

Sen. Patrick Leahy, Sen. Bernie Sanders, and Rep. Peter Welch announced Friday that the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) has awarded Vermont a \$1.8 million grant to help businesses, farms, towns and nonprofits use online resources to bolster disaster resiliency in the wake of Irene and other disasters that struck Vermont in 2011. The Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD) applied for the grant out of a pool of disaster funding Leahy, Sanders and Welch fought to include in the federal budget last year.

VCRD will use the funds to implement the Vermont Digital Economy Project – a \$2.2 million effort that will offer a suite of online tools, broadband infrastructure and counseling targeted up to 25 yet-to-be identified Irene-impacted or flood-hit communities.

Communities interested in participating will be asked to submit applications to VCRD in the coming months. If a community is chosen, it will work with VCRD and the Vermont Digital Economy Project partners (the Snelling Center for Government, IBM, Microsoft, the Vermont Department of Libraries, the Vermont Small Business Development Center, and Vermont State Colleges) to improve community connections, grow jobs and prevent future disasters from debilitating disaster response systems and business operations.

Leahy said, "Irene had a devastating impact on Vermont's physical infrastructure – especially our roads, bridges, houses, businesses and town halls. But virtual infrastructure helped some communities recover more quickly. Vermonters depended on social media, online message boards and websites to find a meal, find a place to sleep or find a way to the nearest gas station that had power. Businesses that were online or that had their vital documents in the cloud didn't lose as much precious time and business as those offline. VCRD will help strengthen our already well-connected physical communities by also making them well-connected virtual communities. "

Sanders said, "This award is another step towards recovering from Irene, but even more importantly, it will help Vermont communities become more resilient should another disaster strike. With global warming contributing to an increase in the severity of extreme weather, we must invest in helping Vermont communities, residents, and businesses prepare to minimize disruptions from future storms."

Welch said, "Vermonters learned a great deal in the aftermath of Irene about the incredible

ability of communities to come together and get the job done in the face of severe devastation. But we also learned about our vulnerabilities and how we can better prepare for future natural disasters. This grant will help Vermont continue on the road to recovery and rebuild the state so that is even stronger than before Irene hit."

The work will build on VCRD's e-Vermont Community Broadband Project which provided 24 communities across the state with similar online tools. Moretown, which was severely impacted by flooding from Irene, participated in the e-Vermont project and made use of several of the new online tools they received, especially Front Porch Forum, in the immediate aftermath of Irene to provide information to residents struggling to recover.

Meg Allison of Moretown said, "In Moretown, the connections we developed through Front Porch Forum gave us an instant ability to share news of flood conditions, to mobilize resources in our recovery, and to provide support for each other, neighbor to neighbor, during our short-term and long-term recovery. Strong online services, and the knowledge of how to use them, provides Moretown with a reliable and robust communication network for self-sufficiency and community building, preparing us for future emergencies as well."

VCRD Executive Director Paul Costello said, "The Digital Economy Project will help communities recover, build community connections and economic momentum and be better prepared for future challenges. It will also help Vermont communities that are now gaining infrastructure in line with Governor Shumlin's goal of universal service, build innovative ways to best use these new services to improve local communications and creative business development."

Vermont's Irene Recovery Officer Dave Rapaport said, "Governor Shumlin has often repeated his determination that we need to build back stronger than Irene found us. Through this project VCRD will help deliver on this commitment."

When a community is chosen by VCRD to participate in the Vermont Digital Economy Project, it will choose from a menu of tools aimed at increasing internet literacy, improving access to broadband, and utilizing online tools to communicate with citizens. Some of these options include the establishment of a social media network platform, like Front Porch Forum, to better engage citizenry, the creation of wifi hot spots, providing internet interns at libraries, and working with a team of IBM professionals to implement best practices.

Businesses and nonprofit organizations in these chosen communities will receive one-on-one specialized counseling from the Vermont Small Business Development Center to start a website, expand their online presence, and implement a disaster contingency plan.

VCRD is the most recent recipient of EDA disaster funds. Late last year Leahy, Sanders and Welch announced two awards -- a \$300,000 grant to the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development and a \$470,000 award to the Windham Regional Commission and the Bennington County Regional Commission. The delegation fought to include EDA disaster funding in the FY12 appropriations bills as part of a comprehensive federal disaster response to Irene. As a result, Vermont organizations were eligible to respond to a federal funding opportunity released by the EDA's Eastern Region for their share of more than \$50 million of funding reserved for states impacted by disasters in federal fiscal year 2011.

Acting U.S. Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank said, "The Obama administration is committed to helping communities impacted by natural disasters rebound and rebuild stronger than ever. The EDA grant announced today will enhance the availability of reliable Internet services and enable small businesses in rural regions in Vermont to be more resilient to future disruptions."