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Club Digital seeks to link Latinos and the Web

The program uses a mobile computer lab and a center in Pico-Union to offer basic lessons in an effort to increase access for Latinos, 30% of whom don't use the Internet.

By Howard Blume, Los Angeles Times

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There's been one notably awkward issue between Luis Arteaga and his mother.

He's an official with the California Emerging Technology Fund; she couldn't use a computer. Never touched a mouse — until Wednesday.

Enter Club Digital, a new public-private partnership to put more people online — especially the underrepresented Latino community. The goal is to help senior citizens such as Edelmira Arteaga, 69, get online and also to enable students to complete assignments, allow young adults to fill out online job applications and assist anyone else left behind when it comes to email, Google and Facebook.

Latinos (55%) are less likely to have a broadband connection at home than blacks (74%), Asians (76%) and whites (81%), according to new research from the Public Policy Institute of California. And 30% of Latinos don't use the Internet or email even occasionally.

Club Digital's basic lessons, such as how to do a Google search, are available in printouts and also online, with help provided by libraries, career centers, schools, housing agencies and faith-based groups. In addition, impreMedia is publishing the lessons this month in its newspapers, including Los Angeles-based La Opinion.

"There is a hunger for quality information," impreMedia Chief Executive Officer Monica Lozano. "Latinos are the least likely to be online and have access to information."

Club Digital, a \$142,000 California effort funded largely through federal grants, is part of a larger public-private digital outreach.

Local partners include the Southeast Community Development Corp., which is making available its \$400,000 mobile computer lab — a converted motor home. Edelmira Arteaga showed off her new computer skills there as well as inside at the Magnolia Place Family Center in Pico-Union, south of downtown, where Club Digital was launched.

Arteaga raised three college graduates and worked in sales — with an eighth-grade education. Computers intimidated her, but she was impressed when another son, who is disabled and lives with her in East L.A., found and reconnected with high school classmates online. She thought she wouldn't mind trading emails, pictures and videos with her grandchildren, or even paying her bills online.

Still, it took the draw of seeing dignitaries such as Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the La Opinion publisher to get her to Wednesday's event at the Magnolia Place Family Center.

Luis Arteaga insisted that she try the program.

"I found recipes for Mexican and Peruvian food — healthy food," she said later in Spanish.

"A star is born," her son said proudly.

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