

A Reader Writes: Closing the Digital Divide in the Imperial Valley

By **TIMOTHY E. KELLEY** | Posted: Thursday, May 18, 2017 12:15 am

April 26 was an unusual day in California. The Internet For All Now Act, a bipartisan bill that will close the Digital Divide in California, sailed through its first committee hearing with a 12-0 vote — thanks to Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia of the Imperial Valley.

Bill support from 22 Republicans and Democrats is fairly rare in the Capitol. The reason is that the Internet For All Now Act (AB 1665) makes economic sense. It extends an already working program that has funded 58 high-speed (broadband) Internet infrastructure projects connecting over 100,000 households to the digital economy.

You might ask: Why do we need this bill?

The reason is the Digital Divide in California is too large. The California Emerging Technology Fund reported in its August 2016 Field Poll that 30 percent of Californians do not have high-speed Internet and a computing device at home and that 57 percent of low-income Californians are “under-connected” — either dependent only on a smartphone or completely offline. In addition, the California Public Utilities Commission issued a report in April 2017 documenting that 43 percent of rural households can’t get reliable broadband.

What this all means is that almost 12 million Californians are shut out from the digital economy. They cannot adequately apply for jobs, do homework, and get health and public services online. The National Association for College Admission Counseling recently reported that colleges and universities now receive 94 percent of their applications online, up from 49 percent in 2005. And the Pew Internet Research Center has shown that lower income and rural Americans continue to lag behind in technology adoption; the result is that a technology gap between rich and poor and urban and rural is widening US inequality.

This is of particular concern in the Imperial Valley, where some cities and towns have inadequate or non-existent broadband infrastructure and where lower income families struggle to keep up with the digital technology revolution.

This was the main reason Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia authored AB 1665. In his district — which comprises Blythe, Brawley, Bermuda Dunes, Calexico, Calipatria, Cathedral City, Coachella, Desert Hot Springs, El Centro, Holtville, Imperial, Indio, Mecca, Oasis, North Shore, Salton Sea, Thermal, Thousand Palms, Westmorland, Seeley, Heber, Ocotillo, Heber and Winterhaven — 8 percent of the households can’t get high-speed Internet and 23 percent are low income. Assemblymember Garcia, who is from Coachella, knows firsthand that individuals and businesses which don’t have high-speed Internet are socioeconomically disadvantaged and those who have fast connections can compete in the 21st century.

The Internet For All Act is a \$330 million, five-year bill that extends the California Advanced Services

Fund, which is the only source of support for broadband unless the Legislature enacts a new fee or tax or does a General Fund budget allocation. My organization, the Imperial Valley Economic Development Corporation — along with more than 80 other governmental and nongovernmental organizations — support this bill because we understand the CASF will soon be out of funds, yet 360,000 households still need to get connected to reliable broadband. We also understand that Internet service providers will not put broadband in sparsely populated areas with low return on investment. This bill incentivizes those companies to serve 98 percent of the households in the state.

So thank you Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia for authoring and advocating for the Internet For All Now Act. Closing the Digital Divide will strengthen the economic fabric of our home, the Imperial Valley.

Timothy E. Kelley is president and CEO of the Imperial Valley Economic Development Corporation.