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SEPTEMBER 10, 2013 BY MATTHEW GRANT ANSON

California bills tackle digital divide head-on



(photo credit: Josie Holford)

Imagine for a moment what it would be like to live in 2013 without high speed Internet service. This is the reality that a third of Californians wake up to every day. It's called the digital divide, and it's doing everything it can to handicap the Golden State's economy one disconnected citizen at a time.

Having millions of citizens living in the 1980s was once a dirty secret for California, ignored by philanthropists and public officials that doubted the value of a broadband connection. However, those days are over. Today, California is home to a growing tide of non-profits devoted to bridging the digital gap, and their mantra of Internet-as-infrastructure has culminated in the taking up of legislation by California's senate and assembly to facilitate that process.

SB740 and **AB1299** tackle that digital divide head-on. The two bills each come at the issue from different angles; SB740, sponsored by Senator Padilla, deals with rural broadband infrastructure, while Assemblyman Steven Bradford's AB1299 is about expanding digital literacy.

"A digital divide exists between those who can access these resources and those who can't," said Bradford. "AB 1299 recognizes that bridging the digital divide requires new public policy that encourages investment in deployment and adoption of broadband technology in publicly subsidized affordable housing developments. Bringing these Californians out of the digital shadows will enable them to succeed in the information economy of the future."

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One of the leaders in the movement to close the digital divide is Sunne Wright McPeak, president and CEO of the [California Emerging Technology Fund](#). She praised Padilla and Bradford for their legislation. "The most vulnerable Californians are further disadvantaged if they do not have broadband access or do not have the requisite devices and skills to get connected," McPeak said. "The digital divide is just another manifestation of the economic divide and opportunity divide."

"I think this legislation is very important to provide much needed support to expand broadband to communities that are not yet served," said Tara Thronson, project manager for the regional planning non-profit [Valley Vision](#). "SB740 will help [rural] communities that are currently unconnected. One of the areas we've been focused on are our vast agriculture communities. When they're connected and are connected to broadband, they can use smart farming strategies."

AB1299, Thronson says, is critical because so much of day-to-day life can now only happen over the Internet. "You can't even apply for a job at Wal-Mart unless you apply online," she said. "In particular, I know of a local public housing community – there are kids that go to school across the street that have now been granted refurbished laptops and digital literacy training, but they come home and don't have a connection. How do you get that residency level connection?"

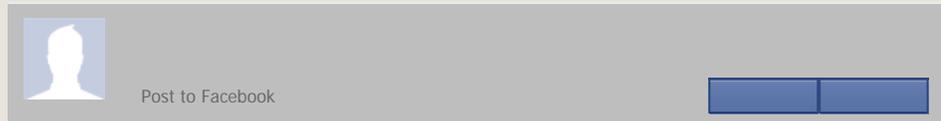
Douglas Guthrie, president and CEO of the [Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles](#), knows first hand what a challenge it can be for some people to even afford Internet access, leaving kids with no chance at a home connection without some kind of assistance. "More than 9,200 residents living in HACLAs 14 large public housing communities are under 18," Guthrie said. "The average annual income for a public housing family is approximately \$16,200; many of our households simply cannot afford to pay market rate for connectivity or purchase a computer."

Should the bills pass into law – both are set to be voted on this week – they will become new weapons in California's arsenal for closing the divide, something the state has earned much-deserved accolades for over the last five years. [CETF's 2012-2013 report, Get Connected!](#), makes note of the state's progress. "In 2008, California's statewide adoption rate for broadband use at home was 55 percent – the same as the national average. Today, at 73 percent statewide, California is seven percentage points ahead of the nation." This achievement earned the state an A- grade from Government Technology Magazine, putting California behind only Michigan and Utah.

"California has made significant progress on this issue because of the state government, California Public Utilities Commission, California's Congressional Delegation, and a network of more than 70 community groups working together for the disenfranchised and disadvantaged populations we're trying to reach," said McPeak. "CETF has been a catalyst in the process because it dedicated itself to the explicit mission to close the digital divide. This kind of results-oriented collaboration is an example of what can be accomplished on every major challenge facing California."

Closing the digital divide is a key element for the success of Internet-as-infrastructure as a concept. California is built on its roads and its bridges, but equally important and less often considered is how critical broadband access is for our economy. "It's a growing movement, I think more and more people are thinking of the Internet as part of infrastructure," Thronson said. "In the past when people said 'our basic infrastructure,' they meant water and electricity. There's still a learning curve." This is a learning curve that we as a state must make progress on if we want to continue our success at closing the digital divide.

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