County helps smaller towns 'Get Connected'

By Roman Flores
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L to R: Heber residents Mario Cortes (left of center) and Martha Ubence (center) get help enrolling in the Affordable Connectivity Plan by volunteer Bethamee Garcia (right), and Alessandra Music (far right) , Marketing and Communications Director for IVEDC and the SBBC, at the Get Connected Day event, August 27, in Heber.

IMPERIAL COUNTY — With August designated as Get Connected Month in California, "Get Connected Day" events were held statewide – including in Calipatria and Heber – on August 27 to help local residents enroll in the state's "Affordable Connectivity Program" (ACP) for free or discounted high-speed internet with local internet service providers AT&T and Spectrum.

The statewide enrollment events will "support eligible families interested in applying for the ACP; answer questions about the ACP benefit; and provide hands-on assistance with the application," according to a California Department of Education press release.

Households throughout California who qualify for the Affordable Connectivity Program are also eligible for a one-time $100 discount when buying a laptop or tablet from participating providers, according to an newsletter email from the Southern Border Broadband Consortium (SBBC).

Alessandra Muse, Marketing and Communications Director for the SBBC and the Imperial Valley Economic Development Corporation (IVEDC), said the ACP is a federal program "available for households that qualify through (low-) income or federal benefit programs."

Muse said the SBBC works directly with the State of California and the California Public Utilities Commission.

She said the August 27 "Get Connected Day" event was decided by the state "because we knew it would be a really good time for back-to-school and educational needs."

"We know that a lot of the underserved households are those with children K-12, or higher education students that do not have Wi-Fi or a computing device at home to do their work," Muse said, "so we hope that this event does help spread the word, create awareness of the program, and help those that come in successfully enroll and get the access they need for critical online services, like distance learning or online homework."

For the general population, Muse said getting connected to high-speed internet can help with online banking, job searching, and especially tele-medicine, "among others," she said.

"Those are all our priorities," she said. "As the SBBC we believe a connected community is one with access to those online resources and that creates an enhanced quality of life for our community here in Imperial County."

Muse said Imperial County has "one of the highest rates of enrollment in the state" in the program at about 68 percent.

Statewide, there are 13,044,258 households, with 5,844,797 – or 45 percent of California – eligible for the ACP program, according to internetforallnow.org. Out of that 45 percent of eligible households, only 27 percent – or 1,570,470 households – have signed up for ACP, according to the website.

Muse said California's goal is "reaching 90 percent of eligible households to enroll," but she hopes Imperial County can hit and surpass that target.

Alma Silva, Director of the Imperial Valley Business Resource Center (IVBRC), said while the in-person events in Heber and Calipatria were held on August 27, the ACP will continue throughout the year for those interested and who qualify for the program.

"If they don't have their documents today they know that this program is available and we direct them to the website where they can apply for it by themselves," Silva said.

"They can also go to their (high-speed internet) service providers and maybe they can assist them because they are aware of this program as well," she said. "They can also share this information with others."

"This is kind of just the start for us this year," Muse said. "This was the first event of the campaign. There is an ongoing online campaign at internetforallnow.org."

As Muse and Silva fielded questions from the public in Heber, volunteers from Proyecto Heber were on-hand to help with the ACP enrollments at the Imperial County Free Library in Heber. Volunteers from Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia's office assisted at the Imperial County Free Library in Calipatria.

Some of the public's common questions were how the high-speed internet is free through the program and what speeds the free internet would be for them.

The answer to the first question is choose the lowest high-speed internet option from AT&T or Spectrum – whose plans are equivalent to about $30 – making it "free" internet, Muse said, answer to the second question regarding internet speeds varies greatly depending on where in Imperial County the household sits.

"We understand that no matter how much you pay for it the capabilities are just not here yet because we don't have (the infrastructure) that would actually allow us to use a fast speed when it comes to internet," Silva said.

"Through the pandemic it was very obvious that when kids went home and tried to go to school virtually it was so hard to have internet at home to do their schooling, and then everyone was home using the internet at the same time, which slowed everything down," she said.

"There were days where people didn't have access for maybe an hour because everyone was trying to use it at the same time," Silva said. "IVEDC, IRA, and the SBBC is working very hard to bring in these programs, create awareness of them and let our community know that there's help out there."

"My personal view is (internet speeds in the Imperial Valley) continue to improve, at least in the major populated areas," said Luis A. Wong, CEO for the K-12 High-Speed Network through the Imperial County Office of Education (ICOE).

"Some of the efforts we've done through the schools is trying to provide our schools tools and options to make sure the students are connected and have access," Wong, who is also in charge of network initiatives program with the Imperial Valley Telecommunications Authority (IVTA), said.

The IVTA is a collaborative Public Joint Powers Authority of all agencies in Imperial County including school districts, city agencies, county agencies, Imperial Valley College, San Diego State University Imperial Valley Campus, and the Imperial Irrigation District which is "dedicated to provide new technology and a community-wide system access the Imperial Valley Public agencies, and contribute to the growth and development of the community," according to its website, ivta.net.

R to L: IVC Security Specialist, Jonathan Singh, shows temporary employee, Ernest Pereda, how to connect computer equipment, October 5, 2021.
COURTESY IVC

Courtesy Photo

The IVTA works with ICOE, IID and others to create a "BorderLink," or a private education wireless network infrastructure which utilizes LTE (Long Term Evolution) wireless technology, similar to mobile phone networks, and existing fiber-optic infrastructure throughout the County to "connect our schools and public agencies to each other and the internet."

Through [BorderLink](#), the IVTA, ICOE, IVC and others utilize the network to provide internet access to K-through-12 students and teachers, as well as local college students, in Brawley, Calexico, Calipatria, El Centro, Heber, Holtville, Imperial, Niland, Seeley and Westmorland, according to their websites.

"We live in a connected world and all the services that you're starting to see require some sort of connectivity option," Wong said. "Some of our families can't afford broadband access. They might have a smartphone and be connected that way but sometimes that's not conducive for a student to be able to do their work."

"We've built an extensive fiber optic network across Imperial County," Wong said about BorderLink. "We've connected over 120 sites into our fiber optic system."

Students who enroll in BorderLink through their respective schools are given an indoor model that provides a Wi-Fi hotspot within BorderLink homes for free, Wong said.

Jeffrey Enz, Imperial Valley College's Associate Vice President of Information Technology, said smaller, more rural school districts tend to see a lot of benefit from BorderLink in that having the network made available to them when large companies are not investing infrastructure to the more rural areas of the Imperial Valley allows "your Mulberrys and Magnolias … the bandwidth they need to conduct school and do some of the things the bigger districts are doing.

"They have as much bandwidth as a large district," Enz said, "so it's been a great program, the Valley being the Valley and getting together and collaborating to overcome that (lack of infrastructure)."

"As students who are enrolling now have other tools … such as ACP or BorderLink," Wong said.

"It's kind of like an extension within the school network," he said. "We have all the protections in place for inappropriate content, things we have in place at school."

"What we're seeing now is technology is really starting to work for schools and students, where we don't have to worry as much about technical issues," Wong said.

"We're still in the adoption phase, still experimenting," Wong said. "Now it's just another tool in the tool belt for our schools to be able to use our community."

For young adult and adults students, Enz said "more students are taking distance Ed type classes," making connectivity important for higher education students as well.

"In many areas on campus they have (internet) access," Enz said, "but when you have students who are in Calipat, Westmorland or some of those further reaching areas that's not always the

most convenient thing, so having the availability of internet is definitely a good thing to deal with those scenarios."

Enz said the IVC IT department is "heavily involved" in upgrading and installing BorderLink equipment "to target some of those pockets of need." He said towers are being put in to mitigate the "gaps between El Centro and Imperial, like making sure our [Tiny](#) [Homes](#) have access."

Enz said the IVTA is also currently working on putting BorderLink towers up near McKinley School in north El Centro, near TL Waggoner School in southern Imperial, and on campus at IVC.

"We're working together as a larger group to not only effect our (IVC) students but help students as a whole," Enz said.

Elizabeth Espinoza, IVC's Public Information Officer, said (IVC) students interested in attaining a BorderLink setup would "make a request through our Student Equity & Achievement program that's located on our website," [imperial.edu](#).

Espinoza and Enz agreed that parents or students interested in having better internet connectivity should not be shy to ask for help.

"An agency can send out so many pieces of communications that we get concerned that we're overwhelming people with too much," Enz said, "but at the end of the day there are still people that miss it and say, 'I didn't hear that.' So if you have questions, go ask."

As far as Imperial County trying to get faster speeds in the region overall like some of those enjoyed by larger cities like San Diego, those interviewed had a variety of responses about that uphill battle.

"How do we convince AT&T and Spectrum to come out and run fiber to these places? The simple answer is it would cost multiple millions of dollars," Enz said.

"That strictly has to do with (population) numbers and potential customers. It's hard to overcome some of those cost benefits from a business in business to make money."

"If you look at El Centro and the bigger cities (here) ... we don't have what they have in San Diego, Orange County and LA, but for the most part what we have is decent," Enz said. "A lot of places up and down the state don't have that ... and we're not the worst. There's areas along the eastern and northern part of the state that didn't have connectivity as good as us."

"It's a tough one to solve," Enz said.

"I think we need to facilitate the investments on broadband, be very creative, and incentive our community partners like the Spectrums of the world to invest on fiber optic infrastructure to the homes," Wong said.

"About 25 years ago people were questioning why we needed fiber optics, and then when we built, it they really didn't understand the power of having that infrastructure (until later)," he said.

"Broadband is always growing and there's always a need for more – it's one of those things where you build and they will come," Wong said. "I think we have a lot of options here now in Imperial County."

Silva said the Imperial Valley higher-speed advocacy should start with "definitely connecting with them and showing them data."

"I think when it comes to the services that we need here, the data shows how much we really use telemedicine, distance learning, and how little of that we do because the connected speed is not here," she said.

"It is something that the state is aware of, especially in this area, and a lot of people are working hard behind the scenes to make it happen," Silva said. "We need to talk to those organizations can help us, always making sure the Imperial Valley is part of the conversation."

Muse said the Affordable Connectivity Program will continue throughout the year, and residents who do not have online access at home are encouraged to use their local libraries or other areas that provide Wi-Fi access to apply online.

See a list of "Identity Verification" needed to apply here or a "qualifying through federal programs" list here.

Those eligible for the Affordable Connectivity Program can apply online at internetforallnow.org/applytoday.

Muse said more in-person events similar to the August 27 "Get Connected Day" will be posted at a later time on internetforallnow.org.

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