Statement of the Morino Institute on "Bridging the Digital Divide"

The recent release of the Commerce Department's report, *"Falling Through the Net,"* has once again put the issue of the Digital Divide on the front page. And while the report reveals some important and disturbing trends, it only tells half the story.

The Digital Divide is not so much about technology "haves and have nots" as it is a symptom of much deeper social issues. It is a manifestation of economic and educational gaps that have existed in this country long before the microchip and the Internet were invented. The "Digital Divide" has simply made these social and economic issues more pronounced. Until we recognize this point, we won't be able to think in the ways we must if we are truly going to help all Americans have the opportunity to succeed in the New Economy.

Too many policy makers and disciples of high technology would like us to believe in the silver bullet of dropping hardware, software and cabling into communities. The key to creating a level playing field for all Americans, particularly those in low-income communities, is to provide ways for people to understand the potential gains and risks the Internet and its related technology present in *their* lives. It is also essential that the entrepreneurs who are creating the New Economy become involved. By doing so, these business leaders will be brought closer together with others in society, benefiting everyone. The gap will be bridged, not by technology but by people sharing knowledge and working together.

If we are serious about bridging the divide, then we must create policies and programs that encourage people in low-income communities to gain the knowledge and understanding to use technology to change their lives and that encourage New Economy entrepreneurs to want to get involved. Having access to technology and information is a vital first step, but we must go beyond the basics. If we want to make a quantum impact, then we have to spend equal time helping people develop the understanding and knowledge to do something of significance for their lives.

Below are six suggestions for policies and programs that the Morino Institute believes would take us far in bridging the Digital Divide.

1. Create the New Economy equivalent of the Peace Corps to work in lower-income areas in rural and urban America.

There is compelling need in lower-income areas in rural America and in our inner cities for the equivalent of the 1960s Peace Corps initiative to empower people in these communities to understand and respond to the challenge of the New Economy. This new New Economy Corps, which could be viewed as a "special forces" of AmeriCorps, could be comprised of young people who understand the potential of technology, but as users and innovators, and NOT as IT or technical specialists. This cadre of young people could go into our most challenging low-income areas to work with people, organizations and institutions to improve their program and operational effectiveness, community outreach, communications, staff development, funding and so forth.

Trends suggest there is an opportunity to engage graduates of associate, bachelor's and even master's degree programs who seek to do something socially meaningful with their lives before they commit to the corporate world. With some "contributed" training resources from firms, like IBM, Bain, Andersen and others who are rapidly developing expertise in Internet-enabled business process transformation, a rather compelling bootcamp and Internet support network could be developed to prepare and support these Corps volunteers to fulfill this mission and serve their country.

2. Establish a "community leaders connection program" with the goal of having 100% of the community leaders, teachers and staff working in schools and out-of-school programs connected to the Internet, email-enabled and mentored in the use of these tools within a several year period.

Today, there are a range of issues that impede technology adoption in low-income areas. It is essential that individuals in these communities see the relevance of technology to their daily lives—and this enlightenment is best done experientially.

Various incentives could help associations, trade groups, labor unions, community organizations and societies create programs that provide their members a packaged solution. They need to be able to inexpensively and easily acquire the equipment to access the Internet—a modem-equipped laptop complete with a suite of software, and a pre-arranged dial-up service connection to an ISP. Such a package can also include starter tool kits, such as those now available from groups like the Benton Foundation, Community Technology Centers Network (CTCNet) and others. Most important of all is access to a technical mentor. Programs like TechCorps and CompuMentor could be expanded to play an even more critical role.

3. Provide incentives to create "technology portals" within lower-income communities through existing schools and community-based organizations.

Efforts are needed to establish technology education programs in the out-of-school programs of community-based organizations that have already established channels to reach young people and adults in the community. We strongly advocate that this investment be focused to stimulate the creation, dissemination and support of programs that build the organizational capacity of community-based organizations. Investment should stimulate these organizations to integrate the Internet and related technologies into their organizations and to create Internet-enabled environments and learning programs. Funding should be directed first to those organizations that could be channels into these communities, such as CTCNet, 4-H and the Association for Community Networking (AFCN). To support these community technology portals, we should create mega-technology access and distribution centers within a region. As well intentioned as corporate giving is, it is difficult for technology vendors to interface with the myriad of community-based groups needing their support. Similarly frustrating is the lack of qualified intermediaries or distribution centers at the regional level through which technology vendors could offer their products and services. Regional technology centers through which vendors could make their products and services available to community-based groups and provide follow-on support and technical assistance would fill this void. Natural anchors for this effort include community colleges, urban-based universities, select nonprofit resource clearing houses and community-based entrepreneurial business startups.

4. Provide incentives to develop incubators for minority-owned Internet-based startup businesses.

At a time when entrepreneurs are driving over 30% of the change in our economic growth, and small businesses generate two-thirds of our country's innovation, we must encourage entrepreneurship in minority communities. Leveraging this untapped pool of talent will increase our country's productivity. The Internet is breaking down barriers to entry in many businesses and opening up opportunities for people who develop skills in the Internet and its related technologies. Incentives could stimulate the creation of new venture funds to target investments in minority-owned businesses. Similarly, incentives could stimulate the refocusing of existing facilities to become incubators for Internet-based startups, outfitted with high bandwidth connection, executives in residence to counsel the entrepreneurs and a critical mass of imaginative people who could fuel each other's dreams.

5. Provide funds to support "opportunity education" in middle schools and tax credits for businesses to participate.

It is especially important for children, particularly those in low-income communities, to develop an early awareness of jobs that could be theirs, if they had proper education and training. Continual efforts to reinforce this message must occur throughout middle and high school to increase the proportion of children from low-income communities who take and pass the right types of courses. For example, children who can't read, write and be ready for algebra by the eighth grade will cut off their options to many technical and technology-based careers.

Young people don't relate as well to career brochures, school counselors and teachers as they do to real live representatives from industry "who look like me" and who can show how what is happening in school translates into things that are important later in life.

Why not incorporate course selections with getting part-time jobs and integrate the school day with technology work programs, through internships, cooperative education or apprenticeships where companies get tax credits for placing kids in progressively more difficult jobs that are related to what the students need to learn? Microsoft's "Working Connections" program with 25 of the nation's community colleges is an example of what could be done in this regard.

6. Provide matching funds to support private sector and community college initiatives that will develop in students the skill competencies in information and communication technologies, as well as in other technology-enabled areas, from graphics design to manufacturing.

Create incentives in the form of tax credits, matching funds and public recognition for businesses to establish training programs that work with high schools and community colleges. The Cisco Networking Academy is an excellent example. More than 2,000 academies are established, and it is estimated that 20,000 students are now certified as Cisco technicians. There are plans to certify 40,000 more in the coming year.

Provide funding to help the country's community colleges establish core technology curriculums and broadly disseminate this work. The technology industry has not been effective in articulating its knowledge and skill requirements to the education community. As a consequence, schools, community colleges and proprietary training companies are creating programs without any reliable information and understanding of what industry needs. In Seattle, the Washington Software and Digital Media Alliance has teamed with Bellevue Community College to identify and validate skill standards for IT workers. A national industry standards report patterned after the Seattle model could be invaluable in giving direction to educators in developing relevant curriculums and learning materials.

Provide incentives to create technical apprenticeship programs that would allow startups and established firms to hire individuals with basic competencies and provide them on-the-job training and mentors. The training and mentors will enable trainees to develop into more accomplished professionals, while also providing a more cost effective way to recruit talent for participating companies. Siemans offers a good example. It has worked with several community colleges nationally not only to donate state-of-the-art equipment, but also to lend personnel, assist in the design of the curriculum and provide a paid industry work-learning experience for students in the program while they are enrolled.

At the heart of these proposals is a recognition that bridging the divide involves bringing both "halves" of our society together in meaningful ways. The Internet and its related technologies offer new possibilities for making connections and finding common ground. And when that common ground is found, America will be a better place for everyone.