



## North Lawndale goes wireless—for free

by Leila Noelliste  
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Clifton Augustine was selling lingerie and small electronics on city buses and trains before he started his own online business. Now, the self proclaimed “e-tailer” says that business is booming.

Conrad Woods was a 21-year-old single parent who did not want to leave his baby at home to job hunt. Now, the young father surfs the Web looking for jobs, with his son by his side.

These are just two examples of how inner city life and digital culture have collided in North Lawndale where, for the past five years, a free wireless network has been growing. In January, the Chicago Police Department listed North Lawndale as one of the city's murder rich communities.

But residents are identifying creative ways to apply technology to the challenges of their lives. “The network has impacted the community in so many ways,” exclaimed Rogers Wilson, a lifelong North Lawndale resident, and manager of the network.

Wilson said that senior citizens who fear getting jumped on their way back from the currency exchange, now do banking and bill paying online. Residents who do not have cars and dread going shopping in the winter, now can order groceries online.

And kids use the network for academic research when trips to the library are too dangerous. Mark Ferguson, a lifelong North Lawndale resident, and member of the network, said the wireless network has also had a huge impact on the culture of employment.

“The network allows us to stay competitive in the job market. We're not searching the newspaper for one and a half hours, then going out and driving another hour to apply to a job, which is expensive, especially with gas so high” he said.

“With careerbuilder.com or monster.com, you can have 10 or 15 jobs e-mailed to you everyday. It gives you time, and an advantage.” Innovative solutions like these are what Nicol Turner Lee imagined when her company, One Economy, secured a grant from the Motorola Foundation to develop the network.

“We wanted to determine how a community like North Lawndale could effectively utilize Internet and 21st century technology for community benefit and economic opportunities,” she said.

The network currently operates in 400 homes, with plans to expand to 2,000 by the end of the summer. “Our intention is to cover North and South Lawndale, and parts of Garfield Park,” Wilson said. The current bandwidth is T1, and the network broadcasts from the old Sears Roebuck tower on the corner of Homan Avenue and Arthington Street.

It stretches south to Ogden Avenue, west to Karlov Avenue, north to the Eisenhower Expressway and east to Kedzie Avenue. In 2010, One Economy will turn the network over to the community, and residents will have to pay a fee to access it.