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Meraki helping narrow digital divide

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Wireless equipment maker Meraki is helping make universal broadband a reality.

The company announced Thursday that it's working with a nonprofit called [OneEconomy](#), which focuses on closing the digital divide by targeting low-income housing. Using Meraki's technology, OneEconomy will deliver affordable broadband via Wi-Fi to more than 100,000 families in the U.S. and, eventually, around the world over the next two years.

Meraki and OneEconomy will launch their partnership at San Francisco's largest housing development, which has more than 2,200 residents. AT&T is providing the DSL service.

OneEconomy provides affordable broadband to low-income housing by forming a kind of campus network that brings in big pipes of broadband and allows residents to share the capacity, much like how an office network is set up. In the past, the organization has focused on providing wired broadband services, because other wireless equipment proved to be too expensive and too difficult to manage.

But David McConnell, senior vice president of access service for OneEconomy, said that Meraki's technology is cheap and easy to use, reducing the cost of running new cabling by 50 percent.

"With other wireless gear you needed a technician to set up and maintain the network," he said. "But Meraki access points just plug in and work. And the online dashboard allows Web-based monitoring that's simple to use."

The reduced equipment and maintenance costs mean that OneEconomy can serve more low-income families. OneEconomy can also pass on the savings to the individuals it serves, reducing the cost of its broadband service by about 75 percent. This means that instead of charging \$20 or \$30 for Internet service, the group is able to charge low-income residents only \$5 or \$7 per month for service.

OneEconomy is just one of many organizations across the country that is trying to bridge the digital divide. Wireless Philadelphia [has been trying to build a citywide Wi-Fi](#)

[network to bring wireless to low-income families](#). The organization, which had originally worked with EarthLink, has developed relationships with state and city agencies to create a program dedicated to meeting the broadband needs of Philadelphia's poor.

But the citywide Wi-Fi movement had barely gotten off the ground, before companies such as [EarthLink abandoned the idea](#). As a result, cities such as San Francisco, have put plans for citywide Wi-Fi on the back burner.

Meanwhile, cities, community groups, and nonprofits have been exploring alternatives, using inexpensive gear from Meraki to set up smaller Wi-Fi hot spots to serve a given community. Meraki, which is backed in part by Google, has targeted this market with products that are easy to install and maintain. Its radios simply plug into a wall and begin transmitting radio signals. It has also simplified management by providing an online tool that allows administrators to easily check usage and troubleshoot problems.

The company has built thousands of wireless networks in 125 countries. And it has [built a test bed network in San Francisco](#), where the company is headquartered. Meraki offers residents free equipment and Internet access. About 80 percent of San Francisco's major neighborhoods have a free Meraki network operating. The company plans to continue building the "[Free the Net](#)" network in 2009, deepening coverage in each neighborhood.

In September, Meraki announced it was [partnering with the city of San Francisco](#) to add wireless coverage to 12 low-income housing projects in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. Meraki also plans to provide Wi-Fi Internet access to low-income housing owned by the city in other neighborhoods as well as provide free Wi-Fi to senior centers throughout the city.

While Meraki's mission is not necessarily to bring broadband to low-income people, the inexpensive and easy to use nature of its products make it an ideal partner for organizations, such as OneEconomy, that are trying to bridge the digital divide. And as the new presidential administration takes office and plans for universal broadband access take shape, Meraki could find itself being used in even more communities to provide low-cost broadband access.