Two years ago, the City of Chicago released The City that NetWorks, a comprehensive document announcing some of the most innovative strategies for developing digital equity across the city in local neighborhoods. One strategy was to develop Digital Excellence Demonstration Communities that would be a test bed of ideas, model how digital excellence can be achieved, and demonstrate how digital excellence can lead to transformation. The report also states that these digital demonstration projects “should aspire to reach every household, business and institution in each target neighborhood with an affordable bundle of hardware, software and training that will enable them to participate meaningfully in digital activities” (The City that NetWorks 2007, p. 54).

For the last 7 years, Chicago’s North Lawndale (NL) community has led citywide efforts to bring digital opportunities to local residents and institutions. 6 years ago, the Center for Neighborhood Technology launched a wireless community network project in partnership with local leaders. Funding was provided by the Technology Opportunities Program (TOP), a former federal initiative to spur thinking on beneficial use for digital technology. NL leaders and residents were engaged during the project to provide input on how technology eases social problems facing the community. At the end of the grant period, the technical assets for the project were given to community partners that have continued to sustain the project.

Today, the Lawndale Wireless Community Network (LWCN) project is still fully functional. Over 500 residents receive free Internet access through the project, 350 residents received refurbished hardware and 100 youth train their neighbors Internet usage. With generous, multiyear support from the Motorola Foundation in 2007 and input from over 40 community leaders, the network architecture is being expanded to serve more than 3,000 families and 15 community hot spots that support public access. Over the past 3 years, 40 project partners have formally organized as the LWCN Collaborative and Lawndale Business and Local Development Corporation (LBLDC), the lead applicant, has worked with these partners to create a business plan sustaining the network beyond grant funds.
A critical element of the project’s success is the integration of public computing centers into the program model and their ability to support over 30,000 individuals per year regardless of their age, technical savvy, literacy level, physical or mental abilities. The collaborative and community residents have identified public computing centers as training and engagement hubs that will increase broadband adoption and utilization efforts. LBLDC is requesting $2,000,000 from the BTOP program under the statute of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to improve the network of local computing centers that distribute information about the existing wireless network to local residents, offer digital literacy training that helps people improve the quality of their lives, support residents in their purchase and maintenance of computer hardware, and connect residents to human service and employment resources. LBLDC will also use the funds to improve the ability of these public computing centers to support small business owners and employees that have little experience with software applications that can help increase competitiveness and profitability, thus producing more jobs in this troubled community.

Chicago’s NL community has a population of 41,768, down 11.69% from 1990. The neighborhood has a growing Hispanic population, now at 4.5%, but is mostly (94.2%) African American. Youth compose a major part of NL’s population: the average age of NL residents is 22, and nearly half of its residents are under the age of nineteen. Over the past 3 decades, NL has faced a great socio-economic decline due to industry leaving the neighborhood, deterioration of housing stock and businesses, and rising crime rates. Today, despite some redevelopment and many community development initiatives, NL is plagued by high rates of poverty, crime, and joblessness. As of 2004, the median family income in NL was $20,253—under half the city of Chicago's average—and 51.5% of NL families with children were living below the poverty line. In 2005, 42% of NL households reported a total income under $15,000. NL's unemployment rate is 13%, in compared to Chicago's 5% average. The prevalence of criminal records among NL citizens poses additional obstacles to their finding employment and to the community’s economic vitality. According to a report by the Center for Impact Research, in 2001 almost 60% of NL’s adult population was incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or sentenced to prison. Estimates suggest that 70% of NL men ages 18 to 39 have a criminal record.

Technological literacy allow NL residents to fill in educational gaps, enhance residents’ access to employment opportunities, enable them to research financial, legal, and health information, and provide them with a forum for their concerns and a means to advocate for change. Many studies have shown that digital inclusion remains a problem in low-income, African-American communities like NL. Greater familiarity with and access to technology at public computing centers can improve the economic circumstances of families and individuals, and revive the community.

Lawndale Business and Local Development Corporation was formed in 1985 to promote the economic health of Lawndale and adjacent areas through retention and expansion of business, and to provide opportunities for residents through training and employment. As one of Chicago’s top community
development groups, LBLDC continues to provide opportunities to members by linking them to key community and government resources.