

When 167 Katrina refugees arrived in Omaha, state health officials were able to access their immunization records electronically and update children's shots quickly and efficiently. "Deputy Darci" helps students at her tiny parochial school stay safe online by tracking their activity and nipping inappropriate language and potential bullying in the bud. And it's possible to electronically monitor aging parents to allow them to stay in their homes and avoid a nursing home.

These are a few ways broadband Internet access is transforming modern life. The examples were shared recently at the annual Broadband Connecting Nebraska Conference in Lincoln.

Broadband access no longer is a luxury; it's a must-have, said Brian Scaffidi, senior director of project management and quality for Broadmap, a company hired by the Nebraska Public Service Commission to collect, verify, report and map the availability, speed and location of broadband internet access across the state.

Breakout sessions throughout the day gave conference participants a chance to learn how broadband is changing government, business, health care, education, human resources and agriculture.

For example, Darci Lindgren, computer technology coordinator for Lindsay Holy Family School, said broadband access has opened up a variety of possibilities for her tiny, 100-student school. Before the school hired a Spanish teacher, students took Spanish online from a teacher in another area school. Students also go on virtual field trips; collaborate on projects with students in other states, even Canada; and take classes from Central Community College.

Lindgren also helps students understand the pitfalls of life on the Internet, teaching them that any activity is part of one's "digital footprint" that never really goes away. She cracks down on cyberbullying and online gossip among students.

"They call me Deputy Darci," she said. "It's not the most fun part of my job, but I feel it's the most important."

The ramifications of increased broadband access in health care are also significant, said Dr. Joann Schaefer, chief medical officer in Nebraska. The state now has immunization records available online and is one of just three states that allows parental access to them, meaning the days of keeping track of immunizations on a paper record are over.

In 2005, when 167 refugees from Hurricane Katrina were flown to Omaha, Nebraska health officials were able to access their immunization records from Louisiana and update their shots.

Nebraska also is piloting a new "syndromic surveillance" project that collects health data in nearly real time to provide immediate analysis and feedback to public health officials. Someday, this could help officials detect and monitor disease outbreaks more effectively, Schaefer said.

David Lewis, a partner in TCA Consulting, shared a variety of Internet gadgets that he said are available, relatively inexpensive but largely unknown. While the industry is good at producing such gadgets, he said, it doesn't do a very good job of marketing them.

For example, children can help their aging parents live longer at home with cameras that allow them to monitor their safety.

Vinton Cerf, vice president and "chief Internet evangelist at Google," told conference participants, "The Internet is not done yet ... It's just beginning."

Cerf is credited as one of the "fathers of the Internet" for his work with Bob Kahn in the early 1970s, which led to the ARPA architecture that evolved into the Internet.

Latest statistics show that 2.3 of seven billion people in the world are online. While 78 percent

of North Americans have Internet access, only 26 percent of Asians and 13 percent of Africans do.

Improving Internet security, safety and privacy is critical, he said. Technology exists to vastly improve those qualities, but their success depends on people making a “conscious decision” to use them.

Sponsors of the conference were the AIM Institute, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebraska Public Service Commission, Nebraska Department of Economic Development and the Nebraska Information Technology Commission’s Community Council.