



Contact:
Linda Hoile
(209) 522-5103 x140
Linda@greatvalley.org

For Immediate Release

Free training connects community members to the Internet

MODESTO, CA (November 1, 2011) – Chris and Guadalupe Perez wanted to learn how to use the Internet to connect with their grandchildren in Mexico. After a brief training session with Jose Urzua, the Stanislaus County community trainer for the California Connects program, the couple was able to email their relatives. After additional hours of training they had set up a Facebook page and were able to speak with and see their grandchildren using Skype. Now, they own a computer, have Internet access and are enjoy a closer connection to far-flung family.

“It was moving to watch tears come to the eyes of a grandmother who now sees the faces of her grandchildren while she speaks with them,” Urzua said.

Many California residents have been “surfing the Internet” for a decade now. However, many Valley residents do not know how to access the Internet or even turn on a computer, even where public access is available.

California Connects seeks to address the “digital divide” by conducting training throughout the state. The program has several components. The Great Valley Center manages the portion of the program that provides for full-time trainers to provide instructions specifically on the Internet in small-group sessions through out the valley, including Stanislaus and San Joaquin Counties. Class participants also learn how to set up an email account, find public access computers and how to find low cost computers and home Internet service. The program seeks to provide training to Spanish-speaking and low-income residents, who are currently the most likely not to have a computer, computer skills or Internet access.

According to the 2010 Census, Riverbank’s population is 22,678 and over 52 percent of its residents are of Hispanic or Latino descent. Urzua is bilingual in Spanish and can conduct classes in both Spanish and English. To date most of his trainings have been conducted in Spanish.

Urzua has been on the job for about four months and has trained approximately 70 area residents. In addition to the leading classes, he also performs community outreach and develops community partners.

“I enjoy the feeling it gives me when the community members’ eyes light up and they smile with understanding this totally new thing called a computer and how life altering it will be for them to be able to communicate to their families instantly or to seek employment from their home,” Urzua said. “It is a feeling of satisfaction knowing you are helping these families to grow.”

Uruza began training classes in Riverbank in October, through a valuable partnership with the CASA del Rio Family Resource Center, which is under the auspices of the Riverbank Unified School District. CASA and the District allow use of their lab facilities at Cardoza Middle School and Riverbank High School. In the future, trainings may take place at the new Adelante High School campus and adult learning center located next to Cardoza Middle School.

The CASA del Rio Family Resource Center, which provides a variety of youth and family services and resources, helps the California Connects program meet a vital need of the targeted population by providing free, adjacent childcare for class members during class hours. CASA also provides assistance in promoting the training through its community outreach and connections.

The first round of classes in Riverbank completed training at the end of October. Additional trainings are scheduled through the end of December at this point. The schedule currently calls for four, three-hour sessions per round of classes. Participants receive a certificate of completion at the end of their final class.

Angelica Martinez, who recently completed the classes in Riverbank, said she is thrilled to be able to make contact and communicate with her husband in Mexico, who she has not seen in six months. Her classmate, Gloria Gomez, began the class having never turned on a computer. Gomez now has an email account and a Facebook page and recently posted on the Stanislaus County California Connects Facebook page in Spanish. "This class is very good and interests me," Gomez wrote.

GVC Executive Director Dejeune Shelton points to community partnerships, such as the one with CASA del Rio and Riverbank Unified School District, as vital to successful implementation of California Connects.

"The success of this program is dependent upon leveraging existing resources in the valley and establishing mutually beneficial partnerships," Shelton said. "We seek community agencies, educational institutions and governmental organizations to partner with in this initiative in each of the 18 counties covered by the grant."

The partnerships are designed to be mutually beneficial to both California Connects and the partnering agency. Both organizations are able to provide additional services to the community while utilizing existing resources to their maximum benefit, acknowledged Esther Rosario, director of health and social services for CASA del Rio and the Riverbank Unified School District.

"The California Connects training meets an important need for many members of our community," Rosario said. "Many of our parents and senior citizens speak only Spanish and some of them have had no exposure to the Internet. This training provides a basic understanding of how to search the Internet for information, jobs and services and shows them how to use email and Facebook as powerful communication tools. Without this knowledge you are at a distinct disadvantage in today's workplace or society."

To supplement the classes, Rosario has recently arranged for computer lab hours at three Riverbank school sites so that those who finish the training can continue exploring the Internet and practicing their new skills.

Program Funding:

California Connects is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration for Broadband Technology Opportunities Program and is administered by the Foundation for California Community Colleges. The three-year initiative aims to train 61,120 Californians in broadband use, with 9,168 becoming new broadband users. Another segment of California Connects program trains community college students who are part of Mathematics, Engineering, Science, and Achievement (MESA) and equips them with a laptop computer, Microsoft certification, and digital literacy training to serve as trainers for their families and other community members. The MESA operates through community colleges throughout the State. California Connects is also working with American River College to develop open-access, online digital literacy tools that can be used anytime and anywhere – in libraries, public computing centers, homes, schools and places of business.

Contacts:

Agencies and organizations interested in partnering with GVC on the California Connects training should contact Desiree Cervantes Holden, program manager, at desiree@greatvalley.org or (209) 522-5103 x136.

To sign up for California Connects classes in Riverbank call CASA del Rio, (209) 869-0468.

For more information on California Connects community trainer jobs go to: www.greatvalley.org/caconnects.

For more information on other components of California Connects visit www.caconnects.org.

For information on the GVC contact Dejeune Shelton, executive director, at (209) 522-5103 x120 or dejeune@greatvalley.org.