

Detroit Free Press

OPINION

313-222-6583 letters@freepress.com

*Advocating
for
Change*

Boost broadband opportunity for all

By PAUL BRIDGEWATER

Detroit, with its double-digit unemployment and an uncertain future, might be in its worst economic state in recent history. There's a lower supply of jobs, an eroding tax base, and a higher demand for social services. But an effective source of job creation — expanding broadband access — is within reach.



Paul Bridgewater

Broadband is the business currency of the 21st Century. Broadband now gives health care institutions and small businesses the technological edge they need to compete with larger companies and to reach customers around the world. For individuals with access to broadband or wireless technologies and proper training, unprecedented opportunity will be available.

In urban minority communities — historically underserved by new technology — broadband access is an economic survival issue. Affordable broadband access offers minority-owned businesses an avenue to expansion and creation of new jobs. And for minority families, broadband is the ticket to full participation in the high-speed Internet society, where it will be crucial to finding a job, getting an education, or even receiving basic social service resources.

Less than a decade ago, cutting-edge technology meant dial-up Internet access at creaking speeds. There was a legitimate concern then about a digital divide, with affluent neighborhoods having plentiful access but rural and underserved urban areas having little or no access. Government policy and private-sector initiatives came together to close that divide; we need to put the same energy into closing the broadband gap now.

The click of a mouse can open the door to economic opportunity. So we must ensure that everyone can join the digital revolution; the last ones on must not become the first ones off.

■ PAUL BRIDGEWATER IS PRESIDENT AND CEO OF THE DETROIT AREA AGENCY ON AGING, AND A MEMBER OF THE ALLIANCE FOR DIGITAL EQUALITY, A NONPARTISAN CONSUMER ADVOCACY COALITION.

Let family unity guide child protection

By ALICE THOMPSON

A recent report by the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform examined when a child should be removed from his or her home. Circumstances and a case-by-case assessment are obvious factors. Yet, as the debate continues, keeping families together and children safe must remain a priority.



Alice Thompson

We have watched the family unit deteriorate over time as a result of increased social and economic challenges. Minority families have been hit especially hard, with statistics becoming harder to digest every year. But the importance of a strong family is what should drive every

decision to help prevent the issues that stand to further divide the family.

Now, more than ever, families need guidance on how to navigate and manage everyday living: jobs, school, child rearing, financial literacy, health and wellness, relationships and communication both within and outside the family unit.

Agencies established to assist challenged families must remain committed to recognizing and discouraging small problems from growing into major disasters. Early intervention and prevention are the keys.

Stable families create strong communities. Children are enveloped in a web of love that protects and nurtures them to productivity. This alone serves as a preventive measure against child abuse, dropping out of high school, risky behavior and delinquency.

When the importance of the family unit is recognized and respected, at all levels, it becomes the driving force behind policies, programs and funding decisions that benefit us all.

■ ALICE THOMPSON IS CEO OF BLACK FAMILY DEVELOPMENT INC. AND A MEMBER OF THE STATE'S TASK FORCE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES.



**Change: Resolve
to be "Positive
Participants" in 2009**

Alice G. Thompson, CEO
Black Family Development, Inc.

After months of planning and preparation, Black Family Development, Inc. (BFDI) hosted its 30th Anniversary Celebration Dinner event at the Renaissance Marriott in downtown Detroit on December 4, 2008. The event, a celebratory success, allowed the staff, board, friends and supporters to gather, reflect and acknowledge the organization's accomplishments and impact upon the metropolitan Detroit community over the past three decades.

Exactly one month prior to the celebration, the United States of America elected its first African-American President. Like so many other individuals in this country and the world, I reflected upon the evening of November 4th and pondered the significance of the moment, the hour and the day both personally and professionally.

I was inspired and filled with pride as I watched television coverage of President Barack Obama and his beautiful family emerge onto the stage to greet supporters in Chicago's Grant Park, and then present his acceptance speech. Campaigning on a platform of change in how government responds to the needs of its citizens and the critical issues of our time - the economy, healthcare, education and energy, the President was able to mobilize, energize and engage millions of people across racial, economic, social and political dividing lines in a way that was unprecedented.

While other leaders have expressed a philosophical belief in a top-down approach as the means to achieve socio-economic progress in our nation, President Obama has emphasized one from the bottom-up. That approach empowers and strengthens lower and middle class citizens by providing equal access to quality education, health-care, employment opportunities, and affordable quality housing that enriches the quality of life for all concerned.

As the CEO of Black Family Development, Inc., I understand, respect, and support that philosophy. When founded in 1978,

the mission of BFDI was to change the manner in which human and social services were delivered to its intended audience - African-American families in need. BFDI has since consistently delivered community-based, values-driven, culturally sensitive programs and services without compromise. We are proud of our achievements. However, we realize that the next decade requires that we embrace and strive for change on a much broader scale.

The image of the Obama family as a loving, caring and supportive unit was perhaps one of the greatest symbols of hope for the future of our nation, cities and communities for me.

At the core of BFDI's existence is family preservation. BFDI has always embraced the principle that parents bear primary responsibility for the success of their child's development. Additionally, children do best when they have the support of a loving and involved mother and father. From strong family units, strong communities emerge.

Although the core of what we do centers on family life, we also focus on positive youth development and strengthening community assets. Our Positive Youth Development programs promote academic achievement, cultural awareness and the identification/ expression of their unique gifts and talents. BFDI has also become actively involved in community organizing. Within the past two years, BFDI with funding from The Skillman Foundation Good Neighborhood Initiative, has organized more than 180 city blocks into 53 block clubs within the Osborn community - - an area with a population of 37,418 residents on Detroit's northeast side. Within the next year, the goal is to organize a total of 250 blocks in that same area. The ultimate objective is to stabilize and strengthen neighborhoods and communities to support positive family life and constructive outcomes for children and youth.

Block clubs, as organized units of individuals with common values, present an excellent opportunity to reduce the incidence and prevalence of crime in neighborhoods while improving the quality of life for residents.

In accepting the call for change and embracing the challenge of the process, BFDI seeks to continue to forge new collaborative partnerships that are beneficial to the community. We urge others to join with us to find common ground and shared concerns that will make a difference in the Detroit community to create the change we all need and desire.

If you have pondered how to be a part of the historic change that is taking place in our nation, get involved. Be a part of the change you wish to see.

If crime is a problem on your street, start a neighborhood watch. If the children the children in your area do not have access to recreation, organize positive age appropriate activities in the community or contact a neighborhood agency or faith-based organization to learn how they can assist. If the senior citizens on your block need assistance with errands or accessing resources, consider how you and others around them may support their needs directly. Or place a call to an organization or agency that offers these services to seniors. Volunteer in your neighborhood school. Organize a neighborhood clean-up or a spring-cleaning project. Give support in any way you believe will make a difference. Have a firm mindset, and be determined to be a part of the change you wish to see.

It's been proven. With a clear vision, mission and belief - - positive change can be realized. Yes, it can.

Block clubs, as organized units of individuals with common values, present an excellent opportunity to reduce the incidence and prevalence of crime in neighborhoods while improving the quality of life for residents.