

Testimony of John A. Rosenthal
National Small Town Alliance
Before
The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am John Rosenthal, President of the National Small Town Alliance. I am pleased and honored to be here this afternoon to discuss computers and technology for small towns and rural schools in America. The National Small Town Alliance is a non-profit organization that serves the interest of the twenty-five thousand small towns and rural communities in America. It does so by advocating for these communities before federal agencies and by presenting their issues to Congress. We are happy to see this effort to help small towns and schools get computers and other technology equipment.

For more than ten years now, I have been personally working to help small towns get excess and surplus government equipment. The majority of that work has been through and in collaboration with the United States Department of Energy's Environmental Justice Program. The Department of Energy is committed to Environmental Justice. Environmental Justice requires that all peoples impacted by a decision have a reasonable opportunity to influence the decision. Two fundamental components of DOE's environmental program are public participation and capacity. The Department believes that all stakeholders should have meaningful and knowing participation the agency's environmental decisions to the fullest extent of the law. Where various populations lack the capacity to navigate the DOE decision-making process, or lack the ability to respond to technical or complex matters, DOE helps these populations gain the requisite capacity or leads them to trained and qualified technical assistance.

DOE found that oftentimes small towns, rural areas, minority and low-income communities are limited in their ability to participate in various federal processes. This is due to the lack of information, technology, expertise and decision-makers. For many, the answer or technical assistance is only a keystroke away. But for those without a computer or Internet connection, the answer or technical assistance is not just a keystroke away, and may just be away.

In order to support small towns and rural communities near DOE facilities, the agency teamed with The Urban Environment Institute at Howard University to provide small towns and rural communities with excess and surplus computers, training and technical assistance. There was also help with Internet access. The majority of the technical assistance came from The DOE Dr. Samuel P. Massie Chairs of Excellence, deans and professors from Historically Black Colleges and Universities with schools of engineering.

Our experiences with small towns and rural communities near DOE facilities demonstrated the depth of digital challenges throughout the country. As news spread

about DOE's efforts to provide computers to communities near its facilities, requests for computers and community technology centers came from numerous quarters.

These requests lead to DOE's environmental justice program forming a partnership with the United States Department of Agriculture's National Office of Outreach. The National Office of Outreach was aware of the Computers for Learning program and saw this program as a steady source of equipment for small towns, schools and community groups.

DOE and USDA have been very successful distributing excess and surplus computers to needy communities. This has been a successful partnership that has distributed nearly 5,000 computers and established a number of community technology centers. The majority of the computers have come through the Computers for Learning program under Executive Order 12999. Other agencies that have contributed to this effort include General Services Administration, Department of Treasury and the National Defense University.

During the life of the DOE/USDA computer distribution partnership, we have seen a number of small towns and schools receive computers as the only ones available to them. There are a number of schools without computer labs and small towns with insufficient computers to run their daily operations. However, I want to point out just one situation.

The November 30, 2007 edition of the Augusta Chronicle printed the following story.

Kids at Lake Forest Hills Elementary sing about their computer needs. (Augusta Chronicle, November 2007)

The designated computer lab at Lake Forest Hills Elementary School has one small problem: no computers.



Chris Thelen/Staff

Lake Forest Hills Elementary School fifth-graders work on one of the school's outdated computers. The school, children and PTA are working to raise money to buy computers for their lab. The school isn't alone. It is one of 15 in Richmond County that has computerless computer labs. Even the computers that Lake Forest has in its classrooms are outdated, many of them 10 to 12 years old. And this despite being in one of the county's more prosperous areas...

"We're making it work," teacher Stephen Fox said, adding that an equipped computer lab would allow students to practice state standardized tests online. "If

we're making success now, the sky is the limit if we had resources." Some of Lake Forest Hills' classroom computers are so slow they won't run new math software the school uses, Mr. Fox said. "We're going into the war with literacy not fully armed," he said.

Richmond County's technology plan calls for every school to have a computer lab and the ratio of pupils per computer to be lowered to 4 to 1. At Lake Forest Hills, its nine pupils for every one computer and some schools have a ratio of 15 to 1. Carol Taylor, the director of educational media and technology, said money from the 1-cent special purpose local option sales tax will be a "giant step toward meeting that goal" of reducing the ratio. She recommends the \$6 million in sales tax money be used to establish computer labs, add computers and replace old computers and servers. An advisory committee will help the school board decide how best to spend the money.

Lake Forest, however, has become creative in its efforts to replace old computers and fill its computer lab. That includes a music video with the schoolchildren singing about their technology needs. The video was for a contest the school entered in hopes of winning money to purchase computers. The school is also writing grants, and its PTA is raising money. But Mr. Fox said parents question whether they should be providing computers. They worry that digging into their pockets now will hurt the school later when tax money is divvied up, and they are hesitant to pay more toward what they are already paying for. Lake Forest Hills Principal Pearl Bailie agreed. "We've been working our bottoms off right now, but we don't want it to count against us," she said, adding that the school even held penny drives last year. "I want (computers) for today, but our children need them for the future."

There are 15 schools in Richmond County, GA with computerless computer labs. Augusta is in Richmond County. Augusta is known for the Masters and is better off by far than many jurisdictions in other states. It is estimated that the federal government replaces approximately 500,000 computers each year. With such a turnover, there should be no school in America with computerless computer labs.

How can HR752 solve the problem of computerless computer labs in Richmond County and elsewhere in America?

First let's examine HR752 in light of Executive Order 12999. While HR752 supersedes Executive Order 12999, it contains some of the same provisions found in 12999. Therefore, we should examine the carryover provisions and discuss their effectiveness.

HR752 plugs one of the holes in 12999 in that it places small towns, counties and libraries on equal footing with schools. It also affirmatively states the intent to make equipment available to small towns as well as schools. It can go further and state an intent to revive small towns and rural communities through technology. That goal can be accomplished by creating a series of regional technology centers that can serve numerous functions including outreach centers for the United States Department of Agriculture and other Federal agencies.

Executive Order 12999 makes computers available to schools and nonprofits. However, the Computers for Learning program places a higher value on providing computers to

schools than to non-profit community based technology centers that can provide resources to meet a variety of community needs. These needs include after-school and weekend technology programs for students without access to technology at home.

Students without technology at home and at school, like the Richmond County students, are out of options. If they happen to live in a small town where the library has five computers connected to the Internet, is open from 10 to 6, closed on Sunday, and limits Internet use to 30 minutes when someone is waiting, there are few options. The limited library option is available if the student can walk to the library or get a ride from a parent or friend. If the library is 25 – 30 miles away, the limited library option is taken away.

The current implementation of Executive Order 12999 does not include distribution to non-profits to create and manage community technology centers. The Federal government recognizes that it has that authority but a policy precludes providing computers for that purpose. Rather, the Federal government takes the position that the policy is not inconsistent with the Executive Order, it just does not go as far as the Executive Order. It further suggests that the community technology centers can be worked through an educational institution to be consistent with the policy. A much easier way to help rural communities and rural students is to change the policy. HR752 solves that problem.

Community Technology Centers

HR752 should provide funds to establish a series of community technology centers in small towns and rural areas that have deficient technology resources to support public schools and municipalities.

Since 1999, the Department of Energy (DOE) has worked through an informal collaboration to create community capacity through technology. This project has involved providing computers, training, and technical assistance to municipalities, schools, and community groups in selected areas across the country. This informal collaboration now includes the General Services Administration, the United States Department of Agriculture, Tennessee State University and DOE's Massie Chairs. Many small towns and rural areas and their constituents require assistance to gain access to computers, training, technical assistance, and connections to the Internet. Otherwise, efforts to improve the Federal government's value to these municipalities and their citizens through technology will fail.

This past year, DOE and USDA and EPA collaborated with others to create two such centers in South Carolina. Each center will employ technology to facilitate planning, resource development, communication, and project management. The technology centers will also include online technical assistance to help community groups, public schools, small towns, and rural communities address energy, environmental, economic development, academic and other challenges. The guiding principle of each project is to build community capacity for environmental cleanup, waste management, academic excellence and sustainable economic development in a manner that permits the local host community to grow and develop over time with little or no additional assistance.

Academic Achievement: One project goal is to support academic achievement through technology. Many rural schools lack sufficient computers and software to allow all students ample time on the computer and Internet to complete their research and assignments. That problem is compounded when teamed with the fact that many students lack access to computers and the Internet at home. This effort will provide high-tech resources, including technology training and classes, for children and their parents who would otherwise not have access to current technology. They will have additional utility in the rural communities without adequate library services. This effort will work to establish a virtual library for students and parents to access books and resources not otherwise available to them.

Students who participate in the centers will discover a variety of resources and activities:

- Use of up to date computers, software and printers;
- Training in computer and software use by qualified instructors and volunteers;
- Access to the Internet (proposed);
- An environment in which to complete homework assignments with assistance from volunteers and peers;
- The opportunity to use donated computers in their homes; and,
- Participation in educational and enrichment activities.

Economic Development Project: Another project goal is to employ entrepreneurship to create jobs and economic development in small towns and rural communities. That will be accomplished through a series of community and municipal technology centers. The centers will have the following features:

- Computers and high speed internet access
- Information Technology training
- Online and in-person technical assistance
- Entrepreneurship classes and business assistance
- Small business incubator

The centers will be used to create an information technology industry in small towns and rural communities that can provide services to Federal agencies, state government and the private sector.

Federal Information Technology Mentor/Protégé program: Each year the Federal government spends billions of dollars in information technology purchases. Some of these purchases could be accomplished through small businesses and entrepreneurs that are participants in the centers created with excess and surplus federal government computers. HR752 can create a mentor/protégé program that will partner Federal information technology contractors with small businesses and entrepreneurs in small towns and rural areas as a means to create additional jobs and thus increase economic development in these communities. Federal information technology request for proposals

could include a provision that rewards applicants that include a small business or entrepreneur from one of the community technology centers on the proposal team. There are current federal programs that make such awards in other instances such as veterans' preferences, 8(a) companies and USDA's BRAVO program. The Federal Information Technology Mentor/Protégé would be another such program.

In summary, there is a great need to get excess and surplus government computers into small towns and rural schools. The most effective manner to distribute computers to rural schools is through regional technology centers. Schools that are not located in a federal facility may find the transportation cost prohibitive. The centers can be developed in a manner to support a variety of community goals including academic achievement and economic development. The centers should have the ability to recoup their out of pocket cost for transporting equipment from federal facilities, refurbishing technology equipment and distributing the equipment to schools and others. Small businesses and entrepreneurs from the centers' incubators should be teamed with federal information technology contractors to spur employment and economic development in small towns and rural areas. I would also urge the Committee to include funds in HR752 to fund a series of Regional Refurbishing and Distribution Centers in small towns and rural areas. These measures will make giant strides toward eliminating poverty in small town, rural America.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon. I would be pleased to answer any questions that you may have.