

Big ISPs back plan to wire low-income Americans

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WASHINGTON--A global nonprofit group is enlisting the likes of AT&T, Verizon, and cable companies for a project aimed at boosting the number of low-income Americans who subscribe to broadband by 2010.

The two-year campaign launched Tuesday by the One Economy Corporation has three major components: getting broadband connections into the homes of 500,000 low-income Americans, enlisting 5,000 young people to train their elders and neighbors in a sort of Technology 101, and dispensing video-based information about a range of topics through a new "Public Internet Channel" accessible via the Web.



One Economy Corporation CEO Rey Ramsey (seen here at the National Press Club in Washington) says the goal of his group's new project is "making sure as a country, we leave no one behind" on broadband.

(Credit: Anne Broache/CNET News.com)

The goal is "making sure as a country, we leave no one behind," One Economy CEO Rey Ramsey said during a press conference here at the National Press Club.

According to the 8-year-old organization, whose mission is getting broadband to low-income households, only 21 percent of people earning less than \$30,000 per year have broadband in their homes.

One Economy said its projects have already helped to get broadband adopted in 300,000 homes and has lobbied successfully in recent years to change affordable-housing policies in 42 states so that broadband is built into the homes of low-income people. It also has dispatched 1,500 so-called "Digital Connectors," who volunteer to train area residents in computer and Internet skills at schools, community centers, and affordable housing developments in more than 20 urban and rural areas across the country. The latest campaign, which the group is calling "Bring IT Home," is designed to expand those projects.

AT&T, Verizon, the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, Intel, and Symantec are among the big names that have signed up to help bankroll the two-year venture. About a dozen state and local governments--including West Virginia; Atlanta; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Seattle; Raleigh, N.C.; Kansas City; Mo.; and Buffalo, N.Y.--also plan to participate.

AT&T and its eponymous foundation, for their part, plans to provide about \$36 million to One Economy by the time the project is complete, which makes One Economy the "largest recipient of AT&T largess," senior executive vice president Jim Cicconi said at the press conference. (In 2006, the company partnered with One Economy to launch a three-year, \$100 million effort called AT&T Access All, supplying technology "packages"--including a new computer, printer and Internet access--to 50,000 low-income families nationwide. Just to put things into perspective, AT&T's net income during the fourth quarter of 2007 was \$3.1 billion.)

It wasn't immediately clear how much money the other partners planned to contribute, but One Economy spokeswoman Austin Bonner said they were all "six figure" amounts.

One Economy, for its part, spent about \$10 million in 2007 on its various projects and ended the year with assets of more than \$22 million, according to its latest annual report (PDF). Its biggest donors--in the \$1 million-plus camp--include the AT&T Foundation, Cisco, Google, and E*Trade.

As for the government partners, all of them are committing to increase "digital inclusion," but beyond that, their efforts will vary, Bonner said. For instance, in Buffalo, One Economy is providing "technical assistance" to the mayor's office in support of a subsidized Wi-Fi pilot program for low-income households. In some cases, the projects won't be focused so much on lack of broadband *access*--after all, cities like San Francisco are heavily wired--as on lack of *adoption*, which means promoting the "value proposition" of Internet access, Bonner said.

West Virginia Governor Joe Manchin, a Democrat, said waters, sewers, and roads still consume most of the state's infrastructure budget, but his small state has already gone from a 58 percent to 80 percent broadband penetration rate in the past two years, in part because of a partnership with Cisco Systems, headed by West Virginia native John Chambers.

The group's campaign is just one of many efforts to increase broadband adoption among low-income people. Late last month, Internet Archive founder Brewster Kahle unveiled plans to outfit a San Francisco public housing complex with 100 megabits-per-second Internet access.