One of the smartest strategies to spur economic recovery is to get all Californians connected through broadband—high-speed access to the Internet—at home, school, work and in all public places.

Today, the ability to be “connected” instantly through the Internet to information, services and digital tools is increasingly critical for access to and success in education, jobs, and economic opportunity. High-speed Internet networks are essential 21st Century infrastructure—as vital to commerce, economic competitiveness and quality of life as the transportation system was to the last century. In addition, broadband is a “green technology” that can significantly reduce impacts on the environment by offsetting vehicle trips, decreasing the use of resources, and saving energy.

Yet, while California is home to a wellspring of innovation that has given rise to the evolution of broadband and information technology, the use by Californians as a whole is only on par with the national average. Today, more than 14 million Californians remain unconnected to the Internet through broadband, which is greater in population than Illinois, the 5th most populous state. And, the 1.4 million rural residents who have no access to broadband live across 44,000 square miles, about the size of Kentucky. Progress is being made because of leadership from the Governor, Legislature, California Public Utilities Commission and the California Emerging Technology Fund. A year ago, 55% of Californians were using broadband, today it is 62%; about 1/3 of low-income households and Latino families were using broadband, and now it is 46%.

This differential in access to and adoption of broadband technology among subgroups of the population is referred to as the Digital Divide, which in reality is actually another facet of “economic divide” for too many Californians. Such a gap is unacceptable if California is to reach its full potential for prosperity, stimulate productivity gains that attract new investment and generates jobs, and achieve many of the additional benefits high-speed Internet access can provide.

California voters have approved billions in infrastructure bonds, the federal government has approved economic stimulus funds, and the California Public Utilities Commission has established a fund to help extend broadband into unserved and underserved communities. California must now commit to achieving ubiquitous broadband and promoting digital literacy. All school children must have access to computers connected to the Internet. Every public agency at the local, regional, state and federal levels must facilitate the deployment of broadband and build the technology into every infrastructure construction project.

The goal for Get Connected! was set in 2008 to reach 45% of Californians (more than 16 million residents) who were not online with broadband at home and to increase adoption by 10 percentage points by June 2010—increasing use among low-income households from 33% to 43% and among Latino families from 34% to 44% as measured by the Annual Survey Californians and Information Technology conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California in partnership with CETF and ZeroDivide.

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Community Connect Fairs serve as hands-on, in-person interactive events that demonstrate the benefits of using broadband. They are designed to directly address some of the key factors that prevent people from using a computer and subscribing to broadband – a lack of experience using the technology and a limited understanding of how broadband can help someone save time and money.

Radio and television ads run during the weeks prior to each event to promote the event and computers are given away on-site, the day of the event to further draw participants.

Get Connected! invites a variety of vendors to participate in Community Connect Fairs and showcase their online products and services. Retail and government vendors are exposed to thousands of new customers and constituents, introducing new users to their websites by demonstrating their online products and services.

For pictures of the Boyle Heights and Macarthur Park Community Connect Fairs held in in the City of Los Angeles visit http://www.flickr.com/photos/getconnectedtoday/.

Events Information For more information on Community Connect Fairs in the Los Angeles area and how to host a Community Connect Fair, please contact Susan Brinas at (310) 633-9439 or susan.bringas@hillandknowlton.com.