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11/02/2017 by Sunne Wright McPeak



## California needs a digital equity strategy to close its opportunity gap

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The [California Economic Summit \(https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017\)](https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017), has taken up the cause of crafting a comprehensive agenda for upward mobility with a series and policy discussion called [Elevate CA \(http://cafwd.org/elevateca\)](http://cafwd.org/elevateca). Summit leader and president and CEO of

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*the California Emerging Technology Fund (<http://www.cetfund.org/>), talks about how closing California's digital divide will be a priority for the disadvantaged and "underconnected."*

Though California has made strides closing its digital divide, we've reached a tipping point in public policy in California in which a strategy for digital equity is seen as essential to lifting up all residents.

The [California Economic Summit \(https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017\)](https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017) will convene in San Diego on November 2-3 with an evolving focus on how to advance the triple bottom-line for the future of the Golden State—Economy, Environment, Equity—with a new banner called "[Elevate CA \(http://cafwd.org/elevateca\)](http://cafwd.org/elevateca)."

The Summit, co-sponsored by California Forward and the California Stewardship Network, is led by thoughtful civic leaders from every region of the state with a deep commitment to improving the future for all Californians.

In developing Elevate CA for the 2017 Summit, a group of stakeholders was invited to participate in a meeting at which Jonathan Woetzel, McKinsey Global Institute director and co-author of *No Ordinary Disruption*, and Keith Kaplan, CEO and co-Founder of the Tesla Foundation, both called for a "Digital Bill of Rights" as a foundational building block for the triple bottom-line of sustainability and a cornerstone of Elevate CA.

That was a remarkable conversation from the perspective of the [California Emerging Technology Fund \(http://www.cetfund.org/\)](http://www.cetfund.org/) (CETF). For a decade CETF has worked diligently to fulfill the mission of closing the digital divide, as assigned to us by the CPUC, securing the seed capital as a public benefit from corporate mergers in 2005. Indeed, California has made significant progress in the last 10 years. The [2017 Statewide Survey on Broadband Adoption report \(http://www.cetfund.org/progress/annualsurvey\)](http://www.cetfund.org/progress/annualsurvey), conducted by the UC Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS), found that 87 percent of all households report high-speed Internet access at home—a gain of 32 percentage points since 2008.

More good news: Low-income household adoption is up 48 percentage points (from 33 percent to 81 percent); Latino household adoption is up 48 percentage points (from 34 percent to 82 percent); and adoption by people with disabilities is up 39 percentage points (from 36 percent to 75 percent).

However, more than five million residents remain offline at home. Further, 18 percent are connected at home by only a smartphone. While smartphones are marvelous devices that allow access to an amazing amount of information on the Internet, it is difficult for students to do their homework and adults to apply for jobs or acquire workforce skills using only a smartphone. Those getting online with only a smartphone are now being referred to as "underconnected" because they have limited benefits from digital technology and are becoming another category of "have-nots." Further, only 43 percent of all rural households have access.

The most disadvantaged populations still remain unconnected or underconnected. These residents also often are confronted with an interrelated set of factors that constitute a huge barrier to overcome and escape—which we call a "wall of poverty"—resulting in these households being left behind at an accelerating pace which stunts California's global potential.

That is why the California Emerging Technology Fund launched and leads [Internet For All Now \(http://www.internetforallnow.org/\)](http://www.internetforallnow.org/)—a "call to action" for foundational public policy and essential resources to close the Digital Divide—to bridge the opportunity gap that plagues California with growing inequality. California's future prosperity and quality of life hang in the balance. Thus, in hearing Jonathan Woetzel and Keith Kaplan issue a similar plea, it confirmed that Elevate CA should embrace digital inclusion as seminal to its platform for action.

Fortunately, the timing is right for Elevate CA to engage. The Legislature with bipartisan authors and votes overwhelmingly just passed and the Governor signed into law Internet For All Now Act of 2017. While far from perfect, this Act provides a path forward although much work remains to be done by the CPUC to implement the law and by the Legislature to address unresolved issues.

Going forward, the quest for digital equity must be an integral part of a deeper commitment by policymakers and regulators to eliminate inequities and empower all Californians. Digital inclusion must be incorporated into education, workforce preparation, healthcare, public housing, and the delivery of government services.

The potential of technology to provide equity in access to information, services and participation in the democracy coupled with its power to transform lives for a better future makes digital access a 21st century civil right. To paraphrase a well-established principle of equality, "access delayed is access denied." We invite you to join [Elevate CA \(http://cafwd.org/elevateca\)](http://cafwd.org/elevateca) and become a champion of [Internet For All Now \(http://www.internetforallnow.org/\)](http://www.internetforallnow.org/).

*Sunne Wright McPeak is President and CEO of the [California Emerging Technology Fund \(http://www.cetfund.org/\)](http://www.cetfund.org/).*

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The 2017 California Economic Summit (<http://caeconomy.org/summit>), will take place this week on November 2-3 in San Diego where problems of upward mobility and potential solutions will be highlighted. Registration and program information can be found on the [2017 Summit Registration page](https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017) (<https://cafwd-secure.org/caeconomy/summit2017>).

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