

Technology fair targets Napa Latinos

The goal is to 'connect the unconnected'

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As computers and the Internet penetrate ever more layers of daily life, advocacy groups worried that many Latinos could be left behind have organized a technology fair Sunday to help them plug in.

The Latino Technology Fair will make its Napa debut from 1:30 to 3 p.m. Sunday at St. John the Baptist Church, 924 Napa St. Organizers plan to assist families in finding computer and Internet instruction, low-cost computers and subsidized Internet service.

Two San Francisco nonprofits, the Latino Community Foundation and Chicana Latina Foundation, are staging the open house with the local Puertas Abiertas Community Resource Center. Grants supporting the Napa fair and similar events in Northern California come from the California Emerging Technology Fund, which aims to get 80 percent of state residents online by 2015, according to Alicia Orozco, Chicana Latina project coordinator.

“The goal is to connect the unconnected, and Latinos are the least connected group in California,” said Orozco, who pointed to roadblocks such as service costs and spotty wireless data coverage in the farming areas where many Latino laborers and their families live. Even in Santa Clara — the heart of Silicon Valley and home to Apple and Google — some 80,000 Latino residents lack computers or Internet access, she said.

The shifting of social services to the Internet is ratcheting up the urgency of helping those new to the Internet find their footing, according to Orozco. Applications for state unemployment benefits are now Web-based, and the General Educational Development high-school equivalency tests are slated to become fully computer-based next year, leaving pen and paper behind.

“With most of the people we’re dealing with, we are introducing them to computers, period,” said Orozco. “We have a large number of people being left out from the table of the 21st century.”

A limited number of computers will be raffled off at the Napa tech fair, but Orozco said organizers are seeking local partners to refurbish laptop and desktop machines to be offered to Latino households in the county.