

Innovative Uses of Technology For Underserved Communities

By John I. West

Closing the Gap, Funding • April/May 2001

More Americans than ever have access to computers, the Internet, and a new generation of hand-held wireless devices. Computer and Internet usage has soared for people in all demographic groups and geographic locations. At the end of 1998, more than 40 percent of American households owned computers, and one quarter of all households had Internet access.

Although acceptance and usage of these tools has increased dramatically, technology watchers still point to the existence of a “Digital Divide.” On one side of this divide are those with computers, Internet access and the new tools. On the other side are those without.

According to *Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide*, a recent report from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), significant disparities persist, despite efforts to increase access to information resources.

The report shows a continuing difference between the “information-rich” and the “information-poor.” The information-rich include most Whites, many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, those with higher incomes, people with more education, and dual parent households. The information-poor include the young, people with lower incomes and education levels, certain minorities, and residents of rural areas or central cities. The report reveals that:

- Urban households with incomes of \$75,000 and higher are more than 20 times more likely to have access to the Internet than rural households at the lowest income levels, and more than nine times as likely to have a computer at home.
- Whites are more likely to have access to the Internet from home than African Americans or Hispanics have from any location.
- African American and Hispanic households are approximately one-third as likely to have home Internet access as households of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, and roughly two-fifths as likely as White households.
- Regardless of income level, Americans living in rural areas are lagging behind in Internet access. At the lowest income levels, those in urban areas are more than twice as likely to have Internet access than those earning the same income in rural areas.

The NTIA is working to help narrow the Divide. Begun in 1994, its Technology Opportunities Program (TOP) has distributed more than \$149 million in grant funds and leveraged almost \$221 million in local matching funds. Simply put, TOP grants help organizations develop innovative programs using technology that can be replicated by other communities for the benefit of everyone.

These grants, which require matching funds from non-federal sources, have helped organizations like col-

leges and universities, and state, local and tribal governments design and develop programs to help the government and their communities. To date, TOP has awarded 456 grants in 50 states, the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

By requiring matching funds, TOP encourages partnerships. These partnerships will help prospective organizations by contributing materially to the project.

TOP projects create opportunities in such areas as lifelong learning, community and economic development, government and public services, safety, health, culture, and the arts.

Kapi’olani Medical Center for Women and Children in Honolulu received TOP funds for its Fetal Tele-Ultrasound Project. Doctors fly and drive all over the state of Hawai’i to care for women with high-risk pregnancies. This new service permitted the Fetal Diagnostic Center to “see” high-resolution ultrasound images broadcast from neighbor islands and remote O’ahu locations. Tele-ultrasound provided 24/7 access to specialty care rather than itinerant clinics.

In another TOP grant, the Tribal Connections project, the University of Washington and the National Library of Medicine collaborated to open access to electronic health information resources for Southwest American Indian tribes. Tribal Connections provided assistance with computer network and telecommunications planning, equipment, and training in the use of electronic health information. Sixteen Northwest tribes and villages have already benefited from the health information and resources provided by Tribal Connections. In 2000, the National Library of Medicine provided additional funding to extend this innovative model for health information outreach to four additional tribal communities in the Southwest United States.

In Oak Park, Illinois, the Every Block A Village Project was awarded a TOP grant to improve community initiatives that provide health care services to residents of low-income areas. These communities identified barriers to good health care, and put strategies in place to address the problems. Working with West Suburban Hospital as part of a primary health care program, residents of an inner-city Chicago community had access to the Internet to find health and safety information.

NTIA’s TOP Web Site points out that a competitive grant application is one that is based on a well-developed, carefully planned project. Between now and next year’s deadline, prospective applicants can take the time to talk with community stakeholders, meet with potential end users and assess their needs, raise matching funds and turn ideas into a realistic plan.

Under “compelling” circumstances, NTIA may waive the 50/50 matching requirement, but organizations seeking a waiver must provide evidence at the time of application that the matching requirement will impose an “unreasonable hardship.”

NTIA suggests that partnerships be clearly defined and mutually beneficial, with the commitments that are well documented in the application.

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TOP also encourages prospective applicants to build on the lessons and accomplishments of previous grantees. TOP has done a number of reports, including independent evaluation studies, case studies of individual projects and a lessons-learned series, that are especially helpful for people planning projects. All of the reports, along with a searchable database of all TOP grants ever awarded, are available on the TOP web site at <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/top>.

In addition to the Web site, TOP is planning a meeting to help people with their projects through lessons learned. This year's "Networks for People" conference will be held in December and will focus on the demonstrated results of TOP grantees.

TOP expects to make announcements in the fall of 2001 on the availability of program funds for next year. Check the TOP web site and contact program personnel by phone at (202) 482-2048 or by e-mail at top@ntia.doc.gov. You can also stay informed on future grants by registering to get updates through an automatic e-mail notification service. The automatic web notification site can be found at http://www.ntia.doc.gov/otiahome/top/whoweare/get_update. ❖

