Engaging Stakeholders, the First Step to Increasing Digital Inclusion
A Case Study of Broadband Rhode Island

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With incredible support from Stuart Freiman and
Alisson Walsh of Broadband Rhode Island.
I am convinced that if we hadn’t taken the initial steps of the stakeholder process and platform development we would not be having senior-level discussions with the Governor and his senior staff from education, workforce development, economic development, and administration. The stakeholder engagement process also helped us to clearly state the value of broadband access and use when we were asked “what is the relevance to my constituents?” The ideas we proposed are starting to make their way into the ideas and language of these officials.

Stuart Freiman, Program Director of Broadband Rhode Island

Introduction

This paper is intended to help local leadership striving to create cohesive 21st century communities learn from the digital inclusion stakeholder engagement experiences of Rhode Island. As a state with 1,212 square miles, five counties and a population of 1 million, Rhode Island’s experience is applicable to cities, counties and regions with similar goals.

Building Digital Communities: Pilot is an IMLS funded project to support and document the efforts of local leadership teams in nine pilot communities who are leading their communities efforts to increase information technology access and use. Building Digital Communities: Framework in Action (a project of IMLS) provides the guidance and structure for the pilot communities. The first step recommended in
BBRI Stakeholder Engagement Steps
The BBRI public policy engagement process can be divided into the following steps:

Step 1: Identify
- Who can help move the needle?
- Who has skin in the game?
- Who are evangelists/champions?

Step 2: Convene
- Meaningful, open, facilitated.
- What are the priorities?

Step 3: Keep Them Engaged
- Regular communications to keep them engaged.
- E-mail, e-blasts, Google Groups, etc.

Step 4: Document, Publish and Promote Agenda
- Tell the story, take pictures!
- Figure out who owns what.
- Establish buy-in.

Building a Digitally Inclusive Community. How to Begin?

At first glance, increasing access and use of information technology has obvious solutions – more home broadband access, more public broadband access, and more technology training. The reality is that successfully building a digitally inclusive community is complicated. Low cost broadband options are not always available (New America Foundation, 2012). Political situations often impede the development of community broadband networks (Greeley 2011). 65.4% of libraries report having insufficient public access internet workstations to meet patrons’ needs (Bertot 2012, p. 7). The cost of public access and training staff (sometimes called infomediaries) often restricts community technology centers and libraries from providing the necessary support to a community. When instructors are available, the greatest success tends to be when those instructors and the organizations they represented are trusted (Clyburn 2013).
To further complicate matters, the fact that two out of ten Americans do not use the Internet and four out of ten Americans do not have home broadband access (Pew Internet & American Life) is not a problem “owned” by only one sector. The IMLS document Building Digital Communities: Framework for Action, states “A community must engage all sectors to achieve digital inclusion—this is not just a product of government action, it needs to involve individuals, local and tribal governing bodies, business, the nonprofit community, special interest groups, and other stakeholders.” (p.3)

“Stakeholder analyses are now arguably more important than ever because of the increasingly interconnected nature of the world” (Bryson, 2004, p. 23). Building a digitally inclusive community is a huge task; to move the needle on the number of community members who use information technology to improve their lives, to support their families, and strengthen their communities. This is not a task that can be accomplished by one organization.

Local leaders working toward a more digitally inclusive community struggle with how to define stakeholders and how to engage stakeholders in a discussion. With a complicated community-wide problem that requires a community-wide coalition, the first step is to agree on the problem definition, the process of which will establish linkages between the stakeholders (Gray, 1989, p. 58). Referring to intra-government collaborations, but easily extended to community-wide collaborations, Bardach states “Trust, a problem solving ethos, and consensus-building processes, do not just appear, however. It takes time, effort, skill, a mix of constructive personalities who are around long enough to build effective relationships” (1998, p. 4).

**Broadband Public Policy Engagement in Rhode Island**

In 2009, Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC) began implementation of $4.5 million State Broadband Initiative grant awarded by NTIA (National Telecommunications Infrastructure Administration) through SBI (State Broadband Initiative). One of the projects funded by the grant to RIEDC focused on state broadband capacity building with the stated intention to: “Create a state broadband office that will assess the barriers to broadband adoption and usage in the state. The office will benchmark the state’s progress over a four-year period; develop a plan to improve broadband availability and usage in the state, utilizing input gathered through a series of community meetings over the course of the project; and create partnerships with the private and public sectors to facilitate greater broadband deployment and adoption.”

RIEDC named their initiative Broadband Rhode Island (BBRI). To accomplish their goals, BBRI determined there was a need to create broadband policy recommendations
and they wanted, in fact needed, the input of stakeholders. BBRI contracted with New Commons to help create and facilitate a stakeholder engagement process. New Commons provided essential process organization. According to Pam Christman, a participating stakeholder, former COO of OSHEAN and now Interim Assistant Vice President for Information Services at Rhode Island College, “We knew we needed to get from Point A to Point B and Point B wasn’t really defined. We were collaborating, not coordinating. That is not possible without a facilitator.”

**BBRI Stakeholder Engagement Process**
The BBRI public policy engagement process consisted of the following between January and June 2011:

1. **Core Group of 10 people met three times to create elements of the vision, produce the first list of strategic initiatives and draft initial policies.**
2. **Public Forum of 89 attendees brainstormed external conditions and proposed essential policies and initiatives.**
3. **Working Group of approximately 25 individuals met three times to integrate and prioritize the insights of the Core Group and the Forum participants.**
4. **Policy paper was produced and continues to be presented to state officials and stakeholders.**

Using NTIA SBI funding, Rhode Island had the opportunity to cover the coordination costs (mostly staff time) as well as professional consultants to pull together a stakeholder engagement process. Being a small state, Rhode Island has the advantage of being able to efficiently identify stakeholders from all defined sectors to participate in the stakeholder process and hold in-person meetings with reasonable time and expense.

As an output of the broadband public policy engagement process, BBRI published a comprehensive white paper entitled *Broadband Policy for Rhode Island: Achieving Competitive Advantage in the Internet Age.* This
Identifying Broadband Public Policy Stakeholders in Rhode Island

In order to convene stakeholders, project leadership must first determine who the stakeholders are. BBRI staff identified organizations, public or private, that had a vested interest in their constituents being digitally literate (either for the benefit of the constituents or for the benefit of the organization) plus individuals who understood the value of broadband (often due to involvement in broadband deployment projects).

When working with a large group of stakeholders, it is often beneficial to create multiple opportunities to participate in the process. Stakeholders do not need to all participate to the same extent or at the same time (Gray, 1989, p. 69). BBRI divided their stakeholder process into a Core Group, Public Forum and Working Group.

**BBRI Stakeholder Engagement Participation by Sector:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Core Group</th>
<th>Working Group</th>
<th>Forum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Agency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Based Organization</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected or Appointed Gov’t Official</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Working with their consultant, New Commons, the staff at BBRI chose to first invite a small group of stakeholders to participate in a **Core Group**. Nine individuals participated in the Core Group, representing libraries, United Way, internet carriers, the BTOP-funded “Beacon 2” project and the Lieutenant Governor’s office. These groups represented forward-looking and experienced “trusted partners” to help brainstorm and frame the stakeholder process while also beginning to promote the ideas with their respective constituents.

To ensure representation from a wide range of sectors, the Core Group defined sectors and representatives from each sector. It was a lengthy process but necessary to ensure a wide base of representation. The above table BBRI Stakeholder Engagement Participation by Sector shows us the BBRI stakeholder process had considerable representation from public (government) agencies. Only one elected official participated in one event. According to Alisson Walsh,
Communications and Outreach Manager at Broadband Rhode Island, “Our original intent was to aim toward upper management but we soon progressed toward educating and working with middle management. Those efforts resulted in a more informed presentation to upper management with specific recommendations. Our initial ideas were very broad and too wide-ranging for senior officials so it worked best to demonstrate concrete implementation plans to upper management in the next round.” There may have been an advantage to only having one elected official participating in BBRI’s stakeholder process. In an interview with Beth Ashman who wrote the BBRI Public Policy Report, Ashman states “BBRI was dealing with how things are done which is generally not what elected officials do. Additionally, the process was never seen as partisan.”

Building Digital Communities: Framework for Action recommends representation from elected and appointed local government, public agencies, community-based organizations, business and residents. Stuart Freiman, Program Director of Broadband Rhode Island stated, “Our work began before we saw Building Digital Communities: Framework for Action and we moved in the direction we felt appropriate. We then saw the report which confirmed and agreed with our approach and provided an articulated model which we found very useful to help quickly frame and visualize our ideas!”

Participation in the Public Forum was opened as wide as possible. It was an invitation only event but anyone who requested an invitation was extended one.

Working Group participants were gathered from the Core Group and the Public Forum.
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Convening Broadband Public Policy Stakeholders in Rhode Island

Not only does stakeholder engagement ensure a variety of concerns are heard and integrated into the outcome, the stakeholder engagement process itself instigates a community-wide discussion that may not have otherwise taken place. Overlapping interests are discovered and relationships are strengthened and/or built. Bryson states “there may be a complex interaction between formulating problems and searching for solutions, with the two jointly contributing to organizing participation” (2004, p. 25).

According to Stuart Freiman, Program Director of BBRI, “In order to get to the discussion of policy, you first have to educate people and give them a platform to talk – to draw out ideas in an open but ultimately systematic way. The early part of the stakeholder process was just that, education and sharing ideas. Also, we felt strongly that the effort to disseminate

Digital Inclusion Stakeholder Sectors

- Local city, county and tribal governments
  - Elected leaders
  - Senior appointed officials
- Public agencies
  - Libraries
  - K-12 Schools
  - Higher Ed, especially community colleges and adult education programs
  - Economic development agencies
  - Agencies with community centers such as recreation departments
  - Public housing departments
  - Technology/Digital management office
- Nonprofit community based organizations
  - Serve targeted populations (such as low income, homeless, disabled, ethnic cultures)
  - Serving populations likely to need access and training to digital technologies such as those that provide supportive housing, job training, childcare.
  - Community foundations
- Business
  - Broadband service providers
  - Chambers of Commerce and other business groups
  - Technology associations
- Residents
information shouldn’t come just from RIEDC, but from within the organizations that represented different constituencies as RIEDC chiefly represents the business community. We needed, and found, a cross section of sectors in Rhode Island to participate in the process and support the agenda."

The role of the BBRI Core Group was to create elements of the vision, produce the first list of strategic initiatives, draft initial policies and help define stakeholders who should be invited to the Public Forum.

The Public Forum had multiple purposes. The most obvious intent of the Public Forum was to broaden the conversation to the larger Rhode Island community and to gather a variety of voices to capture a broader voice in the broadband policy framework. The Public Forum also helped educate the participants regarding digital inclusion and gauged the interest of individuals and organizations who could serve on the Working Group or be supportive at a later date regarding specific policy recommendations. The Public Forum began with an overview of broadband access and use in Rhode Island. Highlights of the Public Forum are in a video created by BBRI. The attendees were divided into small groups at each round table and given discussion questions. After discussing each question, the attendees voted via brown paper activities.

The small group discussion topics at the Public Forum included:

- Is the National Broadband Plan (created by the FCC) “right on”?
- Which criteria determine which broadband policy areas rise to the top?
- Of the twelve broadband policy areas already defined, which are your top three?
- Of the prioritized broadband policy areas, what are precise policies we should be working toward?

The Public Forum gave participants an opportunity to participate in the development of ideas and have their voices heard. Knowing the exchange of ideas was facilitated in a well-organized process and was captured motivated them to actively participate. Conversely, it also helped BBRI staff to determine who were potential project champions. The passion generated by the participants in the Rhode Island Public Forum was palpable and they left feeling energized that they were able to contribute to the larger initiative.

The Working Group comprised of members of the Core Group and Public Forum who were willing to devote time and expertise to shape the policy recommendations and set priorities. According to Robert Leaver of New Commons, “We used one working group for all the policy areas, but worked in sub-groups on policy topics in the big workshop. People were encouraged to leave their expertise and comfort zones and get in to other conversations. In this way, we better wove the connections and interdependencies together. And everyone heard and saw all of the policy proposals.” The Working Group officially consisted of 42 stakeholders. Approximately half of the members of the Working Group attended all the meetings.
The Outcomes of Broadband Public Policy Engagement in Rhode Island

The vision created by the Broadband Rhode Island Public Policy Engagement Process: Rhode Island will increase the number of digital citizens who use broadband to increase productivity, enhance quality of life and benefit society.

The end goal of the BBRI stakeholder engagement process was to create policy recommendations that would increase technology access and use in Rhode Island. January 2012 BBRI released Broadband Policy Rhode Island: Achieving Competitive Advantage in the Internet Age. The document details policy recommendations focused upon statewide solutions. The background information defining the issues and potential solutions are also useful to local efforts.

When asked why BBRI set policy recommendations as the end goal to the stakeholder process, Stuart Freiman explained, “Given the trend towards everything moving online (for example, the current unemployment rate and the need for people to find jobs online and learn new skills to qualify for “new economy” jobs), this is and will continue to be the states’ problem. Big changes in thinking need to happen. To me, big changes mean big ideas and these are usually at the level of policy – What is the state government’s role in broadband access and use? What are we going to do about it? How do we ensure that our online services will be effective and widely used? On the other side, how are we going to ensure that our citizens can effectively use these systems and don’t get further disenfranchised? These questions all point to policy development and policy-level decisions.”

BBRI clearly defined policy recommendations as not being limited to legislation. To ensure the Working Group (the stakeholders synthesizing and prioritizing the recommendations from the Public Forum) understood what a “policy recommendation” could be, BBRI and New Commons led the Working Group through a discussion of what public policy is, what it is not and the variety of approaches to creating policy.

The stakeholders narrowed the broadband policy recommendations down to five items. These five recommendations are described in the Broadband Policy Rhode Island white paper. Three of the recommendations are:

1. Support government agencies to utilize the internet for improved service delivery while reducing costs.
2. Support and publicize digital literacy education.
3. Budget to sustain public access points with up-to-date operating
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systems and fast connection speeds.

Two of the recommendations are functional, in that they support the other three:

1. Creation of a state “Broadband Policy Advisory Board”
2. Adoption of a sustainable funding model for internet-enabled public services.

The Broadband Policy Rhode Island white paper also includes an explanation of the impact of Rhode Island residents' broadband access and use upon nine sectors:

1. Economic Development
2. Workforce Development
3. Open Government
4. Civic Engagement
5. Libraries
6. Healthcare
7. Energy
8. Public Safety
9. Education
The impact of the Rhode Island broadband public policy engagement process goes beyond the intended policy changes. The process brought people together with overlapping interests which resulted in new or strengthened relationships and new collaborative projects. In an interview with Howard Boksenbaum, participating stakeholder and Chief Library Officer for Rhode Island, he states, “This project spawned other projects. It created a fountain from which many can drink.”

**Conclusion**

There is much we can learn from the Rhode Island broadband public policy engagement process. Boiling it all down to five essential lessons gains us the following list.

**Lessons We Can Learn from BBRI**

- Mid-level management of government agencies is just as valuable as agency directors and elected officials.
- Defining the stakeholders and engaging them through the process is time consuming but well worth the effort.
- Impacting multiple small policy changes has cumulative effect.
- The relationship building that occurs during the stakeholder process can lead to partnerships and projects supportive of the end goal.
- A third party facilitator is necessary to stay focused and provide an organized process.

An important supporting factor to BBRI’s stakeholder process being perfect for a case study is their very complete documentation, most of which is available on their website.

**BBRI Stakeholder Documentation**

- BBRI Public Policy Report
- BBRI One-Pager
- BBRI Public Forum Video
- Broadband Policy for Rhode Island

Because BBRI was a federal grant recipient, they had two important advantages. The NTIA funding covered the cost of a facilitator and encouraged stakeholder participation. According to Beth Ashman Collins, “Being able to fund a professional facilitator is huge. Federal dollars made it real to people. Take those 2 things out and you may not get as much engagement.”

Federal and national support of digital inclusion is important but ultimately, digital inclusion is a local issue that requires local solutions. In Digital Cities (2013), Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko make the argument that “place matters” in regard to broadband policies that impact digital inclusion (p.9). They state the reasons place matters is due to:

1. Local governments are responsible for a variety of policies and for funding programs.
2. Social inequality is spatially patterned in metropolitan areas and by neighborhood.
Because place matters, community leaders who want to create cohesive 21st century communities, must learn from each other. This document is a small piece in the information sharing that is necessary to guide community leaders ensuring all members of society have the broadband access and digital skills necessary to succeed.

Since federal financial support is not likely, we must create solutions not dependent upon the federal government. One source of support is the IMLS funded Building Digital Communities: Pilot. OCLC is working with the pilot communities, documenting their efforts and creating resources helpful to all communities working toward digital inclusion.
References


