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Promoting the Benefits of Digital Literacy

Thu, March 21, 2013 by Karen Hanson, Program Officer, Broadband Technology Opportunities Program

Closing the digital divide – and getting all Americans online – requires a multipronged approach. It's not enough just to provide affordable computer equipment and access to broadband at a reasonable price. Just as important is digital literacy training to teach people how to use the Internet and take advantage of everything it has to offer.

That's why NTIA's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) has invested roughly $200 million in public computer centers that provide Internet access for those who don't have it at home, and roughly $250 million in broadband adoption programs that cover everything from how to navigate the Web and set up an email account to how to post a resume online and conduct an online job search.

Today, we are pleased to spread the word about the launch of an important new effort to raise awareness of the benefits of digital literacy and promote programs working to ensure that all Americans can participate in our information-age society.

Connect2Compete, a non-profit seeking to close the digital divide, has teamed up with the Ad Council to kick off the "EveryoneOn, 3-21" Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign just in time for March 21, or 3/21.

A major goal of the new campaign is to help people stuck on the wrong side of the divide find free computer classes and other broadband training opportunities in their communities. The campaign includes a 1-800 number, a mobile text short code and a Website – www.EveryoneOn.org – that let users look up local class offerings, public computer centers and even WiFi hot spots. We expect this to help even more people find BTOP-funded computer centers and training programs across the country.

The EveryoneOn.org website also features lots of content focused on digital literacy, education, career development and related topics – including links to content from BTOP grantees such as CFY (formerly Computers for Youth), which is using BTOP funding to provide digital literacy training and computers for low-income sixth graders and their families in New York City and Los Angeles

The new Everyone On campaign builds on and expands the Connect2Compete program, which is working to lift broadband adoption rates among low-income Americans and others who are not online by helping them get access to discounted computers, low-cost broadband service and digital literacy training.

Although broadband and the Internet are deeply integrated into daily life for many Americans today, the digital divide remains a stubborn reality in this country. Working in collaboration with the Census Bureau, NTIA has been conducting some of the most extensive survey work on the issue for a number of years. Our most recent survey, conducted in October of 2010, shows that 68 percent of American households subscribed to broadband. That's up from 51 percent in 2007 and 64 percent in 2009. But that still leaves roughly one third of U.S. households without a high-speed Internet connection at home.

Even more troubling, nearly half of all homes without Internet access said they did not subscribe because they did not need or want it. That highlights the need for campaigns such as EveryoneOn to promote greater awareness of the benefits of broadband.

In this day and age, it's hard to overstate the impact of being on the wrong side of these statistics. It's one of the looming equity issues of our era. Many teachers assign homework assuming that their students have access to the Internet. Many job listings are only posted online and many employers only accept job applications online. And in the 21st Century economy, businesses expect their workers to have basic computer and Internet literacy skills. Being cut off from the Internet today means being cut off from educational resources, employment opportunities, healthcare information, social networks, even government services.

The BTOP-funded public computer centers and adoption programs have made great progress in closing these gaps. And they look forward to welcoming even more clients who discover their services through the Everyone On campaign. Here are a few examples of BTOP-funded programs working to expand broadband adoption:

• A non-profit called the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) is using BTOP funding to provide affordable computers, low-cost home broadband connections and digital workforce training for low-income residents and other

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vulnerable groups in California. CETF works through 19 partners statewide, including non-profits that offer job training and career development services for the unemployed and community organizations that serve California's diverse ethnic populations. You can find easy-to-understand lessons on the benefits of digital literacy through CETF's "Get Connected" website: http://www.getconnectedtoday.com/

• The City of Boston's Department of Information Technology has partnered with a nonprofit called Open Air Boston to provide digital literacy training, subsidized netbooks or mobile devices and low-cost Internet access to low-income middle and high school students and their families. The city and Open Air Boston are using BTOP funding to bring the program – called Technology Goes Home – to 62 middle and high schools and 35 community sites. Technology Goes Home is equipping Boston teenagers with valuable digital literacy skills that will help them compete in a job market that takes these skills for granted. With training offered in Spanish, Vietnamese, Somali and other languages, the program is also bringing parents and other family members online. http://www.techgoeshome.org/

• The Texas State Library & Archives Commission is using BTOP funding to add and upgrade computer centers in libraries across the state. The Technology Expertise, Access and Learning for all Texans (TEAL) project is working through 38 local library systems across Texas to install 2,100 new workstations and upgrade 580 existing machines in 28 new and 126 existing computer centers. The program is also funding statewide training for librarians so that they can provide job search, career development and technology assistance to patrons. The State Library & Archives Commission has used BTOP funds to create a Webinar series entitled "Building Texas Latino Communities through Technology" for Texas library staff. And it has used BTOP funds to translate a computer training manual into Spanish. https://www.tsl.state.tx.us/teal/

You can find information about these and other BTOP-funded programs at our Connecting America's Communities map.

While there are still challenges ahead and the barriers to meaningful broadband adoption are complex, efforts that combine low-cost computer equipment, discounted access to the Internet and digital literacy training are effective. NTIA already offers a searchable online repository of digital literacy content and curricula at www.digitalliteracy.gov and we will soon publish a "Broadband Adoption Toolkit" that will pull together lessons learned through our BTOP program. We look forward to sharing those stories with Connect2Compete and other partners working to close the digital divide.

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