VALLEY VOICES

COVID-19 reveals how low-income, underserved Valley residents need internet access

BY EDUARDO GONZÁLEZ

MAY 07, 2020 11:14 AM , UPDATED MAY 07, 2020 11:22 AM

Computer access and solid internet connection to allow schooling at home is something lacking for many low-income and underserved residents in the San Joaquin Valley. *MCCLATCHY NEWSPAPERS FILE*

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It's 7 a.m., and I turn on the computer to begin my daily shelter-in-place, work-from-home routine. I give little thought to the fact that I'm privileged to have high-speed Internet access at home and the technology to go online.

Sadly, that is not the case for thousands of residents who call the San Joaquin Valley home. For rural communities in particular, the digital divide is real. Many low-income and underserved people here still lack broadband or an understanding that affordable high-speed Internet access options exist — an isolating situation further exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crisis.

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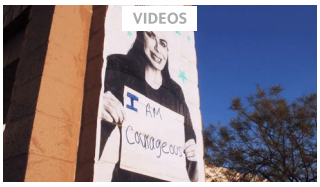
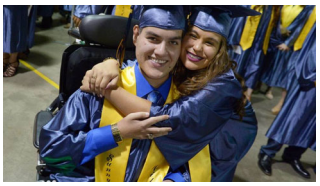


These students chose to spread joy because "that's what everyone needs"



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Eduardo González Contributed *SPECIAL TO THE BEE*

As someone who works on projects to close the digital divide in our communities, I know firsthand that one of the solutions to raising people out of poverty and building robust local economies is digital inclusion.This was a fact even before the health crisis.

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Now, with the 2020 Census officially underway, I can't help but be concerned that lack of basic Internet access will impact achieving a complete and accurate count, which in turn can threaten the potential for billions of federal dollars that would be a significant boom to our communities and state.

The San Joaquin Valley is perceived as a fertile area of the country with abundant agricultural production and manufacturing advancement. However, the people — specifically, seasonal and migrant farm workers — live a challenging reality. Over the past two decades, many former migrant seasonal workers have continued to settle in the area. The greatest percentage by far are Hispanics, who represent nearly half of the population in the San Joaquin Valley, contributing to the increase in this region's disadvantaged population.

Today, there are limited answers as to what will happen to rural communities in the San Joaquin Valley post-COVID-19 crisis and displaced workers and their families who live here. But one thing we can do is meet the need for Internet access and computing devices to increase digital literacy and inclusion as an investment for the future growth and health of the region.

Over the last several years, the demand for internet and digital inclusion training has proliferated in great numbers and increased significantly in rural communities across the San Joaquin Valley. With this increased demand comes increased pressure to reach the 98% broadband infrastructure and adoption goals the state has set.

And this doesn't even factor in the extra-added complicating layers of COVID-19 and the decennial census.

The Office of Community and Economic Development (OCED) at Fresno State has prioritized getting rural communities online. In partnership with the San Joaquin Valley Regional Broadband Consortium and the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF), we are seeing the need to increase infrastructure, adoption and bilingual digital inclusion programming to rural residents throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

More than 5,600 new households have subscribed to the internet via the Fresno State Connect initiative (Adoption Call Center) and well over 3,200 parents have received digital literacy training via the Fresno State Parent University program.

The coordination of these broadband and digital inclusion activities addresses the economic, educational and social issues plaguing the public and private sectors of these rural areas.

Together we can unite to reach a collective goal of connectivity to ensure economic growth and development for underserved populations, survive a health pandemic, and get an accurate, complete count of all communities to secure much-needed funding for our future. Now is the time to get connected and get counted.

Resources: To learn about low-cost internet options, visit GetConnectedGetCounted.org or text "Get Counted" to 5623-726925.

Eduardo González is OCED's Interim executive director.

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