Innovative multisector education effort connects Yonkers residents to broadband

Bridget McCusker| November 8, 2021
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Over the course of this year and the last, access to quality broadband and the internet has revealed itself to be more essential than ever, as many workers transitioned to remote working, students pivoted to remote schooling and businesses and governments increasingly took their commerce and services online.

Just as the importance of being connected was highlighted, so too was the problem of poor or nonexistent internet connections, creating a "digital divide" between those with broadband and those without.

New York ranks second-highest in the United States for the highest proportion of residents with access to basic broadband speeds, according to a September report from New York State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli.

However, DiNapoli's report also found that as of 2019, more than 1 million households in the state did not have access or a subscription to broadband services at home, including a disproportionate number of those aged 65 and older and/or with low educational attainment.

Although rural communities often have the most difficulties with broadband deployment, about half of residents without available broadband in New York state are in the downstate region, with 25% in Long Island and another 12% each in New York City and the Mid-Hudson region, which includes Westchester and the Hudson Valley.

In Yonkers, a multisector effort spearheaded by the Westchester County Association is adding one resource to addressing this digital divide in the form of a new digital opportunity zone, called the Y-Zone.

It will provide free internet access to between 250 and 400 need-based households in a service zone reaching from Glenn Park to Park Hill Avenue and from downtown Yonkers to Nodine Hill.

"Now more than ever, there is a growing need to bridge the digital divide that exists in communities across the country," said Yonkers Mayor Mike Spano. "I am so proud Yonkers families will be given an equitable solution to technology that supports the education of our students. Many thanks to our Y-Zone partners, led by WCA and US Ignite, for recognizing that affordable connectivity is vital to the success and future of the city."

Michael Romita, president and CEO of the Westchester County Association, described the effect of the Y-Zone project as life-changing for residents who have struggled to stay connected throughout the pandemic and before.

"Statistically speaking, areas with strong digital service enjoy higher levels of GDP growth and that's especially because you've got more households and residents who have an opportunity to contribute to and participate in any economy," Romita said. "So whether it's fintech or online learning for students or telecommuting or e-commerce, the more people who have better access to the internet and stronger digital connectivity, it just enhances opportunities for the regional economy."

In Westchester, the problem of lack of connection can have several different causes, including affordability, accessibility and lack of digital literacy.

"Historically, a lot of funding for digital inclusion has focused on rural areas and the build-out of infrastructure and networks in rural communities," Romita said. "And sometimes suburban centers such as Westchester are missed."

The program came about through the efforts of the WCA's digital connectivity task force, along with collaboration among the public, private and education sectors.

After deciding to partner on the project, the group gained funding in March 2021 from Project OVERCOME, a grant program organized by US Ignite and funded by the National Science Foundation and Schmidt Futures. The program provided $2.25 million and $450,000 respectively for projects across seven U.S. communities in an effort to connect those who have been unconnected or struggled to remain connected.

"When we launched Project OVERCOME in the midst of the covid -19 pandemic, we knew that the projects would offer great insights on innovative connection methods," said Lee Davenport, director of community development at project member US Ignite. "This CBRS (citizens broadband radio service) pilot in Yonkers advances an understanding of the intricacies of deploying this novel technology and

highlights the strength among a community organization's ability to find collaborative solutions to connect the unconnected."

"It's not just the WCA," Romita said. "We were the lead organization, but if we didn't have the STEM Alliance, if we didn't have (Yonkers Partners in Education), if we didn't have the city of Yonkers and if we didn't have our private sector partners Crown Castle and Motorola all working together collaboratively, this sort of thing would have never gotten off the ground."

According to Romita, the city of Yonkers worked to identify the need in the community, especially through its Department of Education and Yonkers Partners in Education, a nonprofit that exclusively serves students of the district. It also utilized its connection with Motorola to provide physical infrastructure and technical know-how.

The STEM Alliance contributed through a program called Digital Equity Now, which is providing Chromebooks along with 15 hours of digital technological training to promote the computer literacy necessary to further address the digital divide, and spread awareness of the program.

Fordham University has partnered in the effort to measure the program's success, to determine if the program can be scaled and replicated.

Crown Castle provided physical infrastructure mainly in the form of the fiber for the project.

Romita said the WCA and the partner organizations hope to inspire similar programs at the state and regional level, and spread the knowledge about its results and efficacy, citing the fact that there were few programs the task force found that were comparable.

"I think that the reason why we felt it was so important to move forward with something is because we couldn't find anything that had this level of innovation out there," Romita said. "So we felt like, okay, we'll create this out of whole cloth, and maybe it can stand as an example of the possible."

"It's a pilot, so it will provide lessons that can be replicated elsewhere," Romita said. "And we would certainly seek to find partners and other regional communities that would want to do something like this. A lot of this is going to be funding dependent and we've applied to various organizations for additional funding to see if we can continue what's happening in Yonkers beyond its current lifespan — and then potentially expand it beyond Yonkers and even introduce it to more communities."

Romita added that Westchester's American Rescue Plan funding could add more opportunities for funding such programs, or expanding the Y-Zone concept.

The team has submitted a proposal to the county to attempt to do just that.