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How a Small Town in Illinois is Bridging the Digital Divide

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The Pew Research report published earlier this month showed that [3.7 billion of the 7.3 billion people in the world are connected](#) to the Internet. This progress is welcome news but still leaves about 50% of the world's population unconnected with the majority of those not yet connected in rural areas. This is not surprising, as the deployment of broadband connectivity has prioritized dense urban areas where the business case for high-speed services is attractive to major service providers.

The persistence of the digital divide is concerning, especially in light of our current socio-political climate, because great numbers of people are still excluded from the economic, medical, and educational benefits that the Internet has proven to deliver.

While many communities wait for connectivity, some are finding success in taking the initiative to put their communities online. The town of Pembroke — in rural Illinois, but just 64-miles from Chicago — is an example.

In 2011, AP published "[Behind the Poverty Numbers: Real Lives, Real Pain,](#)" an article that clearly showed the reality of life in poor rural communities in the United States. *Chicago Magazine* focused in on the local angle and described in [detail the poverty in Pembroke](#) that has continued for generations.

Breaking the Cycle

People in these areas, and other rural communities around the world, want their children to have equal opportunities for success. Connected students have a level playing field with urban peers to access content and learning programs.

Wireless broadband technology provides a cost-effective solution that can be rapidly deployed. Instead of connecting every residence, communities, including Pembroke, are

building hubs that serve the needs of all members giving rural towns a viable means to connect their citizens.

Connectivity is a key component to engaging students in developing their education, and local leaders of Pembroke have created two free Wi-Fi zones: the [local Library](#) and the [Black Oaks Center for Sustainable Renewable Living](#). Using a long-range wireless broadband link via a wireless Internet Service Provider (WISP), both locations now have Wi-Fi connectivity for students to do homework for adults to connect with jobs and services.

Consider a teen in Pembroke who is studying renewable energy. Thanks to the recent connection at the local library and community center, this teen can learn more about renewable energy from the Internet, do his homework, and have access to better health care. With Internet access, she can learn from solar panel operators in other countries and share their data and ideas with the world.

[Cambium Networks](#), a wireless communications manufacturer in Illinois, develops the equipment that connects Pembroke. “It is no exaggeration that broadband connectivity is now a basic human need,” says Atul Bhatnagar, Cambium Networks President and CEO. “However, especially in low-income communities, this is a need that often goes unmet. And while connectivity in the U.S. is growing, many rural areas just don’t offer the connectivity that residents need to succeed in today’s connected world. That is why Cambium is committed to helping communities like Pembroke. We are throwing them a lifeline, in effect—to level the playing field and provide residents, especially students, with the same connectivity enjoyed by peers in urban areas. It’s time to eliminate the digital divide.”

Building Connectivity around the World Now

The rural town of Pembroke is not alone. Wireless connectivity is a proven solution that can be deployed in a matter of weeks.

- Windsor Park Church on the south side of Chicago provides free Wi-Fi for students to do classwork, as well as adults to search for jobs and register for services in what had been an urban “connectivity desert.”
- [Disaster Tech Lab](#) constructed a free Wi-Fi zone on the island of Lesbos, Greece, to provide connectivity for Syrian refugees to reunite with family members, register for services, and restart their lives. The network has recently been turned over to GRnet, a part of the Greek Department of Education for continuing operation.
- The [government of India](#) has recently announced an initiative to connect more than 1,000 rural villages with Wi-Fi connectivity.

While global internet connectivity currently stands at 50%, communities stand at the tipping point to accelerate information access. Local leaders are finding viable solutions that connect rural citizens to the same opportunities available in urban areas, taking a step toward bridging the Digital Divide with global connectivity.