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The Politics of Telecom, Media and Technology

Digital Inclusion About More Than Connectivity, Says One Economy CEO

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By Drew Clark, Editor, BroadbandCensus.com

WASHINGTON, June 2 - Ensuring that all Americans have access to broadband is about more than ensuring high-speed Internet connectivity, said the CEO of the One Economy, a non-profit organization promoting a philosophy of “digital inclusion.”

In addition to ensuring that broadband is present, affordable and available for adoption by low-income Americans, groups aiming to make a difference in stemming the digital divide must also focusing on human capital and digital media content, said Rey Ramsey of One Economy, speaking last week at plenary session the International Summit for Community Wireless Networks here.

One Economy has been seeking to bring broadband into public housing developments, and then to create the tools and incentives for residents to use broadband. The group has sought created its digital content, including the Web site beehive.org, about emergency preparedness, and is currently developing a “public internet channel,” which aims to provide what it calls “a 21st century public service benefit for all Americans.”

“It is important to attack everything on the supply and demand side,” said Ramsey, rather than focus merely on the availability of broadband in a particular community. “So much attention is placed on the connectivity” piece of broadband, he said.

Ramsey said specifically that Internet speeds needed to be included in analyses of digital inclusion.

“We have to upgrade the thinking. We are falling behind in terms of speed,” he said of measurements of U.S. broadband. And he criticized the Federal Communications Commission’s inclusion of office use of the Internet in its broadband statistics. “We should only be looking at high-speed in the home.”

Others speaking at the conference, an annual gathering of volunteers and others who have been seeking up wireless community networks for more than a half-decade, also emphasized the need for a holistic approach to leveraging community engagement in the Internet.

Mark Ansboury, Senior Vice President and Chief Technology office of OneCommunity, spoke about the need to not only engage in dialogue about connectivity, but to create a platform for universal adoption of broadband within a community. OneCommunity is a non-profit organization targeting universal Internet access, social inclusion and economic development in northeast Ohio.

The group wants to make broadband as ubiquitous and free as the air we breathe, said Ansboury. But that noble goal doesn't mean avoiding engaging with the business community — including the telecommunications carriers.

Among wireless communications networks, “the fear is that the incumbent carrier is going to come after me [so that] I have to stay so far beneath the radar,” Ansboury said. “We have built a commercially scalable network in northeast Ohio, but have structured it in a way that is a win for us and win for them.”

OneCommunity is funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which has committed up to \$25 million over five years to create universal Internet access programs in 26 cities of focus by the foundation.

It uses next-generation fiber-optic networks, and also wireless communications, to meet its goals, said Ansboury.