Mendocino County*, Laytonville, California

- **Rural Call Completion**

In an effort to find the most cost-effective approach to complete calls to and from rural areas, some providers resorted to offshoring “call completion” responsibility to IP-based contractors who did not actually complete the calls. Transitioning to an IP-based technology could revive issues with rural call completion. **Speaker:** Regina Costa, *The Utility Reform Network (TURN)*, California

- **Consumer Education**

Most consumers do not know what technology their telephone carrier uses to bring service to their home or business. Educating all consumers about the benefits, challenges, and responsibilities they will acquire as our telephone network transitions must be a multi-stakeholder conversation amongst policymakers, telecommunications providers, the FCC, state agencies, and public interest groups. **Speaker:** Whitney Kimball-Coe, *National Rural Assembly*, Kentucky

- **Affordable Broadband**

53% of rural areas (22 million rural Americans) do not have access to broadband service. As broadband becomes a necessary technology to maintain voice service, we must collaborate to make it available and affordable to all Americans. What tools do the federal government and FCC have at their disposal to expand broadband access in rural communities? Hear from a Lifeline phone service subscriber about how this program could help bring affordable broadband to all Americans. **Speaker:** Sharell Harmon, *YouthBuild North Central*, Elkins, West Virginia