

## Rural Internet Use for Government Services Lagging

What are the characteristics and nature of rural household internet use? To what extent have government approaches to on-line programs and services improved or hindered access by rural citizens and households?

Many have argued that the internet can 'level the playing field' between urban and rural citizens. Indeed, many Federal Government programs use this as a basis for action.

One of the 11 priorities of The Federal Framework for Action on Rural Canada, for example, is to "improve access to federal government programs and services for rural Canadians."

The Connecting Canadians Agenda includes a number of interlinked initiatives: Canada On-Line; Smart Communities; Canadian Content On-Line; Electronic Commerce; and Canadian Governments on-Line. The federal government has recently established Rural and Remote Canada On-Line, a "single window to knowledge, information, programs and services for and about rural and remote Canada."

A federal government report card notes that Service Canada has been upgraded and that the number of rural Access Centres has increased. Access Centres are well used and users are highly satisfied with the service. It is government's intention over the next few years to roll out the Government On-Line initiative to implement government transactions on-line and accessible to rural Canadians.



Of concern to observers and rural residents alike is that the "digital divide" not create a problem of equitable access to government services, programs, and information. Current approaches of the federal government appear to respect the diversity of access preferences and practice in rural areas.

A number of studies have reported on internet users

across Canada. Data from the 2000 General Social Survey shows 55% of urban households and 45% of rural households reporting they had access to the internet from any location – with a slightly lower percentage having access from their homes.

Collectively, studies relating to internet use have shown that internet users are generally younger, male, and with higher incomes and higher levels of education. In rural areas, many older Canadians do not use the internet and reported they had no desire to do so. This suggests a digital divide and requires careful and considered approaches to the provision of services and programs on the internet.

Data from a survey of 1995 rural households in the summer of 2001 indicates that, although a fairly high percentage of rural households use the internet (54%), a relatively small percentage of those use it for any type of government contact (321 of 983 respondents, or 36.1%). This includes finding information about government programs and services, contacting government staff and elected officials, and filling

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in on-line forms for various services.

Those who use the internet for government contact reported deriving more benefits and improving access to information they need. Not surprisingly, those who either contact the government using the internet or complete government forms on-line agreed that the internet has improved their access to government information.

The demographic profile of the rural households who are internet users in general closely matches that of previous studies - younger adults, higher levels of education and income. This is also the same profile of those using the internet for the purpose of connecting with government. This reality confirms there is a need to balance the internet with other means of delivering federal and provincial government information and services. But for older residents and those

who prefer face-to-face contact with people may feel alienated by the closure of some government offices in some communities.

There are significant barriers to be overcome if the desire were to move most or all government access to the internet. Canadians who have not been exposed to the internet through work or education are less likely to be users of it and must be eased into internet use. Those with lower incomes are less likely to use the internet at Access Centres and cannot afford home computers. However, those who are using the internet for accessing government services and information note greater improvements for their households.

There is great opportunity for rural communities to pursue a greater 'connectedness' agenda. A continued and more

concerted effort at the local level to proactively invite and demonstrate to non-internet users the opportunities and advantages of internet access is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Public Community Access Centres remain a positive and needed piece of community infrastructure. The key will be to help people understand and learn to use these facilities to their advantage as a compliment to their more traditional and preferred means of government contact.

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### Contact Options for Rural Citizens

- 1-800-OCANADA
- Pocket Directory of Rural Programs and Services (available on-line at [www.rural.gc.ca](http://www.rural.gc.ca))
- Canadian Rural Information Service ([cris@agr.gc.ca](mailto:cris@agr.gc.ca), 1-888-757-8725)



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