How the Y-Zone Is Expanding Digital Equity in Yonkers, N.Y.

As the 12-month digital equity pilot program funded by US Ignite enters its final quarter, stakeholders involved in the project are noting its achievements and looking forward to possibly extending the effort.

Julia Edinger | January 26, 2022
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In Yonkers, N.Y., a digital opportunity zone — aptly named the Y-Zone — has been helping to level the playing field for those without consistent access to the Internet or the devices and know-how needed to make use of it.

Funded by US Ignite as part of Project OVERCOME, this digital opportunity zone is geared toward expanding equity in the city through broadband, digital skills training and access to Internet-enabled devices. The approach mirrors programs seen in places like Oakland, Calif., and Albuquerque, N.M., demonstrating a need to go beyond just providing Internet service.

The project went live in October 2021, offering free Internet access to need-based households within roughly a mile of Nodine Hill and the Citizens Broadband Radio Service (CBRS) spectrum transmitter. Since October, over 40 households have enrolled in the Internet service and over 50 individuals have enrolled in the Access Plus service, which includes a free Chromebook and 15 hours of digital skills training. The undertaking will ultimately connect between 250-400 households.

The Westchester County Association (WCA) was selected as the grant recipient for Project OVERCOME in March 2021, along with six other communities in a $2.7 million effort. The funding came from the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF), which provided $2.25 million, and Schmidt Futures, which provided $450,000.

Michael Romita, president and CEO of the WCA, said that Yonkers faces problems similar to those of other large municipalities, with the county having more than 40,000 homes without an Internet connection.

He emphasized that expanding digital equity is ultimately a way to bring more people to participate in the economy and stimulate growth.

"We've identified digital connectivity and the digital divide as one of the primary pillars of growing the regional economy," said Romita. "And that's a paradigm that's shared by the government sector, the private sector [and] the nonprofit sector."

The key collaborators in the pilot are WCA; the city of Yonkers; the STEM Alliance; Yonkers Partners in Education; Fordham University; Westhab; and Nonprofit Westchester, along with other community groups.

Each partner has a role in expanding digital equity. For example, Fordham University is tasked with collecting, analyzing and reporting data back to NSF.

The STEM Alliance is offering the 15 hours of digital training to those who enroll in the Access Plus service — as Commissioner of Information Technology for the city of Yonkers Bob Cacace explained, access without education is not enough to get people to utilize available resources.

Cacace said there was a public mistrust about private cable operators, underlining the importance of community organizations in building that trust with the public. And although the omicron variant has shifted the landscape and presented some challenges, having people on the ground in the community is a crucial part of this trust-building effort.

Individuals that have signed up for a full year of service will still receive that year of service once the 12-month grant period ends, Romita said, with the ultimate goal being that the program is continued through other state and local grants.

The "lasting legacy" of the pilot, he explained, will be the analytical study to inform decisions at the local, state and federal level for broadband expansion, especially as funding opportunities through the federal infrastructure bill come into play. The data collected through this pilot, he said, is the city's ticket to those opportunities.

Fordham University will conduct a three-month follow-up survey with participants between February and May. The university will then provide its findings to US Ignite later in 2022, and US Ignite will aggregate that data and report it to NSF by November, according to Romita.