

## **Civil Rights Groups Call for Broadband Parity**

By [Kenneth Corbin](#)

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As the federal government prepares to kick off the first round of applications for broadband stimulus grants, nine leading civil rights groups have joined forces to advocate for funding for programs to serve minority communities.

The groups, which include the National Urban League, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Asian American Justice Center, have banded together to form the Broadband Opportunities Coalition, a unified front that plans to press the agencies administering the stimulus funds to prioritize programs that will drive broadband adoption and access among segments of the population on the wrong side of the digital divide.

"This new entity will solidify our commitment to literally drive this issue back home to our communities," Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League, told reporters on a conference call this morning. "We recognize that broadband adoption is an economic tool. Broadband adoption is not a nicety, but it's a necessity to the growth of this nation."

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), [enacted in February](#), set aside \$7.2 billion for programs to spur broadband deployment and adoption. The two agencies administering the funds have collected more than 1,400 sets of public comments on how the grants should be administered, and plan to open the first round of applications later this month.

To prepare a joint application for the stimulus funds, the new coalition will partner with One Economy, a nonprofit group that focuses on digital outreach programs for low-income people.

One Economy CEO Rey Ramsey said the group will seek funds that will drive deployment to minority communities, particularly in urban areas, but also seek programs to promote digital literacy and computing education for non-native English speakers.

"We have a great opportunity to take advantage of some new dollars that are flowing from the federal government, but also create new systems that are sustainable," Ramsey said. "What we are trying to do is make sure that we focus like a laser beam on broadband to make sure that is available in our communities, that it is affordable and that we adopt it."

### **Broadband adoption, public computing**

Of the \$7.2 billion, Congress directed the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration to allocate a minimum of \$250 million toward programs to drive adoption, and at least \$200 million for public computing facilities.

That leaves the lion's share of the funding for network build-out projects, but the new

coalition is likely to press for a greater share for programs to stimulate demand in minority communities.

"I think the percentages are not the ratio we would like," Ramsey said. "There's so much more work that needs to be done on adoption."

Critics of the government's approach to the broadband issue often cite a recent Pew study that found that 51 percent of adults who either don't use the Internet or have dial-up service said they're not interested in broadband because they believe it's not relevant to their lives. Pew has also conducted research [highlighting the declining or stabilizing rates](#) of broadband adoption among low-income and minority Americans.

Today's announcement is the product of a summit on broadband the groups convened in Washington in February. There, they identified as a key priority digital access for underserved segments of the population, noting that the new administration was hinging so much of its domestic agenda -- from economic growth to energy to health care -- on ubiquitous high-speed connectivity.

"We want to ensure that we do everything proactively to make sure that our communities are included, we work hard to catch up, and that we're part of this transformation," Morial said. "That's where the jobs are, and we're determined that our communities are going to be a part of that."

The agenda of the new group loosely echoes a letter sent recently by seven House Democrats appealing to the agency leaders overseeing the programs to not overlook low-income urban populations when awarding grants.

"While there is a strong focus in the ARRA on rural areas, we want to ensure that 'underserved' urban areas are properly considered during the broadband grant process," the representatives wrote. The stimulus bill leaves to the agencies the definitions of the terms "underserved" and "unserved," which will in part determine which regions are eligible for grants.

Of course, the calls for prioritizing low-income and minority segments of the population are competing with a litany of other interests for the attention of the grant arbiters.

The agencies held a series of public meetings as part of the comment process, which in some cases devolved into a parade of special interests stumping for their own cause. In one meeting in late March, for instance, agency leaders [heard impassioned appeals](#) from representatives of 10 groups, including the National Science Foundation for using the money to fund academic research, the National Congress of American Indians for bringing access to tribal lands, and the National Council on Aging plugging training programs in senior centers.

The agencies are planning the first of three grant-application periods to run from July to September. An NTIA spokesman told *InternetNews.com* that the agency hopes to award all of the first wave of funding by the end of the year.