

June 17, 2009

**Broadband with a Purpose: Our Economic Success Depends On It
A Response to the Pew Research Center's Annual Survey of Internet Usage**

By Marc Morial, Janet Murguía and Rey Ramsey

Washington, DC – Today, the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project released their annual national study on Internet usage. The results showed significant increases in broadband adoption and Internet use across every demographic but one. African Americans' use of broadband increased at a rate well below the national average for the second consecutive year. Last year, 43 percent of African Americans had broadband Internet connections at home. This year, that figure is 46 percent, an increase the Pew survey refers to as “not significant statistically.”

It's worth noting that the figures for Latinos are well above average, both in terms of broadband adoption and the rate of increase. According to the survey, 68 percent of Latinos now have connections at home as compared to a national average of 63 percent. This is positive news, to be sure, but a more complete picture might have emerged had respondents been given the option to take the survey in Spanish.

Increased Internet access expands an individuals' access to resources such as education, health care, employment and financial supports. These areas offer the potential to improve lives and, in turn, contribute to our national economy as people become engaged and productive citizens. The Internet is no longer the luxury it perhaps once was. Our ability to compete in today's 21st century economy depends on it.

Such is the position of the federal government, which allocated \$7.2 billion from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to expand broadband access among underserved populations. However, an issue as important as access is adoption. The Pew survey noted that 50% of individuals without broadband access believe it is not relevant to their lives.

There is a nexus between one's quality of life and the quality of information they receive. For example, an expectant mother who knows about pre-natal care eats right, takes the vitamins she needs and seeks care at appropriate intervals. Her baby is healthy. Her peer, who has never heard of pre-natal care, gives birth to a child of low birth-weight at risk of developmental delays. Information is the difference maker.

Broadband must have a purpose – it must be relevant and meaningful. Content is the indispensable element of relevancy. It can provide opportunities for people to find what they need to strengthen themselves and their families. They can use it to find a job, housing or tools to manage finances in difficult economic times. This is the role of “public-purpose media” – content that is created specifically to be engaging and informative, while it facilitates action.

Making use of and benefitting from that content relies on the ability of all Americans to have first-rate access, especially from the home. Our homes are an unparalleled venue for broadband adoption because they are private, convenient and allow for consistent 24/7 access. It is not coincidental that the survey's data reflects only those who have adopted broadband in their homes.

Two weeks ago, the nation's largest civil rights organizations and One Economy Corporation convened the Broadband Opportunity Coalition to address disparities in broadband access and adoption. Our particular focus is on the major barriers that keep communities of color off line—availability, affordability and adoption. As found in the Pew study, being African American and low income are major factors for still using dial up in or choosing not to adopt broadband at all. For the Broadband Opportunity Coalition, the larger question is what key opportunities are being missed for these groups in our new democracy.

It's not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Success relies on organizations like the ones represented in our coalition to create localized projects tailored to the cultural, financial, geographic and professional needs of individual communities – both geographic and demographic.

It is the collective intent of the Coalition to ensure that the voices of minorities in urban and rural communities are heard and to prioritize programs acceptable to government stimulus programs that make access and adoption a reality for all Americans. This also means identifying programs and leaders who have inroads and trust built within those communities that need these resources the most.

Of the \$7.2 billion, a minimum of \$250 million has been allocated toward programs focused on adoption. We hope lawmakers are taking the word “minimum” seriously because if we're looking to move the nation forward, this allocation is not enough.

The data in the Pew Research Center's survey speaks for itself. We must seize this moment and the commitment of an administration that understands the power of technology better than any that has come before it, to ensure that communities of color have adoption rates on par with their fellow Americans. We must provide the access and the content to ensure adoption. That's why we created the Broadband Opportunity Coalition.

Our ability to compete in an increasingly digital economy depends on it.

Marc Morial is President and CEO of the National Urban League, the nation's oldest and largest community-based movement devoted to empowering African Americans to enter the economic and social mainstream.

Janet Murguía is President and CEO of The National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the nation's largest civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States that works to improve opportunities for Hispanic Americans.

Rey Ramsey is the CEO of One Economy Corporation, a global nonprofit that uses innovative approaches to deliver the power of technology and information to low-income people.