

The Battle for Digital Inclusion

Internet access can be a powerful tool to improve individuals' economic prospects. To succeed, broadband adoption programs must meet people on their own terms.

By Michael Liimatta / *Connecting for Good*

Editor's Note: Based in Kansas City, Mo., Connecting for Good operates a variety of programs to overcome the digital divide. In addition to delivering free or low-cost wireless broadband to about 500 families, it refurbishes PCs, sells them at low cost to low-income individuals and trains the recipients to use them. It also helps low-income neighborhoods in Kansas City qualify as Google "fiberhoods," promotes the construction of public-access computing centers (virtual libraries) and encourages the strategic placement of wireless hot spots. "We try to help people connect in the most logical and economical way possible," says Michael Liimatta, president and co-founder of Connecting for Good. In 2013, more than 1,000 people were trained in its free basic digital life skills class. Following is Liimatta's reflection on the organization's first year of operation.

In August, Connecting for Good marked its first year as a recognized nonprofit organization. Recently, Jim Lynch of TechSoup spoke at the luncheon where the Kansas City Digital Inclusion Fund was announced. He made one statement that particularly stood out: "The digital divide is a tough nut to crack, and I'm not sure anyone has figured out how to do that yet."

There's a lot of truth in his statement. After fighting a year's worth of battles on the front lines of digital inclusion, we've learned a few things that can help us make real progress in closing the digital divide.

1. Low-income and under-resourced people want to get online! Some surveys suggest that most people who aren't online simply don't see the value of being online. Our experience since we set up shop in one of Kansas City's toughest neighborhoods does not seem to bear this out. To the contrary, we have experienced a flood of people wanting to learn how to use the Internet. Honestly, we don't have enough staff and volunteers to keep up with the

demand, though we are conducting as many as eight basic introductory classes a week. Think about it: Where does a low-income, 50-year-old black male go to learn how to use the Internet? He may know perfectly well that he should "go digital," but where can he find such help? Free, neighborhood-based training is the only solution.

- 2. No one can close the digital divide digitally.** No matter how much money is spent trying to close the digital divide online, in the end that may prove to be the most expensive and least productive way to go about it. Google Fiber found that out last year when a big chunk of Kansas City's urban core nearly missed qualifying for installation of its gigabit fiber service. This company is among the most elite in online advertising and promotions. But in the end, in order to avoid leaving out the most needy neighborhoods, it had to send out foot soldiers to recruit subscribers in person.
- 3. The digital divide is not going to be closed through a high-level marketing campaign.** The reason is simple: All the



Connecting for Good conducts a training session at the Blue Hill Community Services facility in Kansas City, Mo.

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things that have excluded people from the digital revolution are the same cultural, economic and racial barriers that have kept them in isolation and poverty for generations. However, we sincerely believe that we possess tools in the Internet that can tear these barriers down, unite communities and overcome prejudice and injustice. Through basic connectivity, people are enabled

to communicate with one another and access resources that were never before available. Digital citizenship is real, and we have in our hands the tools to get people empowered and engaged to bring about positive change in their communities.

4. ***It needs to be "up close and personal."*** To bridge the digital divide, we can't help people we don't understand. It's important to

know the cultures of the people we hope to reach. We can't go into an underserved neighborhood and say, "Here we are with the answer to your need!"

The message we share at Connecting for Good is one of empowerment; more Internet access and knowledge of technology means people can take their futures into their own hands. We provide them with the resources to make better lives for themselves. The digital divide will be closed when we can take a handful of eager learners into the digital age one step at a time.

For our digital life skills introductory classes, we limit the class size to 10 and try to get other volunteers to help whenever we can. Though the waiting list for these classes is nearly 100, we know

we can't give participants a decent learning experience with more people. At a recent training session, one of our trainers could be heard saying, "Keyboard? That's the big thing in front of you with all the buttons!"

5. **The cost factor must be overcome.** The entry points to becoming a productive user of the Internet are simply too expensive for low-income people. The cost of connecting includes having an Internet service provider, the necessary hardware and the education to really benefit from being online. We thought long and hard about a price point for our refurbished computers. We know that people value something more if they have some personal investment in it. Plus, we don't want to see our devices ending up in a pawn shop in a week. Our basic price is \$100 for our refurbished PCs, but we give a \$50 voucher to qualified low-income people who complete our basic introduction to the Internet classes. Some people are now paying \$5 a month on a layaway plan.

On the connectivity side, even \$10 a month can be too much for families that have incomes of less than \$25,000 a year, so we are promoting Google Fiber's \$300 for seven years of 5 Mbps of Internet plan. For those for whom even that is out of reach, we are working to find other extremely affordable ways to help the poorest of the poor get online. Wireless networks have emerged as the most cost-effective approach, especially in complexes where multiple families live.

6. **If we had a million dollars to spend ...** we would create an organization similar to AmeriCorps dedicated to digital inclusion. We would train an army of fired-up young people, provide them support for a year and set them up in the neighborhoods with low Internet adoption. There, they would work on setting up Wi-Fi hotspots and public-access computer centers where they could build one-on-one, face-to-face relationships with the neighborhood. By building trust and compassionate handholding, they would lead residents into the digital mainstream. It's going to take "getting up close and personal" to bring the people who need the Internet most into a place where they can take advantage of all the benefits they can find online.

At Connecting for Good, we are driven every day in the pursuit of this work because of our three core values:

- Internet connectivity equals opportunity. It is an absolute necessity to fully participate as a productive citizen in a digital society.
- Education is the No. 1 thing that lifts people from poverty. In a digital society, it is impossible to pursue a quality education without access to the Internet.
- In-home Internet access must be viewed as an essential modern utility, like phone service, electricity and running water.

Using our three-pronged strategy of connectivity, hardware and digital literacy, we are closing the digital divide every day in a lasting, significant way.

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UPDATE: Connecting for Good just opened its first community technology center in a needy neighborhood of Kansas City and established a relationship with nearby Donnelly College to involve its students in helping to operate the center. ❖

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