

## FCC Chairman Wheeler Listens to CETF, Broadband Advocates

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By [Rachelle Chong](#) posted on January 11, 2014

The new FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler made a swing through California after his Consumer Electronics Show appearance in Las Vegas. On January 9, he visited two decidedly different venues: Silicon Valley's Computer History Museum for a meet-up with tech types, and a lively Town Hall meeting with community activists at Oakland's Preservation Hall.

Chairman Wheeler is in only his third month as head of the FCC after his nomination by President Obama followed by a long wait for the U.S. Senate to confirm his appointment. He has now taken the helm of this important federal agency impacting telecommunications, broadcasters, and Internet companies.

*“Brother Wheeler” Listens to Community Advocates at Oakland Town Hall Meeting*

Wheeler appeared at Oakland's Preservation Hall for an evening event, the first of a series of nationwide media policy town hall meetings. This Town Hall was organized by Free Press, the Center for Media Justice, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, and the Voices for Internet Freedom Coalition. While the event ideally should have been open to the public, by the time the press release went out, the Hall was sold out according to the Eventbrite site. A live webcast was available on the OaklandVoices website for those unable to obtain a ticket. Oakland community leaders and other advocacy groups got “quality time” to air their communications, media and Internet grievances to Chairman Wheeler. There were so many attendees, an overflow room was established (which promptly adopted its own Twitter hashtag #overflowroom separate from the #OaklandVoices hashtag).

Chance Williams of Free Press praised the Chairman's visit to Oakland because “People should be the center of media policy.” He said it was “nearly impossible for people of color to own media outlets” noting blacks used to own and operate 18 television stations in 2006 but now, there are none.

Malkia Cyril from the Center for Media Justice declared “Tonight is about change!” Cyril said the power to communicate can be the difference between life and death, and advocated for federal Lifeline program preservation, broadband access for all, policies to restore black-owned media stations, affordable broadband rates, and an open and accessible Internet.

California PUC Commissioner Catherine Sandoval asked for the attendees' help in approving her proposed decision on updates to California's Lifeline program, noting it retains the ability to have a landline phone for Lifeline. She asked for continued support for broadband access for rural areas particularly in light of new mandated, state online education testing. She said she

wanted to ensure “students are tested on what’s in their brains, not how fast their broadband access is”, and said “Beverly Hills kids should not have an advantage over kids in Oakland.” Sandoval suggested the federal Lifeline program have a minimum number of mandated minutes for wireless providers, saying “low income people should not run out of minutes when on with social services, like a suicide prevention line.” She asked Wheeler to amend the FCC’s Lifeline application to not require any social security numbers, saying it results in injustice to illegal immigrants. Finally she advocated the FCC “preserve the option of landline phone services in the federal Lifeline program.” Later, TURN’s Mark Toney went further on the topic of federal Lifeline program, and said the “FCC must protect people from forced migration to IP-networks and wireless networks from landline phones.”

Bob Butler of NorCal National Association of Black Journalists decried the lack of diversity in the nation’s newspapers, TV and radio news rooms.

Jessica Gonzalez of the National Hispanic Media Coalition asked for affordable broadband access to “give voice to the voiceless.” Susan Walters of the California Emerging Technology Fund asked the FCC to urge Comcast and other Internet companies to offer a low cost broadband rate for low income persons, noting that Comcast’s Internet Essentials program had only reached 10% of the eligible low income families after two years. Walters further advocated the FCC set goals and performance metrics for any FCC-funded broadband adoption program

Richard Abisla of Mission Economic Development Agency noted the importance of broadband access, yet the poor struggle to afford it on an average annual income of \$28,000. He advocated for broadband strategies be used in all federal programs alleviating poverty.

A librarian made a plea for faster broadband for public libraries, asking him to raise the cap on eRate limits on funding, reducing deployment barriers, and maintaining an Internet discount for libraries under the eRate Schools and Libraries program.

The issue of affordable prison phone rates came up twice, once by Christina Mansfield of CIVIC, and again, very powerfully, by a mother of a young prisoner, sentenced to 20+ years, who said she has spent over \$3,000 in phone bills to communicate with her son in prison.

Dmitri Belser, Executive Director of Center for Accessible Technology, asked the FCC for better accessibility requirements for Internet websites, starting with the FCC’s own website.

After nearly two hours of Wheeler’s attentiveness and careful note taking of the often passionate speakers, Cyril joked about Oakland’s history of protests, and dubbed him “Brother Wheeler” to the delight of the crowd. When Wheeler finally spoke at 8:50 PM, he emphasized he had decided to get out of DC and listen to people “other than the typical DC players,” then acknowledging he used to be a typical DC player who had sat in their seats and stood in the line to speak. He said his goal was to listen, take in data points and information.

“At this point in history,” he said, “Networks do define us — our culture and our power.”

Wheeler addressed some of the hot issues. He declared he is a big supporter of Lifeline, and strongly decried fraud in the program. “Fraud in the program effects fraud on the people who need the program,” he said. “This is outrageous and we won’t put up with that crap.”

Wheeler praised the work last year that fellow FCC Commissioner Mignon Clyburn did to lower prison payphone rates during the time she was Interim FCC Chair. He said he would remember the poignant story of the mother of the inmate who testified that night on inflated prison phone rates.

On the transition to IP-enabled phone networks, Wheeler came out in favor of doing some trials, consistent with his remarks earlier in the day in Silicon Valley. He noted that some industry players advocate that since the networks are moving to a new technology, all the old [common carrier] rules should not apply. He took strong issue with this, and said there is a “Network Compact” between traditional telephone companies and the public. Key aspects of this Network Compact must be upheld in the new IP-enabled system era, he said, giving as examples of the Compact the ability to dial 9-1-1 and be connected to the emergency response system, interconnection, and no preferential treatment to one player over another to get access to the network. Having said that, Wheeler said the the IP transition is important for the growth of the Internet networks. He said he was a proponent of new technologies, and noted they may allow new voices to be heard. He wants to offer proper incentives to build new networks, yet insist that the providers “uphold the Compact.” And with that pronouncement, Brother Wheeler departed Oakland.

## **Statement of California Emerging Technology Fund: Susan Walters, Senior Vice President**

Good evening. My name is Susan Walters, the Senior Vice President at CETF. In the words of the late David Glover, an Oakland based advocate for justice, equality and economic opportunity, “The Digital Divide is a symptom of all other divides.” The cost of digital exclusion is real and rising—if you are not digitally literate with high speed broadband you cannot take the GED exam; apply for a job, Section 8 housing, or even unemployment.

We urge the FCC to evolve from bridging the Digital Divide to achieving Digital Inclusion—meaning implement policies and strategies to achieve ubiquitous high speed broadband deployment and accelerate affordable broadband adoption for all Americans. This is imperative for economic prosperity, quality of life, and family self-sufficiency. We have worked with more than 100 California community-based from which we share 6 major lessons:

- It requires more resources to help those who have never been online.
- It is simply not enough to build it and say they will come. Udacity and San Jose State halted an online education pilot with a charter school after one quarter when they realized many students lacked sufficient Internet access at school and home and did not have the digital literacy skills needed for the course work.
- Affordable broadband offers are required, although not offers that are loss leaders for companies to up sell poor people. We see the voluntary efforts to date have had modest success, with the most extensive program, Comcast Internet Essentials, reaching less than 10% of eligible participants in two years, clearly a FCC Affordable Broadband Lifeline Rate Program is essential.
- Sustainable broadband adoption requires a comprehensive approach that targets and aligns resources in low-income communities with an integrated, comprehensive “neighborhood transformation” strategy that incorporates adoption into other services, such as education, workforce preparation, and healthcare.
- There is no substitute for leadership. Chairman Wheeler, the National BB Plan needs to be a catalyst for smashing silos in DC and modeling policies and strategies for engaging state and local leaders. Leaders need to be involved in developing the strategies and supported in systematically implementing a coherent, integrated plan.
- It is essential to set goals with quantified metrics and accountability for performance in order to drive high speed broadband deployment and affordable adoption to achieve Digital Inclusion and to regularly report to the public and stakeholders to ensure continued focus on the goals.

## **Statement of Chicana/Latina Foundation: Olga Talamante, Executive Director**

Thank you for the opportunity to share our deep concerns about the vast numbers of low income families that are not able to take advantage of the benefits afforded by internet connectivity. Based on data provided by the Public Policy Institute of California, a non-partisan research institution, in the heart of Silicon Valley (San Mateo and Santa Clara counties alone) we estimate that there are about 300,000 Latino families not connected.

Together with our partner organization, the Latino Community Foundation, the Chicana Latina Foundation has undertaken the challenge of signing up first time users to the internet and providing low cost computers, as well as basic training and information about resources available for job development, English-language acquisition, health and civic engagement. With support from the California Emerging Technology Fund, we have been engaged in grassroots, community based outreach and education and have thus far signed well over 1,000 low income Latino families to the internet.

The work to expand broadband at home takes our young Latina ambassadors from health fairs to union halls to church basements to farm fields. Too often, we find Latino school children having to go without Internet at home, requiring them to spend hours in the library or parking lot to get an Internet connection so they can do their homework.

The FCC approved the merger of Comcast and NBC with a promise from Comcast that it would provide low-cost Internet service to families with students who could not otherwise afford it.

I'm sorry to say the efforts by Comcast are falling very short. Its Internet Essentials program has enrolled less than 10% of eligible California families, yet Comcast is scheduled to end the \$10 a month offer in less than six months.

We ask the FCC to step in and be the advocate that our low income families need and deserve. You are in a position to ensure that Comcast and other Internet providers are not leaving the poorest Americans on the wrong side of the Digital Divide. We think Comcast should not only be encouraged to continue its discount program beyond June 2014, but also expand it beyond students to include low-income seniors, people with disabilities and veterans. The future of our state and arguably of our country depends on having ALL of its residents fully equipped to enjoy and utilize the wonders and benefits of technology.

The FCC can and should play its role to help us lift our communities who are down in the deep crevasses of the Digital Divide. We urge the FCC to encourage Comcast and other providers to continue offering low-cost broadband to Americans in need.

**Statement of the Mission Economic Development Agency: Richard Abisla, Technology Manager**

The Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA) leads the Mission Promise Neighborhood, a collaborative project bringing together city agencies, the San Francisco Unified School district, and over 26 community-based organization that work to raise student achievement and improve financial outcomes amongst low-income families in San Francisco. The Mission Promise Neighborhood is funded through the federal Department of Education to address the high levels of poverty and low rates of student achievement present in the Mission District.

How **can** a child do well in school if their family is facing eviction or foreclosure, their parents are unemployed or underemployed, or they don't have the necessary resources to complete their homework?

Increasingly, Internet access is an essential tool to addressing these problems. MEDA works everyday to train new users of technology, including parents of children attending schools in the Mission Promise Neighborhood. A typical family in the Promise Neighborhood with two parents and two children survives on \$28,000 a year. How **can** this family afford market-rate internet, which currently costs between \$25 and \$70 a month in our area? This same family is **most** in need of lower cost broadband, so that these parents can get training to access higher paying employment, help their children do their homework, communicate with teachers, and manage their bank account and credit score. Many of these families are new to the country or speak limited English.

Over the next five years, the Mission Promise Neighborhood will ensure that 100% of students living in the Mission or attending school there will have access to a computer and broadband Internet- **in the home**. With the support of the US Department of Education and the California Emerging Technology Fund, we promote the benefits of broadband and technology use for the whole family. Increasingly, using technology is necessary to full participation in academic and financial life, as well as civil society.

The FCC **needs** to ensure that low-income communities are not left behind. Home broadband access is important to succeeding in the United States economy at all levels. MEDA urges the FCC to work with other federal programs that fight poverty to ensure that low-income families have access to lower cost broadband. All federal poverty alleviation and education programs should include access to technology and training. The FCC must do what they can to lower the market cost of broadband, particularly in low-income communities.

**Statement of the Office of Community and Economic Development, Fresno State: Eduardo Gonzalez, Project Manager**

My name is Eduardo Gonzalez. I'm here today representing Get Connected! San Joaquin Valley, a collaborative partnership of various San Joaquin Valley educational and non-profit organizations and the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) working to expand home broadband adoption and increase Internet usage among the state's hardest-to-connect communities in the 8 county region known as the San Joaquin Valley.

Get Connected! San Joaquin Valley is designed to help the state achieve its goals to close the digital divide and connect Californians to the Internet. As Internet usage and technology become further integrated in to our daily lives, it is critical that San Joaquin Valley residents are not left behind. The most recent Public Policy Institute of California survey found only 53 percent of Latino households has broadband at home, and the San Joaquin Valley lags behind much of the state.

All of our efforts in closing the digital divide are inclusive to those families facing financial difficulties, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. What we are finding out is that the lack of broadband infrastructure and high cost internet service hinder families from getting connected. And for those families that have the limited infrastructure, the \$9.95-a-month Comcast Internet Essentials program has been challenging to subscribe to. Today, our greatest concern is the Internet Essentials program is scheduled to end in June 2014, leaving many Valley residents unable to take advantage of this opportunity to connect to low cost broadband at home.

Today we work in partnership with local educational institutions to close the digital divide, this collaborative effort to increase broadband adoption via educational partnerships will help our region remain economically competitive and will help promote increased educational opportunities, e-commerce, business development, and improve overall quality of life in our region. Thus, we encourage the FCC to consider that learning is 24/7 and for our students to be competitive they need to have access to the Internet at home, not just school.

Chairman Tom Wheeler, we invite you to visit the San Joaquin Valley and help connect the poorest communities in the nation to affordable internet access. Let's not turn a blind eye to the dilemma of those of us who live in the San Joaquin Valley. Thank you.

**Statement of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers: Teresa Favuzzi,  
Executive Director**

My name is Teresa Favuzzi; I am the Executive Director of the California Foundation for Independent Living Centers. We are an advocacy organization focused on increasing access and equal opportunity for people with disabilities by building the capacity of California's 28 Independent Living Centers. California's ILCs assist over 300,000 people with disabilities and their families each year to live independently in the community.

Through our Assistive Technology Network program, CFILC maintains a statewide Device Lending Library that offers Californians with Disabilities the ability borrow a device to meet a temporary need, or to tryout technology before they buy it. We have seen a significant increase in the borrowing of devices that integrate access to the internet with disability access features.

A good example of how an iPad and a wireless App can impact the life of a person with a disability is Damary's story. Damary is a 21 year old young woman living with Cerebral Palsy. Her speech is often difficult for people to understand, which deeply affected her ability to make friends and feel connected. She borrowed an iPad from her local Device Lending Library that was equipped with Verbally a comprehensive assistive speech solution.

Once she began to use that device she became involved in the ILC's youth group, for the first time she was able to express herself without barriers. She was introduced to Facebook, which opened up a world of friendships she didn't know was possible. She is now a leader in her youth group, is in college, and volunteering for two organizations.

While Damary is well on her way to building a career path for herself, we can't ignore that 60% of working aged people with disabilities are unemployed or underemployed. We can no longer expect to find a job, apply for college, choose a health plan, find an apartment, or map a public transit route, without access to the Internet.

Over the last 5 years we have all experienced a social transformation that makes Internet Access essentially a new utility service, yet the disability community is disproportionately not connected.

The FCC has the power to impact whether Americans with disabilities will gain equal access to opportunities to live, learn, earn and thrive in this new digital revolution. We respectfully request that the FCC develop and prioritize policies that expand access to affordable high-speed Internet, and promote wireless applications that increase accessibility for people with disabilities. Thank you.