

# lohud.

## **Downtown Yonkers residents get free internet, Chromebooks in digital equity program**

*Data on how much people use the internet will help show the state and county this kind of model could be a good use of funds from the federal infrastructure bill and American Rescue Plan.*

**Diana Dombrowski | December 21, 2021**

[Click Here to View Online](#)

The concept is straightforward. Give people internet in their homes, and the devices and training on how to use them, and they'll be better able to rise socioeconomically.

A new pilot program is underway in a section of Yonkers known for a shortage of internet and technology that does just that — gives people Chromebooks, provides training on how to use them and supplies free internet for a year.

"We can keep filling bags with food," said Margaret Kaufer, president of the STEM Alliance, but this kind of effort allows people to rise economically so they don't need the handout. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.



And it goes beyond giving people more tools to stay connected.

"What we're trying to put together is real data," said Bob Cacace, the city's Commissioner of Information Technology. Data on how much people use the internet will help show the state and county this kind of model could be a good use of funds from the federal infrastructure bill and American Rescue Plan, Cacace said.

And it goes beyond giving people more tools to stay connected.

"What we're trying to put together is real data," said Bob Cacace, the city's Commissioner of Information Technology. Data on how much people use the internet will help show the state and county this kind of model could be a good

use of funds from the federal infrastructure bill and American Rescue Plan, Cacace said.



## Free laptops aid the cause

For 57-year-old Bill Soto, the Y-zone project means he now has his own computer. When his laptop broke six months ago he borrowed his home attendant's Chromebook. Then he saw Y-Zone representatives handing out flyers in the community room of his Getty Square apartment building.

In need of his own computer, it peaked Soto's interest and he signed up. He took the 15-hour course on using the Chromebook and upon completion, he and the other

participants were able to keep them.

"It definitely opened my eyes," Soto said.

He was getting used to the Chromebook he was borrowing, but the training taught him some new skills. In class, they learned how to use Zoom for group video calls, helpful for virtual doctor visits, he said. They also learned how to navigate email and save and store photos.

Soto's building, an affordable housing community, has disabled and senior tenants. By having internet and a computer, their quality of life increases, Soto said.

He uses his new technology to conduct research, talk to family and friends and watch movies. And as someone who uses a wheelchair, he uses the internet to find wheelchair accessible events and accommodations.

"It's compact to carry, easy to manage," Soto said of the Chromebook.

Soto has never seen a program that provides internet, devices and training. Kaufer believes it's the first pilot to provide internet in people's homes in Westchester. Other programs have provided access near schools and libraries, she said.

He hopes that when the year of free internet is up in October the program will be able to continue. Y-Zone's partner organizations are still looking at how to fund the program after the free internet is scheduled to expire at the end of September.

**The goal: 500 users up and running**

# lohud.

To participate in the Y-zone, residents must live in the area from Glenn Park to Park Hill Avenue and from downtown Yonkers to Nodine Hill, an area that has seen less internet adoption and device ownership because of affordability issues and lack of training, Kaufer said.

"Over 50,000 people in Westchester County can not afford internet and more than 30,000 do not own computers," said Kaufer.

To connect the users to the internet, CBRS (Citizens Broadband Radio Service)

towers were installed in two locations: behind city hall and at the Dayspring campus in the

Nodine Hill neighborhood. The locations were ideal, Kaufer said, because they are elevated. Each tower has about a mile radius.



The towers communicate directly with receivers given to participating households. Without a receiver, you can't log onto the service.

The program's coordinators reach people by setting up tables in public and through apartment complexes that have residents who could benefit from it.

Some people have their own devices and just need internet through the program.

The goal is to get 500 households internet access, said Lucien. There are also 200

Chromebooks available for people who need devices, which participants get after going through the 15-hour class.

The Westchester County Association secured funding for the Y-zone through a National Science Foundation Grant distributed by US Ignite, a national nonprofit dedicated to improving communities' technology and communications networks.

The WCA partnered with several other groups to distribute the program: The STEM Alliance, Fordham University, Yonkers Partners in Education, Westhab and the city.

"Digital connectivity and the digital divide are one of the preeminent issues that have to be dealt with if we want to grow the economy in the region," said WCA President and CEO Michael Romita.

# lohud.

It doesn't have to be a choice between helping people in need and helping the economy, Romita said. Particularly in this case, the more people that participate in the economy, the better for the regional business sector.

To find out how well the program works and what issues arise, Fordham University is leading a survey of its participants. With the help of YPIE students (who are also helping get people signed up), Jan Bolgatz, an associate Education professor at Fordham, is leading the research effort for the project.



The surveys will collect information on how well the service works and why people decided to sign up, Bolgatz said.

But the surveys will also provide insight into what barriers people in the area face in getting connected to the internet.

"Maybe they don't know how to use it. Maybe they do know how to use it, but they can't afford it," Romita said. And there isn't a

one size fits all solution to digital equity, he added — "This was the most cost efficient technical solution for this neighborhood in Yonkers, but we had to combine that with reaching out to the community to get them to sign into this and then all the other supports that we're providing as well."