

Southern California leaders hope to close digital divide



Edward Lewis, director of the Riverside County Office of Education Foundation, seen Tuesday, Aug. 11, 2020, shows laptops that are part of the All For One campaign that provides laptops and hotspots for at-need students. (File photo by Watchara Phomicinda, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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A new Southern California effort aims to address an inequality spotlighted by [the coronavirus pandemic](#) — the digital divide.

Inland entrepreneur Steve PonTell and San Bernardino County Supervisor Curt Hagman are bringing together leaders in business, government, technology and other fields to find ways to close the divide.

The divide refers to the gap between people who have access to broadband internet service and those who do not. Former state Assemblyman Lloyd Levine estimates that nearly 25% of Californians either lack the access, devices or skills to connect or experience a combination of all three.

The reasons often depend on where one lives. In rural areas, the top problem is lack of infrastructure. In urban areas, it's related to income, Levine said.

"It does not help if access is there but you can't afford services or devices, and vice versa," said Levine, co-founder of the UC Riverside Center for Broadband Policy and Digital Literacy and president of the Filament Strategies consulting firm in Sacramento.

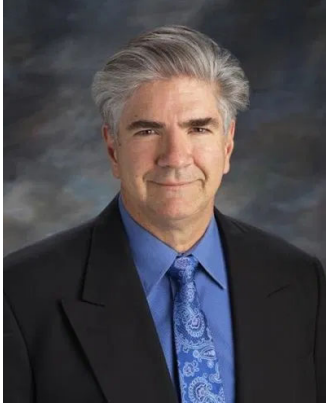
"The real frustrating part is that this divide has remained relatively flat over the past decade," he said in a recent interview. "Technology continues to make great advances, but many people are still getting left behind."

The leaders are still discussing how to tackle the issue and don't yet have a list of recommendations. But they did hold a recent forum to air out possible approaches.



This problem existed before the pandemic and likely will remain a concern for years to come. However, the issue worsened in 2020 with more people working from home, most schools using distance learning and people going online for other services, such as health-care visits.

"This is a true crisis," Sunne McPeak, president and CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund, based in Concord, said during the forum, hosted by the Los Angeles County Business Federation. "It has been exposed as a digital cliff."



Inland entrepreneur Steve PonTell is among the business leaders hoping to find solution to the digital divide problem. (Photo courtesy of National Community Renaissance)

PonTell, president and CEO of the Rancho Cucamonga-based National Community Renaissance, which develops affordable housing communities, helped organize the forum.

"We have known about the digital divide for several years, and yet we still have this major problem," PonTell said. "That made me ask, 'What've we been doing all this time?'"

"I think everyone has been so focused and concerned with solving their own problems, and there hasn't been enough communication happening across the board."

Assemblyman Miguel Santiago, D-Los Angeles, echoed PonTell's call for partnership.

"Everyone needs to work together and be open to ideas," Santiago said. "It's not going to be productive if (individual stakeholders) come together with an approach of my way or the highway."

Panelists said some advancements have been made during the pandemic, notably in the education and health fields.

Many school districts tapped into government dollars to buy and issue digital devices and hotspots so students could take online classes. For example, in early August, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors earmarked \$10 million from the Coronavirus Aid,

Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act for the Riverside County Board of Education Foundation's [All For One fundraiser](#), which seeks to ensure every student in the county is connected online.

More people are using online health services, but many patients still lack the tools to access them.

"This pandemic has shown that inequality really can be a life-or-death matter," said John Baackes, CEO of L.A. Care Health Plan, which helps provide health care for low-income individuals and families.

Projects are in motion to bring broadband internet access to underserved areas.

Charter Communications recently applied for state grants to provide technology to residents. The California Public Utilities Commission awarded more than \$4 million to four Inland Empire projects: Country Homes Mobile Parks in Ontario, Monterey Mobile Home Village in Montclair, Villa Montclair Mobile Home Park in Montclair and Soboba Springs Mobile Estates near San Jacinto.

The National Community Renaissance also aims to bring affordable access to its residents.

"My continued fear is the gap between haves and have-nots will only get bigger unless we do something about it," PonTell said. "We need to take action."

Internet service providers spend billions of dollars every year to build and improve the infrastructure for high-speed internet but still face obstacles. In rural areas, for example, the cost of digging trenches and laying cable or fiber is greater than the demand for service. And service providers often have to go through plenty of governmental red tape.





Curt Hagman, chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, is among the leaders in government hoping to push for policies to help close the digital divide. (File photo by Jennifer Cappuccio Maher, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

Hagman, the chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, said government and state agencies have a significant role.

A board member of the Southern California Association of Governments and chairman of its Emerging Technologies Committee, Hagman said SCAG and the San Diego Association of Governments have discussed ways to streamline the permitting process and update building codes. Government subsidies for service providers offering affordable rates to low-income households could also help bridge the gap, he said.

"We want to help solve this problem, not be the problem," Hagman said. "We have to realize that closing the divide is for the common good of society and will have a significant impact on so many lives."

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Eric-Paul Johnson has been covering high school sports for The Press-Enterprise since 1999, specializing in football, girls volleyball, girls water polo and softball. He is a stat junkie who created and maintains a record book for high school sports in the Inland Empire. Eric-Paul is a lifelong resident of Riverside and graduated from Bethel Christian and Cal Baptist. Eric-Paul enjoys going to concerts and twice has worked as a photographer at the Coachella Valley Arts & Music Festival.

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