

Community Engagement through 21st Century Telecommunications

How can people be engaged within their community if they don't have access to telecommunications?

Sandra McNally and Amy Goldman, *Institute on Disabilities at Temple University*

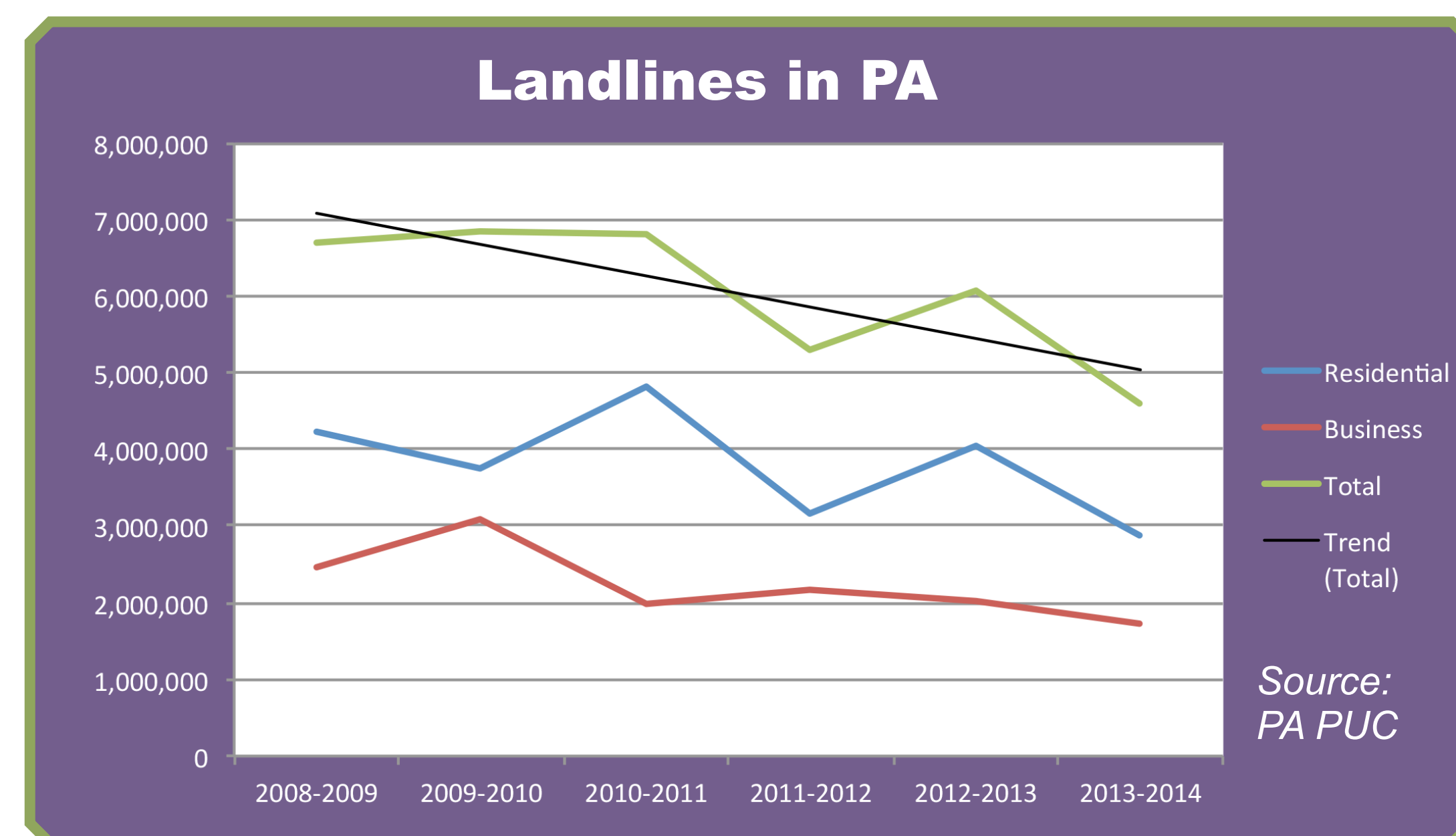


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Introduction

Mobile phones were once a luxury alternative to landlines, payphones, and pagers. Within the past ten years, mobile phones have become the primary mode of communication. They have made payphones and pagers obsolete, with landlines not far behind. The number of households who do not have landlines and only use mobile phones increases yearly. As of 2012, 26% of Pennsylvania residents lived in a household that did not even have a landline because they only used their mobile phones.

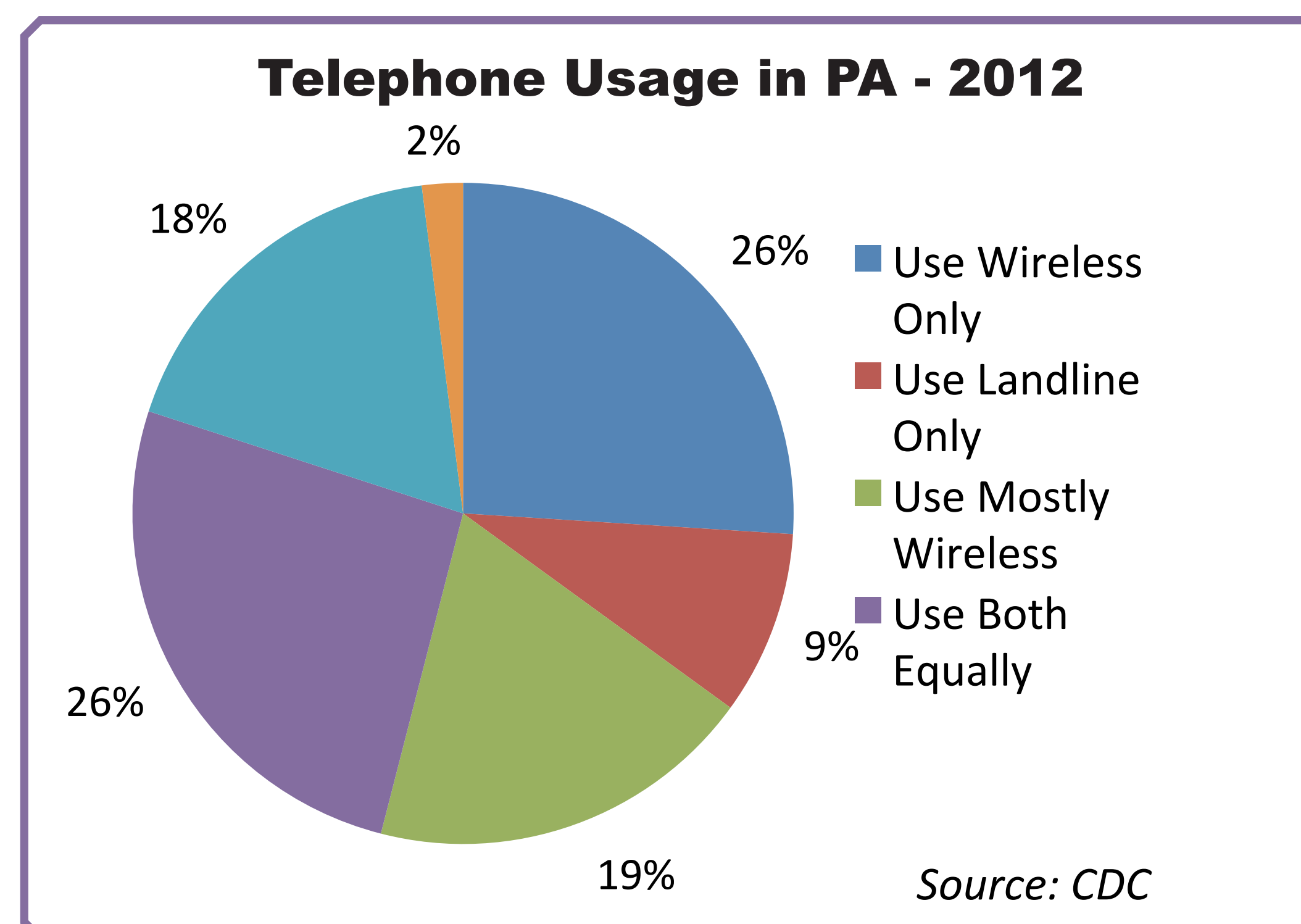
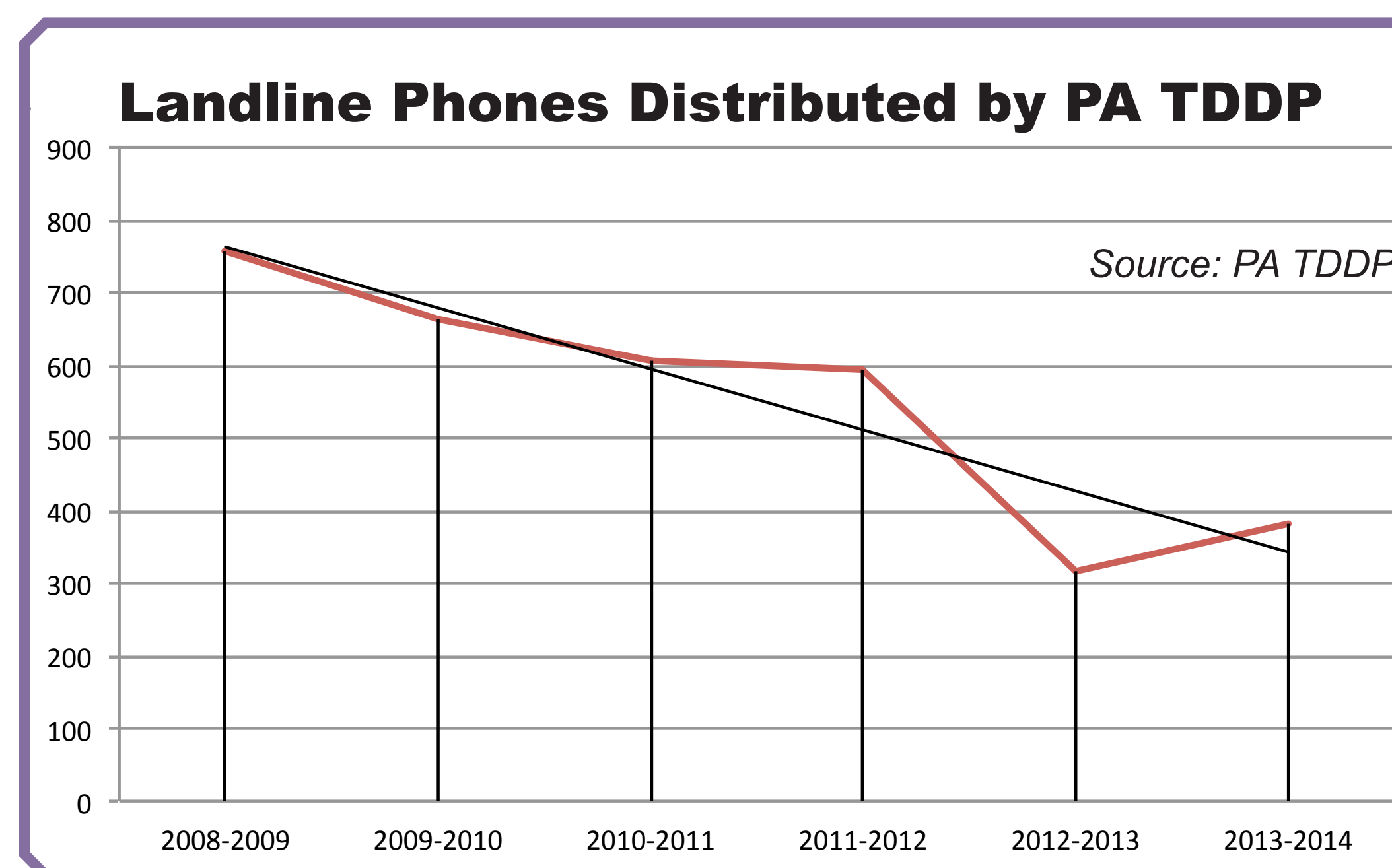
Created by legislation in 1995 and operated by the Institute on Disabilities since 2007, Pennsylvania's Telecommunication Device Distribution Program (TDDP) provides specialized landline telephone equipment to income-eligible Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Having a landline is a requirement for the program since TDDP equipment is funded through a surcharge on landlines.



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Need

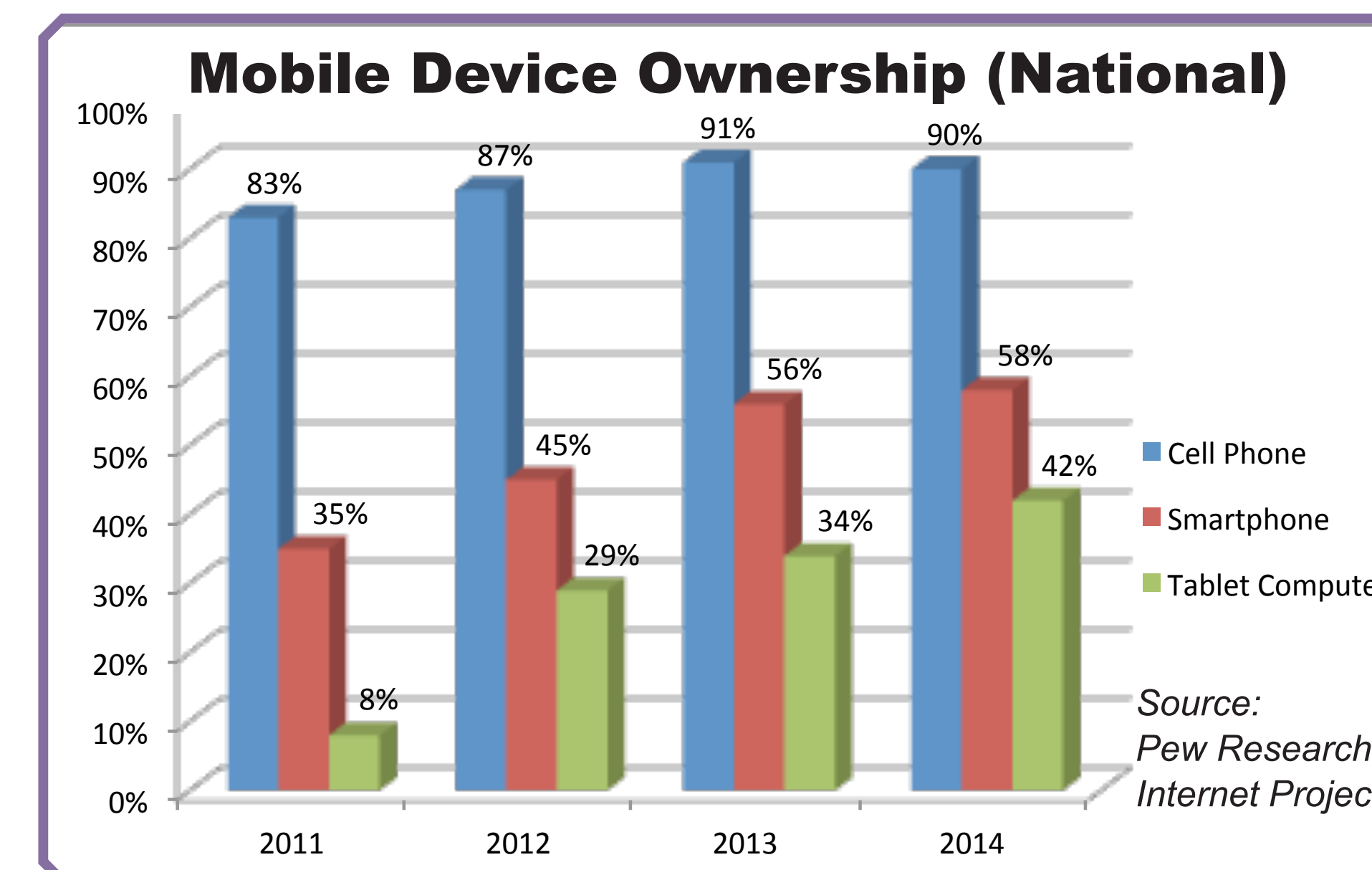
Wireless devices are now an integral part of daily life. The prevalence of mobile technology among American adults is continuously increasing. People with disabilities prefer accessible generic technologies; people who are Deaf have all but abandoned "traditional" TTYs in favor of video communication and texting (where they can afford those technologies).



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Statement of Purpose

Many states have already recognized that wireless devices are an essential element of communication and offer Internet and wireless options through their telecommunication device distribution programs. States currently distributing wireless devices are: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Texas, and Wyoming.



Wireless devices allow individuals to:

- Customize devices in a way best suited to their specific communication needs
- Increase communication options, such as facilitating face-to-face communication by translating text to Braille, placing video-based relay calls from any location, and increasing the number of individuals with which one is able to communicate.
- Use standard wireless features such as video chat, instant messaging, and email.
- Use the numerous features and applications for wireless devices created to assist individuals with disabilities.

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The Institute on Disabilities Pathway to Systems Change

Expanding Pennsylvania's TDDP to include wireless technologies will provide equal access and promote the engagement of people with disabilities in their communities.

- **May 2014** Conference call with Public Utility Commission (PUC) to identify equity issues
- **"Statement of the problem"** was developed; formed Wireless Coalition with key stakeholders
- **June 2014** Meeting of Wireless Coalition; initiative approved by the AT Advisory Committee
- **July 2014** PUC approves inclusion of technologies that deliver captions via the internet
- **November 2014** Submit proposal for wireless pilot to PUC and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)
- **January 2015** Implementation of Phase I of Wireless Pilot, distributing WiFi-only iPads, iPad Minis and iPod Touches
- **2015** Evaluate findings from Phase I, begin Phase II, adding additional devices, including cell phones

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Challenges Ahead

Sustainability of a permanent wireless program. In order to fund a program, a legislative change will be needed.

References

Stephen J. Blumberg et al., *Wireless Substitution: State-level Estimates From the National Health Interview Survey 2012*, 6 (2013), www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr070.pdf.

Pew Research Center, *Mobile Technology Fact Sheet* (January 2014), www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet.

Pew Research Center, *Cell Phone Activities 2013*, 3 (2013), <http://pewinternet.org/data-trend/mobile/cell-phone-activities>.