

The Washington Post

One Step Off The Superhighway

Push to Expand Internet Access Leaves Behind the Urban Poor

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Saturday, February 28, 2009; Page D01

President Obama made his first major push for the Web this month when he signed off on the stimulus bill, which includes \$7.2 billion to bring high-speed Internet to rural America. But some critics say the administration's plan largely overlooks the biggest group of disconnected people: the urban poor.

One provision in the stimulus plan could provide about \$250 million for service and training in urban areas. Some of that money is likely to go toward boosting efforts at community centers, but interest groups say the amount is not enough to help an estimated 21 million low-income people get online.

Access isn't the issue for them. In many of the nation's cities, residents have more than one option for service providers. What many do not have is the money to hop on the information superhighway.

"I have the will and the determination to get it for my kids," Petworth resident Judith Theodore said. "But I don't have the money."

Theodore scrambles daily between public libraries in the District so that the oldest of her three children has access to a computer to do his homework, and she can search for a job.

"The Internet is becoming as important as electricity and gas," Theodore said. A growing number of cities are asking residents to renew driver's licenses or pay tickets online. More patients are connecting with physicians and pharmacists online. Even more of the world's social connections revolve around the Web, from Facebook to MySpace to seniors turning to Flickr to check out pictures of their grandchildren.

A survey last May by the Pew Internet and American Life Project showed that about one-third of people who do not have high-speed Internet or broadband service said it was because service was too expensive. In the District, 41 percent of all homes do not subscribe to dial-up or broadband Internet service, according to an October 2007 report from the Census Bureau.

There are several ideas for tackling this problem. One is grants to build local "hot spots" in public housing units where residents could get free wireless service. Another would be training programs where youngsters are given laptops and pay for offering computer and online training and trouble-shooting to low-income elderly consumers -- one of the biggest demographic groups not using the Web, according to Rey Ramsey, president of OneEconomy.com, a nonprofit group that provides technology to low-income communities.

"We're looking at this as an initial investment on adoption issues, but there's going to need to be more resources," Ramsey said.

Free Press, a public interest group that advocates for universal access to the Web, has called for \$1.2 billion for broadband subsidies and training. Many, however, question whether putting taxpayer money into shrinking the digital divide is the best way to help poor communities.

At an American Enterprise Institute conference last week, former FCC chief economist Michael Katz said he commissioned a study on the effects of a \$7 billion rural telephone service program. The conclusion was that the program had minimal impact on towns that received subsidies for phone service. Instead of putting billions of dollars into telecommunications programs, he said, a bigger social good would be to stop infant mortality or end gang violence in Los Angeles.

"There are a lot higher social value programs we could be doing," Katz said.

But Theodore, who lives in a rental rowhouse in Petworth, points out that companies like drugstore chain CVS and [McDonald's](#) increasingly are putting application processes online. Public assistance programs that might aid her family also are moving to the Web.

Theodore lost her job as a real estate agent a year ago. She cannot afford a computer. Even if she could, there's no place to carve \$30 to \$50 a month for broadband service fees out of her monthly \$1,100 budget.

"I feel like everyone is driving on this fast road and I'm a little car with just three wheels, sometimes just two and a half," Theodore said.

Theodore said that last month her 11-year-old son Steven was researching Web sites for a geography paper on Chad when the library computer network shut down because of a technological malfunction. She said he received his first failing grade.