

## Bridging the tech divide

by [Ambreen Ali](#)

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WASHINGTON – Jean Fleming might never have a use for a Blackberry. She could care less about who wins the Mac versus PC debate. To her, standing in line for days to spend \$600 on Apple's iPhone might even seem irrational.

Fleming, a retired custodian, is on the sidelines in tech companies' competition to develop new gadgets for our hearty digital appetite. Yet technology plays a pivotal role in Fleming's life.

Every month she goes to Bertie County's resource center, where a digital connector helps her pay her bills online. That saves her the hour-long drive she used to make to the government buildings in the next county over.

Bertie's 19,000 residents live in one of North Carolina's largest and longest counties, spanning 700 square miles. There are 28 residents per square mile, compared to 770 per mile in nearby Durham County. So residents -- especially those elderly people who prefer not to use the mail -- often have to drive long distances to pay bills in other counties or use a computer at the area's single public library.

To address this need, One Economy – a nonprofit that uses technology to support the needs of low-income individuals – opened Bertie County's first public technology center this month. Along with a traditional computer lab, the staff has a mobile lab with 11 laptops that volunteers take around the county to residents who can't travel. One Economy also places computers in low-income homes.

“Technology had an overarching role in transforming the economy in the 1990s,” said Alec Ross, who helped create One Economy in 2000. “Why not apply it to the age old issue of poverty?”

Ross taught sixth grade in Baltimore before starting the organization. He was inspired by his students' innate comfort with technology. “Young people play a role as translators of technology,” he said.

Headquartered in Washington, the group has programs that span from Seattle to Istanbul. It receives funding from some tech giants, including Intel, who are eager to help a new generation of Americans gain access to technology.

One Economy trains youth to provide support for the computers it disseminates to the community. The goal is two-fold: Adults feel more comfortable knowing someone can help them if a computer freezes, and the community's youth gain familiarity with technology.

“Young people growing up in (low-income neighborhoods) aren't going to be tech competitive if they don't have the skills,” Ross said. “We think of the Internet as a way to break down the traditional barriers.”

More than 70 percent of American adults use the Internet, and nearly half have high-speed connections at home, according to the Pew Research Center. But only 50 percent of Americans with a household income below \$30,000 are online, and 30 percent of them have high-speed connections at home.

As government, employers and banks increasingly move online, low-income individuals need access and training to avail those services.

SRI International, an independent research group, evaluated One Economy's programs in San Jose, Calif., and Miami. The 2006 report showed improvement among the program's clients in job performance, health, and community involvement at rates higher than other low-income Internet users.

Between 25 and 50 percent of the clients said they use their computers to apply for jobs, make purchases, pursue educational opportunities and engage in banking activities.

“The impact of this center has changed life for a generation of folk who thought learning for them had come to an end,” said Vivian Saunders, who runs the new Bertie County center. Her son Dennis, who was a digital connector while in high school, relies on computers to overcome dyslexia.

He returned home from college to celebrate the center's opening on November 3 along with Fleming and the other residents he used to help with their computers.

“I haven't seen that many laptops and computers in my whole life,” he said. “This is important so that Bertie County won't be left behind. Things move so fast. They have to keep up.”



Courtesy of One Economy

Dennis Saunders, a participant in One Economy's Bertie County digital connectors program, accepts the Lisa Sullivan award at One Economy's 2007 gala.

## **Comparison of Internet use between Pew National sample and One Economy clients**

Pew National sample

Use the Internet: 46%

Went online yesterday: 44%

Have broadband at home: 17%

One Economy: San Jose, Calif.

Use the Internet: 86%

Went online yesterday: 63%

Have broadband at home: 63%

One Economy: Miami

Use the Internet: 82%

Went online yesterday: 50%

Have broadband at home: 29%

Source: "One Economy Digital Communities," SRI International study, October 6, 2006