Working to Close the Digital Divide in Silicon Valley

By Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information and NTIA Administrator Lawrence E. Strickling

Silicon Valley has long been a hub of technological innovation and promise in our country. It's the birthplace of iconic technology companies such as Intel, Apple, Cisco, and Google. And regions across the country – and even around the world – attempt to emulate its success.

This week, I joined Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker and other Commerce Department leaders in travelling to Silicon Valley to promote the Department's initiatives to spur U.S. economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness.

We're meeting with leaders of technology powerhouses, fledgling start-ups, and venture capitalists funding the next big idea. Yet, we recognize that not everyone in the region has shared in the wealth created in Silicon Valley. Yesterday I had the privilege of meeting with a number of groups including the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF), the Chicana/Latina Foundation, the Latino Community Foundation, and others that are working tirelessly across the state to close the digital divide.

Leaders from Silicon Valley-area community groups gather with Assistant Secretary Strickling to talk about bridging the digital divide.

Even as Silicon Valley is experiencing economic growth on the whole, income inequality in the region continues to rise. For instance, African American and Latino residents earn 70 percent less on average than the region's top earners, the biggest gap ever recorded by the Silicon Valley Index. Computer and Internet training provided by our broadband grant projects offers users 21st century skills that can lead to better employment.While high-speed Internet is widely available

throughout Silicon Valley, not everyone has the means or the skills to access it. It's an issue NTIA has addressed through its sustainable broadband adoption and public computer center grant programs, which funded projects to increase broadband Internet usage and adoption, particularly among disadvantaged populations where broadband technology is underutilized. We funded several projects in California that aim to narrow the digital divide, and train individuals to use broadband technology to build digital literacy and workforce skills.

To highlight this work, I met yesterday with some of NTIA's broadband grant recipients and other community groups that are working to close the digital divide in the Valley and San Francisco. Among those on hand at Monday's event were leaders from CETF, the Monterey County Office of Education, 2-1-1 California/United Ways of California, Mission Economic Development Agency (MEDA), California State University, Monterey Bay, Chicana/Latina Foundation, the Latino Community Foundation, Eden Housing, Community Technology Network, National Hispanic Media Coalition, Greenlining Institute, and El Concilio.

As part of the funding it received from NTIA's broadband grant program, CETF has been working with other organizations such as the Chicana/Latina Foundation to help address the digital skills gap in Latino communities. The foundation, based in Burlingame, has been providing free refurbished computers to Latino families in the Valley who subscribe to broadband. It also funds college scholarships for students who can serve as digital ambassadors in their neighborhoods to tout the benefits of going online.

At our meeting, I was able to meet Maricela Hora, a single mother who received a computer through the Chicana/Latina Foundation program. She shared the difficulty of getting computer access in her community. Having a computer at home has made a tremendous difference to her children, Maricela said, now that they can do homework without the schedules and time limits of computer centers.

Assistant Secretary Strickling meets Maricela Hora, who received a computer through the Chicana/Latina Foundation.

Other leaders in the region on this issue include the San Francisco-based MEDA. MEDA, partnering with other nonprofit organizations, received funding from NTIA's broadband grant program to provide computer access and bilingual computer training to low-and-moderate income Latinos, particularly Latino entrepreneurs, in San Francisco and other communities throughout the country.

Solving the broadband adoption gap is a complex, multi-faceted problem that requires a community focus. These organizations in California are working diligently to focus on the specific challenges of their communities, and are making a real difference in people's lives.