

News from the Communications Workers of America

The Union for the Information Age

For Release May 18, 2009

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Get the full report at www.speedmatters.org/onlinelearningreport.

Online Learning Builds Economic Empowerment for Low-Income Workers

Washington, D.C. -- Making online learning more available and accessible to low-income working adults was the focus of a Capitol Hill briefing sponsored by the Communications Workers of America, the Alliance for Digital Equality, and the Alliance for Public Technology.

The briefing spotlighted a new report that stresses that the innovative use of information technology – personal computers and high speed broadband – can be a cost-effective way to helping working adults expand their skills and move beyond entry-level jobs.

That report, “Online Learning for Low Skill Adults,” was authored by Heather McKay at the Rutgers University Center for Women and Work. The report is being released by the Rutgers University Center for Women and Work and Speed Matters, a public policy initiative of CWA.

Since 2002, the Sloan Center on Innovative Training and Workforce Development at Rutgers has been working to develop online skills training and credential programs for working adults. There are now programs in place in more than 21 states.

President Obama’s economic recovery plan includes \$7.2 billion to provide grants for programs that “facilitate access to broadband service by low-income, unemployed, aged, and otherwise vulnerable populations in order to provide educational and employment opportunities to members of such populations.” This first-ever public initiative to help bring broadband access to citizens and communities now not served is a big step toward improving citizens’ lives and livelihoods. This report gives important guidance about how to structure these programs for success, based on actual experience in New Jersey and Texas.

For example, the report documents that participants were most successful when they had access to high speed broadband. In New Jersey, the majority of participants in a pilot program did not have access to high speed Internet connections and in fact had to use “dial-up” services. This caused many problems, including the slow loading of websites and especially graphics, and frequent disconnection, and prevented many participants from completing their coursework. When participants were given access to faster connections, their online learning experiences were much more successful, the report found.

The report finds that there’s no question that “education is the key to moving lower-skilled adults into jobs that pay wages that meet family needs and enable families to be self sufficient.” Yet many educational credential programs don’t take into account the barriers to education and training that many of these adults face: irregular work hours, lack of access to transportation, child care and family responsibilities, and more.

Online learning provides a real opportunity for workers to overcome these challenges and participate in programs that are tailored to their career and educational goals.

Moderating the briefing was Maynard Scarborough, executive director of the Alliance for Digital Equality, which works to bridge the digital divide and empower communities.

Also participating were Heather McKay, author of the report; Eileen Appelbaum, Director of the Center for Women and Work at Rutgers University; C. Vanessa Spinner of the University of the District of Columbia; Debbie Goldman, CWA; and Karyne Jones of the Alliance for Public Technology. CWA is a leading voice for the build out of high speed broadband and access for all Americans. APT works for public policy that ensures access to advanced telecommunications technologies for all Americans.

Chris Gaston, Legislative Director for Rep. Russ Holt (D-NJ), discussed the Online Job Training Act of 2009 (H.R. 145), which would amend the Workforce Investment Act to provide grants to states for online employment training programs.

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