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HUGO MORALES/LUIS ARTEAGA: Valley closing Digital Divide

By Hugo Morales and Luis Arteaga - Special to The Bee

Monday, Sep. 03, 2012 | 10:47 PM

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The Central Valley can claim many contributions to California's well being. The successful effort to close the Digital Divide is one we proudly can add.

The Public Policy Institute of California just released the fifth annual Statewide Survey: Californians and Information Technology, which tracks Internet use and broadband adoption at home. In those five years, the Central Valley has seen broadband adoption increase from 53% to 71% of households, just shy of the state average. Statewide, adoption has grown from 55% to 73%.

The Valley is only 7 percentage points behind the heavily technology-focused San Francisco Bay Area and Orange County/San Diego County regions. What's more, the Valley is more connected than Los Angeles County, which is at 69%. And when it comes to Internet usage, we are tied with the Bay Area, with 88% of Valley respondents saying they use the Internet. The Statewide Survey was conducted by the independent PPIC in collaboration with the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) and ZeroDivide.

Arguably, Central Valley families have higher hurdles to access and pay for the Internet than many households elsewhere. Our communities have suffered greatly during the economic downturn, and expansion of broadband infrastructure to the rural areas has been slow. Yet, we did not lag. How did we accomplish this?

It happened because of a focused commitment by community leaders and innovative execution by public, private and nonprofit partners funded in part by stimulus grants from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). These organizations and leaders, including school districts, social service groups, and private providers are working in collaboration to build and promote high-speed networks through grassroots education and media outreach.

In Dinuba, school district IT staff fixed broken computing devices of parents and students for free at a Computer Help Day. The United Way of Fresno, through the 2-1-1 information service, referred callers to affordable technology solutions. Fresno-based Radio Bilingüe became a key partner with CETF in implementing the NTIA grant to increase broadband awareness and adoption throughout California. Radio Bilingüe, focusing on English- and Spanish-speaking Latino households, has produced more than 100 hours of programming, educating listeners about the benefits of home broadband on air and at outreach events in southeast Fresno and beyond. Programs air on 14 radio California stations and are available on the Internet.

The Statewide Survey also showed very encouraging growth of Internet use and home broadband adoption among Latino households statewide. In 2008, just 48% of California Latino households used the Internet and 34% had broadband at home. Today, 78% access the Internet and 58% have broadband at home. Especially noteworthy, now almost half (46%) of Spanish-speaking respondents have broadband at home -- up from 35% in 2011.

But for those who think the Digital Divide is all but closed, the fact is that home broadband adoption rates for Californians earning under \$40,000 hover at 60%, and access for rural communities, poor inner-city residents, seniors, and people with disabilities falls well below the state average.

Education is also paramount, from teaching families how to pick the right computer and broadband service to training digital newcomers how to use online tools to improve their lives. When parents, for example, learn how to email a teacher for a firsthand report of their child's progress, they feel empowered.

The goal is nothing less than for all Central Valley residents to have affordable broadband at home. A connected community is a strong community.

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