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Alliance brings high-speed Internet to low-income

SCI-TECH SCENE | Seeking a wider Web

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BY [SANDRA GUY](#) Sun-Times Columnist

Eighth-grader Crystal Herren has no Internet access at home, so she logs on to the Web at the Alliance for Community Peace, a nonprofit, faith-based project that provides a free computer lab to residents in the Cabrini-Green neighborhood.

"I've been coming to the lab for two years. They help us do research. I've done research on health issues like diabetes and AIDS," Crystal said.

Another visitor, Darnell Griffin, comes to the lab because his Internet access at home is slow and he has to share a desktop computer with his three sisters. Darnell has received help filling out the federal student financial-aid application for college at the computer lab.

Arjah'nay Herren, Crystal's cousin, has used the computer lab for two years to learn how to sharpen her resume and apply for summer jobs. She has a slow-moving desktop and a Wi-Fi laptop at home.

The Rev. Walter B. Johnson Jr. founded the Alliance 13 years ago to give children a safe place to go, in large part in response to a 1992 shooting in which 7-year-old Dantrell Davis was killed by a stray bullet. The Rev. Phyllis Harrell, director of the Alliance, has seen many young people visit the computer lab because they have no access to the Web at home.

The students are the very people President Obama has pledged to help by ensuring high-speed Internet access nationwide, and especially to rural and underserved areas. The plan calls for areas left off the broadband Internet grid to get billions of dollars of high-speed fiber and wireless connections, plus subsidies for training and adoption efforts.

The goal is easier heralded than done, as business groups call for changes in state law governing telecommunications service, and as a federal court ruled last week that the Federal Communications Commission lacks authority to require that all legal Web content be treated equally.

Greater broadband access would help people in the Cabrini-Green community access Web sites, forms and formats that can help them get jobs and gain skills, Harrell said.

High-speed connections are important because Web content increasingly comprises broadband-gulping video, educational, medical and business uses.

Yet Harrell said the Web access must be affordable so that people will use it. Today's bundled Web and telecom services are expensive for low-income families, said Harrell, whose most pressing issue is a delay in receiving program funding from the state because of the budget crisis.

Nationwide, the average download speed of 4 megabits per second ranks 15th in the world, according to a study by the Information Technology Industry Council. Although 5 percent of Americans have no high-speed Internet access, 30 percent cited the most important reason they lacked broadband access at home as either because "too expensive" (26.3 percent) or "not available" (3.6 percent), according to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

Will urban neighborhoods ever achieve the dream, and what will need to happen first?

Business groups say Illinois must loosen many of its telephone regulations -- much like neighboring Indiana has done -- to free up competition so companies will want to do business in underserved, low-income neighborhoods. The Illinois Technology Partnership, the Illinois State Black Chamber of Commerce and the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce released results of a study on March 16 showing that with a 7 percent increase in broadband penetration in Illinois, the state would gain \$6.2 billion in economic growth, \$28 million in average health-care savings and more than \$4 billion in direct yearly income growth.

Lindsay Mosher, executive director of the Illinois Technology Partnership, pointed to the study to encourage lawmakers to rewrite the 1985 Illinois Telecommunications Act to encourage investment in the state's broad-band infrastructure.

The technology partnership and the Discovery Institute's Technology and Democracy Project are calling for the state to provide greater pricing flexibility for local residential service, reduce the obligations of telecom companies that serve as providers of last resort, and reduce in-state access charges paid by wireless and long-distance phone companies to encourage them to invest in broadband.

Illinois' outdated rules hurt the very competition and consumer protection needed to provide greater broadband access and to make it affordable, said Hance Haney, director and senior fellow for the Discovery Institute's Technology and Democracy Project.

The Citizens Utility Board cautions that rules changes must not allow Internet-access providers to spike their rates or to get out of service-quality standards.

"Giving up state oversight of the future of the telecommunications industry would be a mistake," CUB Executive Director David Kolata said.

Even with freer competition at the state level, experts say, the federal government's ultimate goal of connecting 100 million users who don't get broadband today could take until 2020.

Other arguments about broadband access will revolve around how the FCC can protect consumers and preserve the Internet's openness, how much spectrum will be available to whom, and whether an auction of the wireless spectrum will cover the expense of a full broadband rollout.

jonbtuba wrote:

These are all incredible developments. Our school system and labor force will be a lot better off from this. \$6.2 billion in growth would go a long way towards mitigating the budget crisis. Thank goodness we live in a state where this is becoming a priority.

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