Mobile Voices, Mobile Justice Fact Sheet: Cell Phones and the Digital Divide

Communities of color and low-income populations are much more likely than the population overall to rely on cell phones exclusively for both making calls and accessing the Internet. In addition, these populations use their cell phones more often and do more things on them.

Because these groups are much more dependent on wireless networks and less likely to have access to wired broadband at home, it is extremely important for as many of the same rules as possible to apply to wireless and wired networks so that the already-too-large "digital divide" does not become even wider.

Consider these statistics:

- Fifty-one percent of Latinos and 46% of blacks use their phones to access the Internet, compared with 33% of whites, according to a July 2010 Pew poll.
- The figures for using social media like Facebook via phone were 36% for Latinos, 33% for blacks and 19% for whites.

While cell phones can provide a reasonable substitute for wired broadband in many situations, there are many tasks where it just doesn't work, many of which are especially important to communities of color, low-income, disabled, rural and elderly populations. Among them:

- Job Hunting. Updating a resume or filling out an online job application is extremely difficult on nearly any cell phone, and impossible on many. So is printing out instructions or other needed documents.
- Applying for government assistance such as Medicare, Medicaid, Food Stamps and others.
- Buying products or services online. Many are much cheaper online and having them delivered is important when it isn't easy for someone to get to a store.

There are also many other issues involving cell phones:

- Unlike wired networks, wireless networks are not subject to so-called "Network Neutrality rules, the principle that the Internet should remain open so all consumers have unrestricted access to lawful web sites and online businesses and entrepreneurs can compete freely on a level playing field.
- Early termination fees, a tool that phone companies use to lock customers into long-term contracts.
- Device exclusivity, such as the iPhone, where consumers have to use a designated wireless carrier.
- Hidden fees and confusing charges. Many wireless carriers tack on huge for roaming, where a customer makes a call outside the company's network. Sending an extra text message or a single phone call above monthly limits can often invoke large overage changes.