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One Economy weaving broadband into low-income housing

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In large metropolitan areas such as New York, Chicago and San Francisco, low-income housing and broadband access have become intertwined thanks to efforts by One Economy, a global nonprofit organization delivering broadband to low-income people.



Greenlee

Certainly low-income housing gives families the stability they need to help them get back on their feet, but it's becoming increasingly evident that, when combined with free broadband access and computer training, people have an even greater opportunity to turn their lives around, said Alan Greenlee, vice president of One Economy.

"Our mission is really about connecting people to information," said Greenlee. "There is the assumption that people are online and people have computers and the capacity to use those computers--not all of that is in place."

Sure, it's possible to head to the local library to get online, at least for a short time. But Greenlee said the real impact of broadband comes from connecting people in the home. It's difficult to fill out an application or lay out a business plan at a public computer that other people are waiting to use, and home connectivity is often the difference in someone finding a job or getting the money they need to go to college.

One Economy, born out of the affordable housing and community development world, understands well how money is funneled down at the local level into affordable housing projects. As such, it has been able to successfully work at a local level to bring in the necessary funds to



[Click here](#) for a video about One Economy's efforts.

give housing projects free broadband access and the training to make people proficient computer users.

Through the National Equity Fund, it is offering a resource to pay for computers, training and years of Internet access for new affordable housing developments. In partnership with AT&T, it is providing two free years of Internet access to 50,000 low-income Americans by 2010. And through the California Emerging Technology Fund, One Economy will connect more than 30,000 low-income California residents within the next three years.

In California, One Economy has successfully encouraged the state to include funding language that incents affordable housing companies to include Internet access into new buildings. As a result of that policy, some 17,000 units now have free or affordable broadband Internet access.

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And One Economy itself has delivered 9,000 of those units free broadband access. While One Economy started out building wired data networks itself in newly constructed affordable housing buildings, it found that wiring existing buildings was too challenging. Two years ago, it partnered with Meraki, a WiFi equipment vendor aimed at making the setup and maintenance of WiFi pain free. The product is a managed solution that is self configuring and can be remotely managed via cloud architecture, without the need for an army of IT experts.



Biswas

"They deploy the network and manage the network. There is no IT professional on site," said Sanjit Biswas, CEO and co-founder of Meraki. "They use our cloud controller, set security and bandwidth policies and set other policies such as blocking adult content. If anyone is hogging all of the bandwidth, they can throttle that bandwidth down."

In January, One Economy and Meraki expanded their partnership with an aim at delivering affordable WiFi to more than 100,000 low-income housing families across the U.S. and around the world within the next two years. As part of the agreement, One Economy is deploying Meraki solutions to low-income communities in every location it provides services to, beginning with major U.S. cities including Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco. Meraki also teamed with the city of San Francisco last year to unwire several parts of the city.

"If you are comfortable using Gmail, that is the user experience needed to set up these networks," Greenlee said. "You don't even have to know about IP addresses. Just give the network a name, set all of the policies and hit a button."

In Sunnydale, one of the most depressed areas of San Francisco, One Economy and Meraki are providing WiFi access to a 790-unit public housing project there. Like all of the housing projects One Economy unwires, it's not enough to simply declare that WiFi is alive. Many of the residents don't own a computer and don't know how to use the Internet. So One Economy has set up a youth leadership program--called the Digital Connectors program--that serves two purposes: to educate residents on how to use the Internet and to train young people in technology to help them build their leadership and workplace skills.



Meraki allows users to set up a wireless network, and includes directions on how to map out the location of access points via Google Maps.

"They go through a hiring process, get flash drives, T-shirts and other hardware and later get a stipend," Greenlee said. "They teach their friends and neighbors about how to use technology."

One Digital Connectors graduate, who is still in high school, has been hired on by One Economy as the network maintenance person within Sunnydale, in order to ensure the network is being used and operated responsibly, Greenlee said.

One Economy also provides a multilingual Web portal, called the Beehive, which provides low-income individuals Web-based tools and information about financial services, education, jobs, health care and family. For instance, there's information on managing diabetes, building a budget and how to start your own business.

At tax time, One Economy offers free tax help and online filing to families whose income is less than \$56,000 a year. For the 2007 tax year, 7,000 people took advantage of some \$9 million in earned income tax credit they otherwise would not likely have gotten on their own.

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