



**Testimony
of
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Before the Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet**

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Respected Chairs Boucher and Waxman, Ranking Members Barton and Stearns, I thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Nicol Turner-Lee, and I am Senior Vice President of External Affairs for One Economy Corporation.

One Economy is a global nonprofit that leverages the power of technology and information to connect low-income people to the economic mainstream. We bring broadband into the homes of low-income people, produce public-purpose media, and train and employ youth to enhance communities' technology capacity. Our work has taken hold in four continents, from big cities to small rural towns. Since our founding in 2000, our work has reached 17 million people.

Today, as we examine issues related to the broadband programs in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), I would like to highlight the successes and challenges we face in encouraging families to adopt that access in their homes and communities.

When we look at the data on broadband, we see both good news and bad news.

Most Americans have *access* to broadband service—by which I mean it is available where they live if they want a connection to their home computer. In fact, according to the Federal Communications Commission's zip-code level data, in more than 90 percent of the United States, consumers can choose from three or more broadband providers. Nearly 60 percent of Americans have *adopted* broadband by paying for a high-speed connection.



The latest Pew data shows that the top reasons why people are not online are *usability* and *relevance* - two questions that One Economy is addressing with culturally meaningful, literacy accessible online content. The creation of the value proposition for first time and fully detached users is critical and the platform that includes – rather than excludes on the basis of language preference, literacy comprehension and speed is paramount to addressing barriers to adoption.

The affordability of access is another barrier to adoption as significant inequality that exists between rich and poor communities. According to the most recent Census Bureau data, while 76 percent of households earning more than \$50,000 per year are connected, only 35 percent of homes with annual income less than \$50,000 have adopted broadband in their homes. Low-income families are also less likely to have the money for broadband subscriptions and adequate hardware to connect to the Internet.

Universal access is particularly important to these low-income communities, along with programs that support widespread adoption. Programs that address the barriers to adoption can not only serve to accelerate use, but also strengthen the value proposition for disconnected citizens.

When we frame broadband access and adoption for the ARRA, our first goal should be to create a *digital ecosystem* comprised of the home, school, community centers, libraries, workforce development centers and even mobile devices that support a culture of use around broadband. Our second goal should be focused on promoting *broadband with a purpose* that educates, motivates and empowers people to take control of their own lives. In our work, we have seen the power of broadband give low-income people tools for improving their education, their health, and their economic lives.

For example, 70 percent of working families who receive the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) pay for professional help preparing and filing their taxes and as many as 25 percent of families who qualified for the EITC did not receive it. For the last two years, we have partnered with the private sector and



community-based organizations to make free tax preparation and filing available online. Families using our content rich web site, the Beehive (www.thebeehive.org), received nearly \$10 million in state and federal refunds last year and we hope to double that number this year. In addition to the \$1000 average refund, broadband made possible the education and support these families needed to file for themselves, saving hundreds of dollars in fees.

Broadband is also giving low-income people tools to improve their health. Chronic diseases affect millions of Americans and disproportionately impact low-income communities. Broadband can bring into homes the resources people need to handle the day-to-day management of a disease like diabetes- wherever they live. These tools can be accessed by people who may not be able to seek in-person assistance because of their location or the cost of these services.

Perhaps the most dramatic changes we have seen are in the area of education. Greene County, North Carolina—a rural, economically distressed area—struggled with high rates of poverty and low attainment of higher education. Beginning in November 2003, a diverse team of stakeholders, including the Greene County local government, the school system, grassroots leaders, and social service providers, used technology and its tools to positively impact the pressing economic needs in the area. The technology infusion began at the school-level by bringing Apple iBooks to each 6th through 12th grader.

The schools and the community quickly realized that without broad-based, affordable access to the Internet, the benefits of technology would be limited. In November 2003, Greene County leaders began working with One Economy to help create Internet tools and content for the community. Since then, Greene County has developed free Internet hotspots at schools and fire stations and a municipal broadband solution for the entire County.



Today, Greene County has improved educational outcomes—including higher SAT scores, more students attending college, and dramatically reduced teen pregnancy.

These opportunities to improve health, education, and economic livelihood in low-income communities demonstrate that while universal access is an important goal, it is only a starting point. Our experience has shown that additional steps—efforts that are less about a specific technology and more about awareness and creating a culture of use—are needed to ensure that the benefits of the digital age are reaching the communities that need them most.

As specified in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, government can play a role in stimulating both supply and demand. Programs that integrate what we consider six key drivers – *adoption, public/private partnerships, intentionality, affordability, sustainability and innovation* can support the development of a digital ecosystem and promote a culture of use. These six drivers should serve as a framework for evaluating requests for broadband stimulus funding and drive our national goal to bring access to unserved and underserved communities.

First, adoption can be promoted in a variety of ways in local communities. Public awareness about the benefits of digital access, online media that put vital information and tools directly in the hands of citizens, digital literacy that creates or enhances aptitude and affordability are all critical in demonstrating the value proposition of bringing broadband into the lives and homes of American people. For low-income people, who are often caught in a web of government programs and services, simple and direct online access to those programs can mean the difference between missing a day of work to stand in line at a municipal building and getting help in the comfort of one's home. At One Economy, we believe that the time has come for a broad-based effort to provide these kinds of information and tools online. To that end, we have created the Public Internet Channel (*PIC.tv*): public-purpose programming designed to inform, engage, and help people take action. The millions of people who have taken advantage of our



online resources to file their taxes, find better schools for their children, start new businesses, and take other steps to improve their lives demonstrate the need for such an effort.

Second, stimulus investments can be multiplied through public and private partnerships. Partnerships that create synergies between government programs and private sector interest help expand broadband access for the public good. Moreover, local and state government endorsements of such programs serve to embed them into the fabric of local democracies.

Third, the need to be intentional about how broadband stimulus funds are used to serve low-income or disenfranchised groups is crucial to deployment of services and the expansion of use. If the allocation of broadband stimulus funding does not make a considerable difference among this demographic, we have failed. Moreover, we have hindered the workforce and community development opportunities that flourish in communities when broadband is readily available.

Affordability is the fourth driver to consider in the examination of broadband programs. Free or low cost provision of broadband services should be made available to communities in need without reducing quality of service or content offerings. In addition, innovative payment plans or pricing models can serve to encourage broadband adoption and maintain long-term use among low and moderate income families.

Sustaining the engagement of individuals is also a necessary fifth driver as we involve targeted populations in the creation of content, new applications, social uses and compelling online communities. Imagine the possibilities when people who have been left behind become active advocates for broadband access and adoption. Five years ago, One Economy provided young people, ages 14 to 21 years old, with the tools to become technology ambassadors throughout rural and urban America. These young people served their communities after receiving leadership training and learning a digital competency. Today, over 2,600 Digital Connectors have provided more than 56,000 hours of technology service in



communities across the United States. We view this program as one of many vehicles that activates people to learn and teach their neighbors on the power and benefits of this medium.

Innovation is the final driver for creating successful adoption programs. Unproven “experiments” should not be the goal and technology bias should not hinder solutions. Innovative programs that are scalable, replicable and outcome driven should be supported, especially when they leverage private/public partnerships and are intentional in impact. Right now, the stimulus provides an opportunity to surface and expand innovative program models that are making a difference throughout the country. Utilizing tax credits for developers to lower the cost of broadband in public and affordable housing is just one example of the type of innovation that can be expanded to other housing authorities or transforming young people into Digital Connectors who get educational credit for their service is also replicable and scalable. These both represent rapid wins and quick investments that serve to accelerate deployment and adoption activities.

Again, I appreciate the subcommittee's interest in hearing our testimony on how ARRA broadband programs can help accelerate the national goal of providing universal access and meaningful value for disconnected populations throughout rural and urban America. I believe that the integration of our six drivers into the framework for the submission and evaluation of programs will set us on a path to cultivate broadband with a purpose for the millions of people that have been fully or slightly disconnected from the digital economy.