The difficult economy of the past two years has had a profound effect on lower-income families. In too many instances, the jobs held by lower-income families were eliminated due to: technological advancements that replaced humans with cost-effective machines; outsourcing to cheaper labor overseas; and an increase in the number of "working managers" who have come out from behind the desk to work in the trenches with their employees. A large part of this problem is directly related to education, or the lack thereof. Fifteen years ago, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) sensed that a digital divide was growing in the United States between the computer literate and the computer illiterate. HUD realized that with the use of computers and the Internet growing exponentially, fewer and fewer jobs would exist that did not require some degree of computer literacy. This shift would cause lower income families who did not have the resources to buy a personal computer or the background to learn computer skills due to language barriers, literacy barriers, and the like, to fall further behind financially and create a burden on society as they qualified for fewer jobs. The problem did not end with working-class individuals. School children who did not have a computer at home were at a distinct disadvantage in school, making it ever more difficult for them to emerge from assisted housing and other forms of public assistance. The cycle was doomed to repeat itself. Teens were an especially vulnerable group as being in a position of falling behind in school and not qualifying for jobs left them to 'hang out' and find all sorts of trouble, including drugs and gangs. Since its creation, HUD provided affordable housing for people who were going through financially difficult times until their fortunes reversed and they could move back into homes or conventional apartments in the free market. HUD's goal was never to provide a means of living without income or with minimal income for generation after generation. Out of this spirit, the Neighborhood Networks initiative was created in 1995 to serve multiple purposes. Neighborhood Networks computer centers target the low-income populations in affordable housing developments and provide computer learning skills, literacy skills, senior programs, GED courses, ESL courses, after school homework assistance, job-readiness skills, and placement assistance. During its first several years, Neighborhood Networks allowed and encouraged funds from Drug Elimination Grants to be used to develop Neighborhood Networks centers. Neighborhood Networks allowed students to keep up with their schoolwork, young adults to learn the skills that qualify them for entry-level positions (and keep them off the streets), and adults the skills to compete for jobs and to upgrade to better jobs. The initiative is a resounding success and has expanded to include over 1,800 computer learning centers throughout the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. While the HUD Neighborhood Networks program facilitated the start-up of these computer centers, there has never been sufficient funding to keep pace with changes in technology. Technology
and computer applications continue to advance rapidly. State-of-the-art becomes obsolete in a very short time in this field. Therefore, unless one continues to learn new skills and programs, they can go from computer literate back to functionally computer illiterate very quickly. Many Neighborhood Networks centers now find themselves in need of a facelift, working with five- to seven-year-old, virus-ridden computers and out-of-date versions of programs. It will not be long before many of the manufacturers of these older versions of programs stop providing support for them. This highly worthwhile initiative needs a facelift for it to expand its outreach to low income populations. Formed in 2005 as an independent non-profit organization, the Neighborhood Networks National Consortium (NNNC) provides support to these computer centers with its mission to continue and expand the work that HUD began. NNNC leverages the meager resources of the nationwide initiative to establish partnerships and funding opportunities for which individual centers are too small to be seriously considered. Under the auspices of NNNC, HUD encouraged the development of regional consortia to pool resources and do the same thing as NNNC on a local level. NNNC is the 'consortium of consortia' of Neighborhood Networks centers. The local consortia build community and cultivate local partnerships for the Neighborhood Networks centers in their region. NNNC has always sought to increase the use of broadband access in order for Neighborhood Networks centers to best serve its low-income users. To bring the Neighborhood Networks initiative to the next level, NNNC has enlisted the help of program partners who will provide cutting-edge programming at grant centers. These include: Rosetta Stone, whose programs will allow non-English speakers to learn English and English speakers to learn other languages; Global Kids, whose innovative program allows participants to actually design computer games and use the computer in highly imaginative ways; Pearson Education, who will focus on literacy and GED programs; and RRTN who will teach the important skills of entrepreneurship. DB consulting, which has years of expertise in providing technical support to the national Neighborhood Networks initiative, will assist in hiring eleven regional consortium managers (RCMs) to make the program work, and train these RCMs continuously and monitor and guide their progress. There are two more keys to the success of this program. (1) The programming needed to make Neighborhood Networks initiative successful gets more complicated over time. Additional bandwidth is required to make these sophisticated programs run optimally. (2) The eleven RCMs being added. The RCMs will have the most direct impact, as they will work with the centers chosen in each region for the program on a full-time basis, and expand upon the existing community ties and outreach. It constitutes a level of oversight, technical assistance, and support that has never been experienced before in the Neighborhood Networks initiative, and is expected to expand the reach and impact of centers in their communities. A technology manager will oversee hardware and software upgrades at each of the centers, and the program director will oversee the program and be charged with ensuring that these improvements last long beyond the next three years. The ultimate goal is to replicate the program beyond the forty centers in eight states, to implement at other Neighborhood Networks centers across the country, through the growing branches of the 22 regional consortia. The 40 centers selected for this program are in Massachusetts, California, Louisiana, Indiana, South Carolina, New Jersey, Texas, and Washington. Five of the centers are located in housing developments that serve senior populations, and 35 in multifamily low-income developments. The centers currently offer 312 computer workstations, which is anticipated to increase to 460 with grant funding. Centers also intend to increase hours of operation to provide additional programming to those who cannot take advantage of the centers' programs during their
current operating hours, which in most cases is 30 hours per week or more. The centers currently serve approximately 11,000 residents of low-income housing and their surrounding communities. Through expansion and outreach, it is anticipated that the same 40 centers could be providing services to 18,000 to 20,000 individuals in dire need of assistance. The populations served include: 45 percent Hispanic; 40 percent African-American; 8 percent Caucasian; 1 percent Filipino; 3 percent Creole; and 3 percent other minorities. Across the board, the centers serve a large segment of single parents with their children. The national scope of the Neighborhood Networks initiative enables it to reach more people within an important vulnerable population, across a wider segment of the country than virtually any other organization of public computer centers in the nation. NNNC is uniquely qualified to achieve the goals of the PCC portion of BTOP.