April 13, 2009

Bernadette McGuire-Rivera
Associate Administrator, Office of Telecommunications and Information Applications
Broadband Technology Opportunities Program
U.S. Department of Commerce
Room 4812
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

RE: Docket Number 090309298-9299-01

Dear Ms. McGuire-Rivera:

On behalf of the undersigned organizations, we write to urge that you grant Broadband Technology Opportunity Program (BTOP) funds in a manner that addresses the number one technology issue facing the communities we represent: *broadband adoption.*

Broadband adoption can help create jobs in information technology and related fields, increase education and skill sets and thereby spur economic mobility of adopters, and enhance the quality of every day life. And all of this will help spur an economic recovery. Thus, we applaud NTIA for publicly stating that the $250 million allocated by Congress for adoption programs is a funding floor, not a ceiling.

Over 90% of U.S. households have access to at least one broadband provider, but only 57% actually subscribe to broadband; subscription rates for African Americans and Spanish-speaking Hispanics fall below the national average at 43% and 32%, respectively. And the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that such factors as lack of digital literacy, the perceived lack of relevant content and fear of the overwhelming amount of information available online remain barriers to adoption.

Throughout the country, non-profit organizations have demonstrated that programs that encourage digital literacy, computer ownership, and community access to technology are the key to bridging the digital divide. These are the kinds of programs that should be regarded by the BTOP as the relevant paradigms for federal assistance now.

For instance, One Economy works with affordable housing owners, nonprofit organizations, municipalities and technology companies in more than 50 communities around the world to build Digital Inclusion programs to ensure that the benefits of technology are extended to low-income individuals. One Economy has connected more than 300,000 Americans to broadband Internet access, and its Digital Connectors program engages community youth – through training and eventual employment – to serve as tech ambassadors in their communities.

Similarly, the League of United Latin American Citizens operates 56 community technology centers (CTCs) in 26 states and the District of Columbia, providing free high-speed Internet access and 21st-Century skills training to more than 55,000 students, parents, and low-income individuals each year.

The National Urban League works through its 102 local affiliates to provide direct tech training services designed to educate, train and provide resources to residents in local communities. For instance, the Milwaukee chapter partnered with local Boys & Girls Clubs and schools to provide 92 computers in the homes, schools, and after-school programs of local students. In Baltimore, the Urban League's tech center trains adults in office-related tech skills such as word processing, spreadsheets and email while lending a hand to students seeking help with their homework or SAT prep.

The Latinos in Information Sciences & Technology Association (LISTA) works to increase public awareness among Hispanics on the importance of technology and to prepare Hispanic students for careers in IS&T through its 10 local chapters. LISTA's "Center for Excellence in Information Science & Technology/Techno Centro" in Atlanta offers workshops on computers, software and Internet use, English as a Second Language and after-school activities. The Center has served 250 clients since October 2008, helping more than 1,500 households in applying for their DTV converter box coupons.

Finally, the Boys and Girls Clubs of America have established 22 Technology Centers nationwide to provide youth the opportunity to acquire hands-on experience with new information technologies, thereby increasing their computer competency and helping prepare them for success in our knowledge-based economy. A typical Center serves over a thousand young people each week.

With these and other examples in mind, we hope that NTIA will distribute BTOP funds with the following principles in mind:

1) **Increase access to computer hardware**. Simple access to low-cost computers, for instance, could do more than perhaps anything else to stimulate greater broadband adoption.

2) **Support Community Technology Centers and like-minded civic organizations**. Every day, community technology centers provide the computer and broadband access that would otherwise elude the grasp of many families. Community technology centers are not only dens of digital learning, but also public learning centers around which digitally disenfranchised citizens can gather. In addition, places of worship are the most important gathering places in many communities that we serve. To the extent permissible by law, NTIA should consider, in addition to community colleges and libraries, grant applications from large community churches and other worship centers that contain, or could contain, community technology centers.

3) **Support non-profit digital education programs**. Increasing digital literacy is critical and BTOP funds should support local organizations devoted to this purpose. A considerable body of data shows non-broadband users are inclined to subscribe once they see the relevance of broadband to their professional mobility and everyday lives. Increasing digital literacy is likely to awaken many to the innumerable wonders of broadband technology and applications, and the relevance to their lives.

4) **Support Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions and other Minority-Serving Institutions.** These equal educational opportunity institutions educate disproportionate numbers of students from low-income, traditionally underserved families and communities who do not have broadband access. Many of the 1890s land-grant institutions are located in rural or remote areas without limited access. Most MSIs are the economic engines for their communities, housing community technology centers, "one-stop" small business and commerce centers driven by computer and broadband access, mental and physical health services, and distance education. NTIA can find several successful models in MSIs, who are bridging the digital divide in their communities with quantifiable, affirmative results.

5) **Treat single state and multi-state applicants equitably**. NTIA should adopt rules that allow local groups to leverage the strength and experience of national organizations. Organizations with chapters in multiple cities/states have the reach, institutional capacity and existing partnerships with public, private or non-profit entities to administer large grant programs.

6) **Spur culturally relevant content.** Studies show culturally relevant content is a major factor in spurring broadband adoption. Yet, residents in communities we represent are largely unaware of the culturally relevant content that is already available to them online. Therefore, we urge BTOP to support organizations dedicated to bridging this "content gap" by finding inventive ways of making this content more accessible and user friendly. In particular, residents in our communities would be become more interested in broadband if relevant information is made easily accessible, including:

a) Online information about preventive health care;
b) Online information about job opportunities;
c) Online news on relevant subject matter;
d) Child care monitoring;
e) Appropriate online social networking and accessing and downloading legal and appropriate video and audio content.

Again, the Internet is a treasure trove of much of this information and these services, but its format is often inaccessible or otherwise not "user-friendly." Therefore, we need to address how to make this information more easily accessible.

In short, the problems in communities we represent involve access to computer hardware, digital literacy and how to leverage the knowledge and cultural sensitivity of local organizations to ignite the imaginations and interest of local community residents in this technology. For the BTOP program to have a meaningful and lasting impact in our communities, substantial funding must go toward addressing these problems.

Sincerely,

/s/ Clayola Brown
President
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/s/ Guarione M. Diaz
President and CEO
Cuban American National Council

/s/ Antonio Flores
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Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities

/s/ Lillian Rodriguez Lopez
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/s/ Dr. Gabriela Lemus
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/s/ Brent Wilkes
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/s/ Harry Alford
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National Black Chamber of Commerce

/s/ Rev. Miguel Rivera
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National Coalition of Latino Clergy and Christian Leaders (CONLAMIC)

/s/ Dr. E. Faye Williams
National Chair
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/s/ Rafael Fantauzzi
President and CEO
National Puerto Rican Coalition, Inc.

/s/ Marc Morial
President & CEO
National Urban League

/s/ Kimberly Marcus
Executive Director
Rainbow/Push Coalition

/s/ Augustine Martinez
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