To: Greene County Commissioners

From: Marisa Nowicki, Keith Poleti, Lucy Daynes, Brian Rhindress, Luke Rostosky

Subject: The Greene County Connectivity Initiative - Addressing Food Accessibility and Long-Term Prosperity

Abstract

The community in Greene County, Pennsylvania, has partnered with Carnegie Mellon University and Waynesburg University to explore solutions that improve local food security. Through individual research and consultations with local stakeholders, our team identified the need to better connect the community physically, socially, and digitally. To achieve this, we recommend:

1) Update the Green County Food Security Partnership (GCFSP) brochure to be a user-friendly roadmap that guides users in accessing the existing resource network
2) Develop a digital resource-sharing tool that improves network awareness, coordination, and data-tracking
3) Create a "Connectivity Coalition," with the GCFSP as a key stakeholder, to guide a needs assessment and strategic plan to bring broadband internet access into the community.

These short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals build momentum in connecting residents with each other, service providers, and the government. We anticipate that these recommendations will both improve food security in Greene County by improving the flow of communication and collaboration throughout the resource network system.

Background

Greene County welcomed students from Waynesburg University and Carnegie Mellon University to develop solutions to food security in Greene County. Our team met with many stakeholders of the Greene County Food Security Partnership (GCFSP) through site visits to St. Ann's Soup Kitchen, Corner Cupboard Food Bank, Gateway Senior Housing, and Blueprints. Moreover, we learned about government efforts in this area through presentations by the West Greene School District and Greene County Department of Human Services.
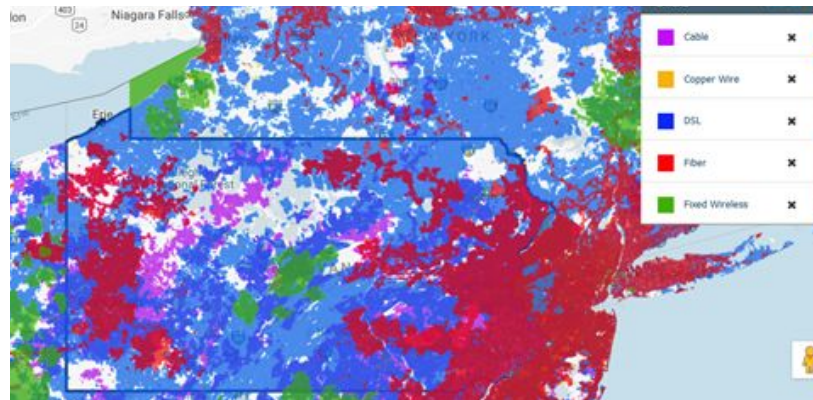
During our interactions with stakeholders, we noticed the themes of community and connection, which we view as particular strengths of Greene County. The Greene County Food Security Partnership has leveraged these connections to address food security by hosting summits of government agencies, community leaders, and nonprofits. One of the challenges identified by the Partnership is a "lack of knowledge about available resources."[1] Our team considers addressing this challenge an essential starting point to meeting the community's needs.

To be effective, our strategy should address both the immediate, short-term needs, as well as the long-term, systemic concerns that perpetuate food insecurity. When investigating the long-term

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[1] *About Us*, Greene County Food Security Partnership, http://greenefoodpartnership.org/about/

causes of food insecurity in Greene County, stakeholders continually mentioned 1) the lack of broadband access and 2) a lack of economic opportunities. These two factors prevent residents from connecting with the network of resources, communicating with each other, and finding and maintaining a steady source of income. As shown by the PA DCED map below, Greene County is one of the least connected regions in the state. There are pockets of primarily TV cable networks and dead zones.[2]

As of late, access to the internet has received a large amount of attention in political discourse. In 2018, Governor Wolf's PA Broadband Initiative announced $35M in assistance to service providers, with the goal of connecting Pennsylvania's 650,000 disconnected residents by 2022.[3] Moreover, in 2018, State Representative Pam Snyder (D-Greene/Fayette/Washington) advocated for a Broadband Bill of Rights and convened a state panel on the issue.[4] Lastly, in November 2018, Windstream announced a $1.3M network investment in Greene County, including fiber optic cabling in Waynesburg, Carmichaels, Rogersville, Greensboro, Jefferson, and Mt. Morris.[5] The ambitious goals of state government officials and private sector firms presents a unique window of opportunity for the local government in Greene County, PA to gain political momentum and financial support in this area. While Greene County has made strides in broadband,[6] there is an opportunity to shape the state-wide debate about how the massive investments in broadband can promote food security.

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[2] *Broadband Resources,* PA Department of Community & Economic Development, https://dced.pa.gov/broadband-resources/

[3] *Pennsylvania Broadband Initiative,* Governor Tom Wolf, https://www.governor.pa.gov/broadband/

[4] *Windstream announces $1.3 million network investment in Greene County*, Greene County Messenger, https://www.heraldstandard.com/gcm/news/local_news/windstream-announces-million-network-investment-in-greene-county/article_deb9e373-beb4-5c99-a605-27100c46aebf.html

[5] *Windstream announces $1.3 million network investment in Greene County,* Greene County Messenger

[6] *Information Technology (IT) Office*, Greene County, http://www.co.greene.pa.us/secured/gc2/depts/adm/it/it.htm

Recommendations in Brief

1-Month Goal: **Update the GCFSP brochure to be a user-friendly road map that guides residents in accessing the existing resource network in Greene County.**

Greene County provides a variety of services to the community that address food insecurity and other connected concerns. After meeting with stakeholders and further researching the issue, our team concluded that Greene County would benefit from a singular, unifying, user-friendly source of information, which would contain all the services and outreach programs in the community. The Greene County Food Security Partnership currently provides a comprehensive brochure. We wish to build upon this brochure by providing more comprehensive information, such as contact information for all programs, and making it easier to follow with concrete action steps. The proposal is an updated all-in-one road map that will guide users through the process regaining food security. Our goal is not just to meet the immediate needs of hunger, but to also help individuals regain their ability to afford food security. In the brochure, action steps could include the food related services, such as pantry times and locations, as well as complementary programs like drug rehabilitation services or financial management programs. The road map could also include a visually appealing, comprehensive calendar. The purpose of the one month goal is to provide a quick win with immediate benefits. The road map should be a low cost solution with fast results.

The action steps for this recommendation are focused on using user-centered research and design to understand what information is most important and how to convey this information in the most useful way.

Action Steps - 1 Month Plan
- Build a team that includes stakeholders throughout the community, with the Food Security Partnership as a central figure   - Focus on user-centered research and design   - Participate in events, such as food bank distribution days, to understand how users interact with the existing system   - Meet with staff and volunteers of nonprofits addressing food insecurity to gather further perspectives on the knowledge and experiences of users   - Talk to members of the community, both those that use services to increase food security and those that do not   - Find out what information is most useful   - Use storyboards and other prototyping activities to understand which design elements should be incorporated into the brochure   - Put out the first draft of the brochure at the end of the first month   - Receive feedback from stakeholders, and make updates as needed

Five-Year Goal: <u>Develop a "Connectivity Coalition" dedicated to 1) placing food security at the center of conversations on long-term prosperity, and 2) connecting the community digitally through investments in broadband connection</u>

Greene County has a unique opportunity to develop a cutting-edge solution to food security by reframing it within the larger discussion of economic prosperity. To promote food security, we must address the root problems of food insecurity, such as access to education and economic opportunities.

Broadband internet access is a particularly important component of our recommendations because it gives residents access to a wider range of resources and opportunities. That helps to address these root issues.The Connectivity Coalition would draw support and capacity from a variety of stakeholders, building buy- in across the community.

It's important to take advantage of Governor Wolfe's focus on Broadband access.

a well-structured strategic plan might include full-time technical experts collaborating with food access coordinators, funded by both investments in broadband and grants related to hunger alleviation. With more people dedicated to this effort, the GCFSP (Green County Food Security Partnership) can be leveraged not only as a partnership for food security, but also as the vehicle for upward mobility through food and technological access.

Possible Funding Strategies:

Our team acknowledges that our recommendations could be costly. A limitation of our recommendations is that a cost-benefit analysis is outside of our scope. We recommend that the county run a cost benefit analysis for each of the short, mid, and long-term goals.

If the programs have a positive net social benefit, but the county cannot afford them, there are alternative funding strategies to consider. There are many examples of rural energy and broadband expansion efforts such as 1) the $15M Ohio Next Generation Health Care investment in fiber optic networks in partnership with Ohio Healthcare facilities and 2) Minnesota's $53M RS Fiber project connecting 10 rural cities and 17 townships.[7]

The funding mechanisms for these projects vary but include:
- Bank lending through the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA)
- Municipal Bonds, such as the Obligated Tax Abatement and Revenue Bonds
- State and Federal Grant funding, e.g. PA Broadband Initiative. Note: To-date, only $17.1M of these funds have been awarded- primarily to the Tri-County Rural Electric Cooperative, Inc.
- Joint-use agreements between service providers and sectors, e.g. energy and broadband
- Investments by stakeholder institutions, e.g. Hospitals, PennDOT, etc.

Funding mechanisms and infrastructure investments are flexible but should be well-matched to local assets and needs.

Conclusion

Our vision is to enhance food security in Greene County by connecting the community physically, socially, and digitally. Our recommendations seek to build interdisciplinary partnerships, enhance the flow of information, and invest in long-term economic development. We seek to make efforts more effective and efficient by focusing on greater uniformity of information and coordinating outreach efforts. With those factors in mind, the 1 Month and 1 Year goals emphasize team building, information gathering, and clarity of communications. The 5 year goals aim to reframe our understanding of food insecurity within the broader system and address system concerns, such as economic development. The "Connectivity Coalition" would be a visionary force within the community that both addresses short-term needs and encourages long-term economic health.

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[7] *Community Development Investments,* Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, https://muninetworks.org/sites/www.muninetworks.org/files/2018-11-OCC-pub-cdi-rural-broadband.pdf