OurCycle LA Turns E-Waste Into Societal Gain

Nearly 10,000 computers will be either refurbished for use in disadvantaged neighborhoods or recycled as part of broader job training program.

by Colin Wood / February 27, 2015

A new Los Angeles program aims to use unneeded computers as fuel that improves society. On Feb. 27, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and City Council President Herb Wesson announced the launch of OurCycle LA, a program seeking to close the digital divide, create new jobs for the formerly incarcerated, and support local businesses. The effort involves more than a dozen organizations, from nonprofits like employment generator REDF (the Roberts Enterprise Development Fund) to companies like Best Buy and CitiGroup.

The program starts with 10,000 old computers that the city had planned to ship north for recycling. The old computers are the product of Microsoft's discontinuation of support for Windows XP and the city's migration to a modern operating system. Rather than simply recycle its computers and move on, the city will instead attempt to use every part of the buffalo, as it were.

"By getting creative and innovative, we're stretching our taxpayer dollars by providing a second life for city computers," Garcetti said. "Each computer represents an opportunity – an opportunity to connect, an opportunity to protect the planet, an opportunity to work. With OurCycle LA, we're not only helping bridge the digital divide, we're simultaneously supporting our economy by providing job training, creating employment opportunities, and boosting L.A.'s growing e-waste management sector."

About 35 to 40 percent of the old computers will be refurbished and half of those will be given to low-income individuals and families. The other half will go to local nonprofits with public access centers that serve low-income areas. The program begins in the neighborhoods of Baldwin Village, a neighborhood of the Crenshaw district, home of Los Angeles' largest black community, and Koreatown, the most densely populated and culturally diverse neighborhood in Los Angeles.

To receive a refurbished computer, applicants must attend a two-and-a-half-hour financial and digital literacy course, and sign up for low-cost Internet service ($10 per month plus a $65 initial

hardware fee). A $150,000 California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) grant will pay for the city's warehouse refurbishing costs, training and technical support.

"OurCycle LA meets our shared goal of building 21st-century skills and bridging the digital divide for disadvantaged youth, seniors and adults in the community," Wesson said. "It's a great privilege to be able to give refurbished city computers to families that have never had one, which will open doors for opportunities."

The remaining 6,000 to 6,500 computers that did not reach the city's performance standards will be recycled, but instead of shipping them to Northern California, the city will work with nonprofit LA Cleantech Incubator, Good Tech America, Human-I-T, Best Buy, and Isidore to de-manufacture the computers locally and train youth and adult volunteers to promote job growth. Starting with seven formerly incarcerated young adults, a total of 75 volunteers will eventually receive paid training while working at a e-waste processing plant. A $50,000 REDF grant and a $50,000 Citi grant will fund the job training segment of the program.

The city hopes that this program will extend beyond what has been planned so far and become part of normal operations, said Mark Wolf, executive officer of the city's Information Technology Agency. The city will monitor the program's efficacy through email correspondence with city partners and surveys. Some grant requirements ensure that the program reaches the right people. The CETF fund, for instance, requires that a minimum of 1,500 computers be placed with families or individuals who have never had a non-smartphone Internet connection in their home.

Where the digital divide is concerned, Los Angeles is at a particular disadvantage, Wolf said. Just 53 percent of households making less than $20,000 per year in Los Angeles have broadband at home, according to a 2014 field poll by the California Technology Fund, compared to an 80 percent adoption rate at the $20,000 to $40,000 income bracket.

Los Angeles is also home to one of the largest populations of Latinos in the nation (4.9 million), and makes up 9 percent of all Latinos in the country. Latinos lag behind other cultural groups in broadband adoption at just 52 percent while blacks (71 percent), whites (81 percent) and Asians (75 percent) enjoy substantially higher adoption rates. Koreatown, one of the program's targeted neighborhoods, is about 54 percent Latino (and 32 percent Asian, 7 percent white), according to 2000 Census data.

"OurCycle LA is a great example of a successful public-private partnership collaboration that empowers the underserved and helps them prepare them for the future," Chief Technology Officer Steve Reneker said. "I am excited to be part of such an innovative program."

Other program partners include the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Everyone.org, the Southeast Community Development Corporation, L.A. Shares, Community Build and the Youth Policy Institute.