Lt. Governor Simon urges rural citizens to complete broadband survey

Written by Kathryn Phillips Monday, 20 February 2012 14:38

Online poll to identify needs, promote statewide access

CARBONDALE – February 15, 2012. As a statewide voice for Southern Illinois, Lt. Governor Sheila Simon is urging rural residents to participate in a new online survey about high-speed internet usage that launched today and will help create jobs, improve medical care and enhance educational opportunities.

Unlike past surveys that simply looked at internet access, this statewide poll will reach out to households, farmers, businesses and anchor institutions, such as community colleges and hospitals, to learn how they put broadband to use now and their needs moving forward.

The 20-minute survey includes questions about preferred internet devices, frequent web activities such as research, workforce training and buying or selling of goods, and the importance of broadband to job retention and expansion.

"Rural Illinoisans need affordable, high-speed internet access to land new employers, expand educational opportunities and improve health care," said Simon, who chairs the Governor's Rural Affairs Council. "I encourage my neighbors in Southern Illinois to participate in this research project to ensure that we are a part of the state's broadband strategy and can compete in the 21st century economy."

The survey is being conducted by Partnership for a Connected Illinois, a Springfield nonprofit, enlisted by the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) as part of the High-Speed Internet Services and Information Technology Act of 2007 to guide local, state and federal policymakers. The results will be used to develop broadband plans in several categories: agriculture, energy and the environment, economic development, education, health care, public safety and government performance.

Illinois is already working with its federal and private sector partners to improve current broadband infrastructure. In his State of the State address, Governor Pat Quinn announced the Illinois Gigabit Communities Challenge, a \$6 million statewide competition funded by the Illinois Jobs Now! capital construction program. It will provide seed money to private and public organizations that expand broadband networks and connect at least 1,000 end-users to ultra-high speed Internet.

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Simon said it is crucial for rural Illinoisans to compete in the challenge and complete the survey, as they represent the communities that can benefit most from high-speed internet. Nearly one-fifth of the land area in Illinois lacks any broadband access, and eight of the 10 counties with the least access to broadband in the state are in Southern Illinois. Many suffer from slow speeds.

Similar surveys have been conducted recently in Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia. A 2010 North Carolina survey of 6,266 businesses showed that 17.5 percent of new jobs created over a 12-month period were attributed to the use of the internet and that 32 percent of those businesses consider access to mobile internet essential to their operations.

Partnership for a Connected Illinois, also known as Broadband Illinois, is working with organizations such as the Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs at Western Illinois University and state agencies such as DCEO and the Illinois State Board of Education to distribute the survey to internet users throughout the state.

"A major goal of this survey is to ensure that residents of rural Illinois will have access to better broadband," said Drew Clark, executive director of Partnership for a Connected Illinois. "By developing a statewide strategy for better broadband, we're creating a future that includes enhanced economic opportunities, increased availability of educational tools, and higher-quality health care for Illinois residents."

The online survey is open to the public and can be accessed at www.broadbandillinois.org.

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