Wireless Neighborhoods

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Rendall Harper and I am a board member of Wireless Neighborhoods. Wireless Neighborhoods is an alliance of community and faith organizations committed to using partnerships, technology and training to improve communities' capacities to support children's education, promote economic development, and address other social barriers facing residents.

We were formed by a group of community organization leadership in the late 1990's to address, in part, the digital divide facing so many of our lower income and African-American urban families and to explore and support efforts to use technology to drive educational achievement in Pittsburgh lower income and African-American neighborhoods.

Wireless Neighborhoods delivers fixed point broadband wireless services from the WQED tower in Oakland to approximately 40 community and faith organization throughout the city.

I am sure that you are aware of the many challenges facing our children from lower income, urban communities. The vast majority of students in the neighborhoods we serve are in a battle for survival. Success at this stage will significantly reduce the likelihood that the children will become victims of all of the negative influences that exist, in too many cases, in their homes or just outside their doors. Death, substance abuse, drug sales and other criminal activity are a far too real part of many of our young people's fragile families and communities. Failure in school, whether resulting in dropout or a complete lack of preparedness for post secondary life, significantly increases their exposure to negartive behaviors whereas educational success can be their shield. These social challenge often translate directly into poor school performance. In 2006-07, in Pittsburgh Public Schools, at all grade levels, African-American and lower income students scored on average 35 percentage points behind their Caucasion and more affluent counterparts in both Reading and Math on the state standardized assessment.

The need is great. So many vulnerable lives are on the line. We feel strongly that education can be the tool that saves many of our young people from the ravages of poverty and that technology can be the great equalizer in this effort. There are incredible online academic tools that can support a young person's learning, even in homes and neighborhoods where their learning often gets lost in life's day to day struggles. This great work of combining traditional and technology curriculum is happening at Wireless Neighborhoods partner sites throughout the city. Wireless Neighborhoods has incredible partners including the Hill House Association, Bloomfield Garfield Corporation, several urban branches of the YMCA, and Mt. Ararat Community Activity Center, just to mention a few, that are committed to helping children and families and to finding creative ways that technology can support that mission. We have had success bringing technology to the community organization level in many of our poorest city neighborhoods and have seen the impact these efforts can have on the lives of children.

Regrettably, we have struggled to bring technology into the homes of our lower income families, those who truly could benefit most from the incredible resources available across the Internet. We work with hundreds of families each year and the great majority do not have internet access in their homes. In many cases, our high school students, for example, need access to the web to complete assignments or to view their textbooks which, in many cases, are not given to them to take home to study.

So, two years ago Wireless Neighborhoods took on the challenge of trying to provide connectivity to the families of our high school students. We worked with a local Verizon DSL reseller on this initiative. It was our hope that students could use the technology to more effectively compete in high school.

It quickly became apparent that delivering connectivity to many of our families was going to be a difficult, and in many cases, impossible proposition. Many of our families use cell phones as their sole source of telephone communication and do not have landlines in their homes. In other cases, if they did have a home phone, they were not Verizon customers, which presented its own set of installation challenges. In either case, providing connectivity became timely and prohibitively expensive. Exacerbating the situation was the fact that many of our clients moved frequently or switched between phone carriers, which made keeping them connected extremely challenging. We believe that our experience was typical of the challenges confronted by so many lower income families. There are other connectivity options certainly, Cable and FiOS, just to mention two, but they are not necessarily affordable or practical for many of the families we serve given the instability of their lives and their often tenuous financial situations.

We certainly favor some of the Wi-Fi solutions currently on the market but the bottom line, while at first blush it may appear that there are affordable, available connectivity solutions for our lower income families in urban areas, in reality, it just isn't the case. We certainly hope that you will consider using a larger portion of the Universal Service Fund to support the challenges that we face in the urban areas across the country. As with many things, appearances can be deceiving and once we look closer, we see the great majority of our most vulnerable urban families cut off from a technology that has transformed the world economy and could transform their lives.

Thank you.