

**Oversight Hearing on Bridging the Digital Divide in California:
A Foundation for a Better Way of Life**
Utilities and Commerce Committee

**Testimony by Ken Simmons,
Chief Operating Officer**
Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles
March 11, 2013

Thank you Chairman Bradford, Vice Chair Patterson and members of the committee for inviting me to testify about the critical need to bridge the digital divide in California, particularly in urban low-income communities and to provide our support for AB 1299 and its hope of bridging the digital gap between low-income families and the rest of our state.

I am the Chief Operating Officer for the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles (HACLA). We are the largest housing authority west of the Mississippi. We provide assistance to more than 50,000 families in our Section 8 program, provide senior housing and serve nearly 7,000 families in public housing, more than 22,000 individuals. Nearly half of these residents are school age children. We are increasingly alarmed that these children are being doomed to a continuing life of poverty because they are denied access to the education they need and the tools such as computer literacy that will allow them to compete with the changing and complex skills required for well paying jobs in the future.

We attempt to do our best to be more than landlords by providing services to better the quality of life for these children. We have pre-school programs to support mothers reading to their children as literacy is the cornerstone of education and academic success. We continue our support through elementary school with reading and math programs to keep grade level skills knowing that falling behind in these areas will likely result in a failed high school programs and possible drop outs. We are also working to support opportunities in Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM) by providing our children with a view of a world that they do not see in their communities and the support that they need to know that they too can dream a future in these fields. Nonetheless this battle becomes more difficult as the child ages and competing forces try to keep them down and out.

Our children face every adversity in trying to get ahead. The average household income for our public housing residents is only \$1,400 a month. Fifty (50) percent of these children live in single-mom households typically without a working role model and limited parental support and guidance. Our housing sites, have been located in industrial areas surrounded by neighborhoods of poverty accompanied by the worst performing schools of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Our children are denied access to free public services through our libraries and to books, computers and internet because they would be required to cross neighborhood gang lines and place themselves in jeopardy. What few of these services we have been able to provide on-site with satellite libraries and computer labs require restricted hours because we cannot guarantee the safety of either the children or support staff. The children who are most in need of support are being provided the least assistance.

Compare this life with the average California child who has access to good schools, libraries and is most likely to have access to a computer. Through the internet this child connects to resources for study and research. Most importantly, the child is able to actively develop those skills that will make them a valuable part of the workforce or even as their own entrepreneur. We know these opportunities are readily available but are denied to our children because the costs of internet access and computers will not be forthcoming when your income is below the poverty level.

We would like to help but cannot command much of a priority when it comes to dividing up the federal budget. It is well documented that public housing has been severely underfunded even in maintaining the bricks and mortar part of our business; services to support the human capital side of the equation are virtually non-existent. Yet it is this side of the equation that offers the most hope. While we debate the various needs and which adults deserve assistance, we miss the entire point that these children are victims in a system to which they have made no choices. It is also nonsensical public policy. The connection between a poor education and public dependence and even incarceration is well known, yet we continue to use our low-income neighborhoods as incubators for the next generation of problems.

Consequently our battle against the forces that keep our children down is heavily dependent on our non-profit partners. Not only do they possess the resources, they possess the expertise. Their help has been immeasurable in providing a helping hand. But those skills and resources are limited by the mediums in which we are forced to operate. Services must be limited to daylight hours, offering very little during a weekday in which our school children must keep up with the demands of homework, essays and school projects. Our partners have developed programs that provide things like online homework assistance and even a program to provide online counseling to help kids who may be victims of bullying, gang challenges and even domestic abuse. I recall a recent discussion with school officials in which we asked about the biggest gap in obtaining success for school age children. His response was not homework assistance but mental health as he faced a situation of more than 800 students per counselor. We have a partner - University of Southern California (USC) - who can provide such an online service. The resources are there but we cannot provide them. That is why we are so hopeful about this bill because we cannot provide the infrastructure, the internet service and the computer equipment required to make these services a reality.

While our children are our highest priority, we certainly have other populations who require our attention. Nearly a third of our public housing population are seniors and/or disabled who may face challenges of getting assistance due to the isolation of our sites, limited mobility and poor access to public transportation. How much is their life improved by a telehealth service that can provide medical care as well as preventative services through online tutorials for better health and eating habits.

Nearly 80% of our population is Latino in which the head of household is a Spanish-speaker. How much is their life improved if after a day of work which they are proud to perform for themselves and their families, they can spend an hour or two on the computer improving their English Skills, participating with an online skill training program or working toward their GED.

We have one site in which we have been able to provide some assistance to residents for internet and computers. Through a partnership with One Economy, AT &T, California Emerging Technology Fund and money set aside by the California Legislature, in 2009, we launched a pilot program at the Jordan Downs public housing community in Watts. Through this partnership, 700 units at Jordan Downs received free wifi access. After discovering that only 10% of the residents owned computers many which were quite outdated, HACLA received assistance from a non-profit; residents who completed a digital literacy boot camp were eligible to receive a free in-home computer through the Computers for Families program. There were some challenges with this pilot as residents shared that the connection was not reliable. This may be true of wifi connection particularly in cases when you are dealing with housing built during the World War II era. Wifi in this case was not the best option as the signal has limitations due to the configuration of the site and the fact that our buildings are made out of concrete. Hard-wired broadband connection was not an option for us as we lack the proper infrastructure. Nonetheless, the increase in quality of life for Jordan Downs residents after this system was put in place is noteworthy.

A group of graduate students from the School of Social Work at the University of Southern California studied and followed the results of the program and provided an evaluation. I'd like to share some of the observations and conclusions from the study: At one of the focus group sessions, facilitators asked how having a computer at home helped the participants and their families. Their response included the following: helped with job searches, submitting applications and resumes, increased communication between the parents and teachers to obtain information on children's academic performance, helped kindergarten through college level students research educational information to complete assignments, increased general access to information, improved research and job skills including online classes, made learning more enjoyable for children through educational online games, helped save money through paying bills online and finding lower prices online, made entertainment more affordable, children benefitted from free online tutoring at home, spent more time engaged in educational activities after school, improved children's grades, families spend more time at home, and students learned about college requirements and scholarship opportunities.

These observations provide a clearer understanding how we might build a plan to move our residents into the mainstream of Los Angeles and our economy. Given the right tools our residents have shown how ready they are to help themselves and take advantage of services that would not otherwise be available.

Our vision is one of a "virtual village" in which services are not dependent on income, transportation, or access but is available to all. The California Emerging Technology Fund shares this vision. Under the leadership of its President and CEO, Sunne Wright McPeak, we believe a strong partnership can be developed to explore a pilot partnership to implement proven Smart Housing strategies. Our collaborative work will improve the lives of people in affordable housing and validate the cost implications for all of HACLA's multi-family units and determine the most cost-effective adoption of support services, including Digital Literacy and computing devices.

As you can see our partners are ready to provide the bridge for children to receive homework assistance and mental services, preventative services to our seniors and the skills and education services to our

adults to improve the lives for themselves and their families. We also have the partners available to provide a network of services and informational systems to provide the opportunities for our residents to be an integral part of their communities. All we lack now is the mechanical means by which these services can be delivered.

Today's hearing is titled Bridging the Digital Divide in California; **A FOUNDATION FOR A BETTER WAY OF LIFE. We so agree with your vision**, as a necessary foundation for a better life is digital literacy with ability to log-in to the world that can potentially help children in their education, assist adults in job search, allow parents to connect with teachers, seniors to connect with their doctors ... the benefits are endless.

CONCLUSION

I would like to thank this committee for providing me with an opportunity to talk about this critical issue. I thank Chair Bradford for working to ensure that every Californian may have the chance to get connected no matter what their socio-economic background. There is an entire world that opens up when you are connected and for our residents who already are faced with tremendous challenges, we cannot add another obstacle of being computer illiterate. I strongly urge you to support AB 1299 and in doing so I assure you that you will be opening a new door full of opportunities for thousands of low income families and individuals.