



CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

ACTNow: Access, Connectivity, Tools

Pilot Project Case Study

Contents

Project Summary	3
Challenge and Solution	5
Focus Areas Supported	5
Goals, Approach and Results	6
Lessons Learned	11
Looking Ahead	15

LOCATION

Columbus, MS

PROJECT COSTS

\$279,752

Spend to Date

\$189,371

TVA Connected Communities

\$90,381

Proposed Match

FOCUS AREAS



Broadband and Digital Literacy

Project Summary

To address the digital divide, the Columbus Housing Authority (CHA) and Columbus Light & Water (CLW) provided access to digital literacy programming, connectivity to internet service and the tools needed for residents to engage in the digital space successfully.

TOPICS

- ✓ Digital Literacy
- ✓ Connectivity and Connected Devices

TECHNOLOGY

- ✓ Chromebooks
- ✓ Mobile Hotspots

KEY PARTNERS

- Affordable Housing Authority
- University Partner
- Community Advocacy Groups
- Public Housing Support Services Program
- Local Power Company
- Project Advisor





“ Dr. Verdell and I both grew up in Public Housing, and it brings us immense delight to serve the community through this pilot project.

DEBRA TAYLOR | executive director, CHA

Challenge and Solution



Challenge

The internet and devices connected to the internet are more important in personal lives than ever before, with access to many critically important functions like schooling, telemedicine, banking and telecommuting now available online. At the same time, communities of color are disproportionately affected by a digital divide that prevents many from using a computer to access these and other critical online services and online information sources.



Solution

To address the digital divide, the Columbus Housing Authority (CHA) and Columbus Light & Water (CLW) provided access to digital literacy, connectivity to internet service and the tools needed for residents to engage in the digital space successfully.

Focus Areas Supported



Broadband and Digital Literacy

Mobile hotspots enable various residents to connect to the internet with the community-supplied laptops, and digital literacy classes are available for varying digital skill levels — residents learn basic computing skills like word processing and keyboarding, as well as internet skills like internet browsing, emailing, privacy and security. By enhancing the digital literacy of underserved populations, particularly the elderly, the classes help empower residents with the skills and tools they need to benefit from the modern digital landscape.

Goals, Approach and Results

Project Goals

This pilot project sought to provide mentoring and programming for students aimed at increasing awareness and knowledge of digital literacy and explaining the role of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in computing. By providing devices, education and services, ACTNow enables residents to be more independent and self-sufficient. Throughout the project, the ACTNow program serves as a resource for affordable internet so residents can continue to apply their newly developed digital skills in their daily lives.

With the goal of providing necessary digital literacy and inclusion, the objectives for this project were:

- Provide residents with digital equity and literacy
- Enhance the use of technology to enrich the quality of life of the residents
- Increase self-sufficiency among affordable housing residents
- Provide in-home digital devices and access to 50% of all CHA households



PILOT PROJECT GOAL

Provide access to digital literacy, connectivity to internet service and tools needed to successfully engage in the digital space.

Goals, Approach and Results

Project Approach

Project team members from CLW, CHA and Resident Council of Friendly City held a kickoff meeting to discuss the needs of their target audience and outline the high-level structure of the program. With many years of professional experience and a wealth of community-based knowledge, the project team was uniquely positioned to drive a successful pilot project for increasing access to the internet.

These initial plans included objectives for class content, considerations and accommodations for the needs of different students and what the team ultimately wanted students to walk away with upon course completion. This planning discussion resulted in the decision to provide mobile hotspots that enable residents to connect to the internet along with community-supplied laptops, allowing for a level of connectivity these residents would not have otherwise. In support of this goal, CHA provided Chromebooks and mobile hotspots for the community to use, providing access to critical resources and remote opportunities.

Additionally, the project team knew that digital literacy was equally important to equip residents with the skills to utilize devices. Digital literacy classes would be made available for varying digital skill levels — residents will learn basic computing skills like word processing and keyboarding, as well as internet skills like internet browsing, emailing, privacy and security. By providing devices, education and services, the ACTNow program offered a holistic approach for residents to be more independent and self-sufficient.



Key community engagement activities that drove program support

- Held a kickoff mainly for affordable housing residents
- Distributed a newsletter to community members
- Utilized local channel networks such as the Community Lighting and Water Department
- Made phone calls to potential influencers
- Posted social media content
- Publicized through community centers

Goals, Approach and Results

Project Approach (CONTINUED)

After completing the plan for the project outline, the project team partnered with personnel from the Mississippi State University chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) to provide students with additional technical support and hands-on training.

The first class was held at the CHA site, a location known to provide services and programs for underserved community members. With prior experience creating and implementing STEM outreach programs with CHA, the project team launched a communications campaign to inform the community about the new opportunity and proceeded to serve as instructors for this class with great success.

While the project team had originally planned to only hold classes at a single location, the community interest and student enrollment were overwhelming, and it quickly became clear that additional sessions and locations were a necessity.

The stakeholder team utilized their own influence and community networks to identify instructors who were able to support additional sessions across Columbus, many of which administered classes within their organizations to ensure locations were accessible for prospective students. With a focus on supporting and educating underserved residents, selecting locations that required minimal effort and travel time was critical to the program's success.



ACTNow volunteer instructors included:

- The director, assistant director and lead teacher of the adult basic education and GED program at East Mississippi Community College
- Multiple volunteers from the Stephen Chapel Church community helped support class facilitation
- A staff member and volunteers from Gateway Commons, an elderly housing complex, who had experience teaching computer science and digital literacy
- Cadence Bank produced a financial literacy session about online banking and budgeting
- Columbus Light & Water general manager and several staff
- Residency Office of Self-Sufficiency (ROSS) Program Service Coordinator

Goals, Approach and Results

Project Approach (CONTINUED)

The additional instructors and their shared expertise enabled the ACTNow program to expand its scope to include topical content such as financial literacy, digital presentation development and more advanced digital skills.

With as many as four classes running consecutively at different locations to support different audiences, the ACTNow initiative continues to provide connectivity and digital literacy education for a diverse population across the city.

Key Partners

- **Columbus Light and Water (CLW)**
 - **Dr. Angela Verdell**, general manager
- **Columbus Housing Authority (CHA)**
 - **Debra Taylor**, executive director
- **Mississippi State University Chapter of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE)**
 - **Kaitlyn Jackson**, president of NSBE, engineering major
- **Resident Council of Friendly City**
 - **Jacklyn Weir**, ROSS program service coordinator
- **Tennessee Valley Authority**
 - **Lisa Akins**, senior program manager
 - **Georgia Caruthers**, senior project lead

“ This program is helping build confidence with the participants, as well. We know that one of our students who participated did not have her high school equivalency when she signed up, and now she’s working on getting that.

JACKLYN WEIR | resident service coordinator, Resident Council of Friendly City

Goals, Approach and Results

Project Results

Through ACTNow, various resident groups gained access to the internet as well as the necessary skills to help close the digital divide. ACTNow helped seniors engage in telemedicine, students access online learning tools and working adults readily access online workforce development and employment opportunities.

Students received their Chromebooks and now have access to devices at home, providing them a way to connect with their families and friends and minimizing isolation. The ACTNow program has tangibly improved residents' quality of life, independence and access to critical resources.



An additional outcome of this project took shape as CLW championed a Senior Citizens Advisory Council. This newly formed advisory group pulls together at least 20 senior citizens from across the city and has quarterly meetings to discuss opportunities to engage the elderly population and identify resources the community can provide to support senior citizens.



Increased confidence of residents unfamiliar with the internet

345

Chromebooks

have been distributed to in-need community members

50

Wi-Fi hotspots

have been provided to enable at-home connectivity

169

new email accounts

for residents

Lessons Learned

1

Elect a Project Coordinator

Having a project coordinator dedicated to organizing and addressing the ongoing needs of the project helps streamline the program and class management for all involved, ensuring the project yields the best results possible. For instance, the project team initially expected to facilitate classes themselves in addition to managing the program, but the high demand for additional sessions required them to quickly expand their group of instructors and identify volunteers to support the growing program. In this instance, a project coordinator would take responsibility for identifying additional instructors, coordinating class location details, preparing technology and facilitating training for instructors.

2

Conduct Pre-Engagement Assessments

During initial courses, the project team found that the length and topics of classes evolved throughout the duration of the course based on what the audience needed and wanted to learn. One group wanted to learn more in-depth techniques and skills, leading to the instructor expanding the course time from eight to twelve hours. As a result, the project team began conducting pre-engagement assessments before each cohort began to identify areas of opportunities and skills that would be most relevant to that audience.

Lessons Learned

3

Design a Curriculum for Each Literacy Level

The project team originally expected a higher demand from young people but soon found that the elderly were much more interested, and their needs differed from younger generations. Designing a separate curriculum for beginner, intermediate and advanced students respectively ensures instructors have the tools they need to adapt content on short notice and provide a meaningful, engaging experience for all students.

“ Some of those classes wanted more information because they were more advanced. Some classes we needed to slow down to make sure they got the basics because that was their level of capacity. We had to tailor the class according to what the need was, and we didn’t think about that during planning because we had an idea of what we wanted to teach. Being flexible with what you teach, how you teach or the amount of material that you want to cover, and let your group decide.

DR. ANGELA VERDELL | general manager, CLW

4

Identify Instructors Early

Producing ongoing class schedules can be a challenge to maintain, especially when the success of the project takes off and more people want to attend classes. Having a full roster of potential instructors can help project teams quickly identify qualified individuals to teach additional sessions or serve as support staff for existing sessions. The project team found that having four volunteers was optimal for a class size of twelve or more, as many students required one-on-one assistance. If funding allows, offering compensation can help encourage additional participants. The project team found that stipends were available for instructors toward the end of the project and felt that having an allotment for personnel early on would have helped streamline the recruitment process.

Lessons Learned

5

Train and Set Expectations with Instructors

Instructors may come from many disciplines and backgrounds, so setting expectations and ensuring a full understanding of the technology and programmatic needs are critical to maintaining the quality of sessions. Having a training session ensures alignment and literacy with the technology available for classes and participants. Initial training also allows instructors to share feedback that may be critical for smooth project execution.

6

Make Classes Accessible to Residents

Initially, the project team planned to hold one class at a single location but quickly found demand for additional classes at locations across the community. The project team learned it helps to be flexible on class time and offer times that work for target populations, like adding classes in the evening for those who work during the day. Transportation can be a barrier for some populations, so the project team held classes at various locations in underserved areas to ensure accessibility for those residents. Childcare should also be offered to enable parents to attend without additional burden.

7

Use Community Resources for Recruitment and Coordination.

Recruiting class participants from historically underrepresented populations is most effective through word-of-mouth and trusted community organizations. The project team was comprised of community influencers with ample experience launching and maintaining initiatives that serve residents, so they were able to quickly gain support and visibility for the ACTNow program. Identifying and engaging community influencers in the early phases of project planning can help gain their buy-in and encourage them to champion the initiative in their respective networks.

POTENTIAL COMMUNITY INFLUENCERS TO CONSIDER

- Religious organizations and leaders
- Doctors and healthcare professionals
- Business owners
- Daycare providers
- Community support organizations
- Local universities and trade schools

Lessons Learned

8

Remain Flexible and Adaptable with Technology

Effective digital literacy programming is reliant on the technology working as seamlessly as possible. The project team suggests being intimately familiar with the technology being used and updating Chromebooks before the classes. The team also found that laptops with a smaller screen do not work for the older population, and computers requiring an internet connection to access software may cause challenges due to occasional connectivity issues. Inspect all technology prior to the first class to ensure confusion is minimized. Consider developing a troubleshooting guide for common tech issues; if technical difficulties arise during class, instructors can use it as an opportunity to educate students on how to resolve their own tech issues.

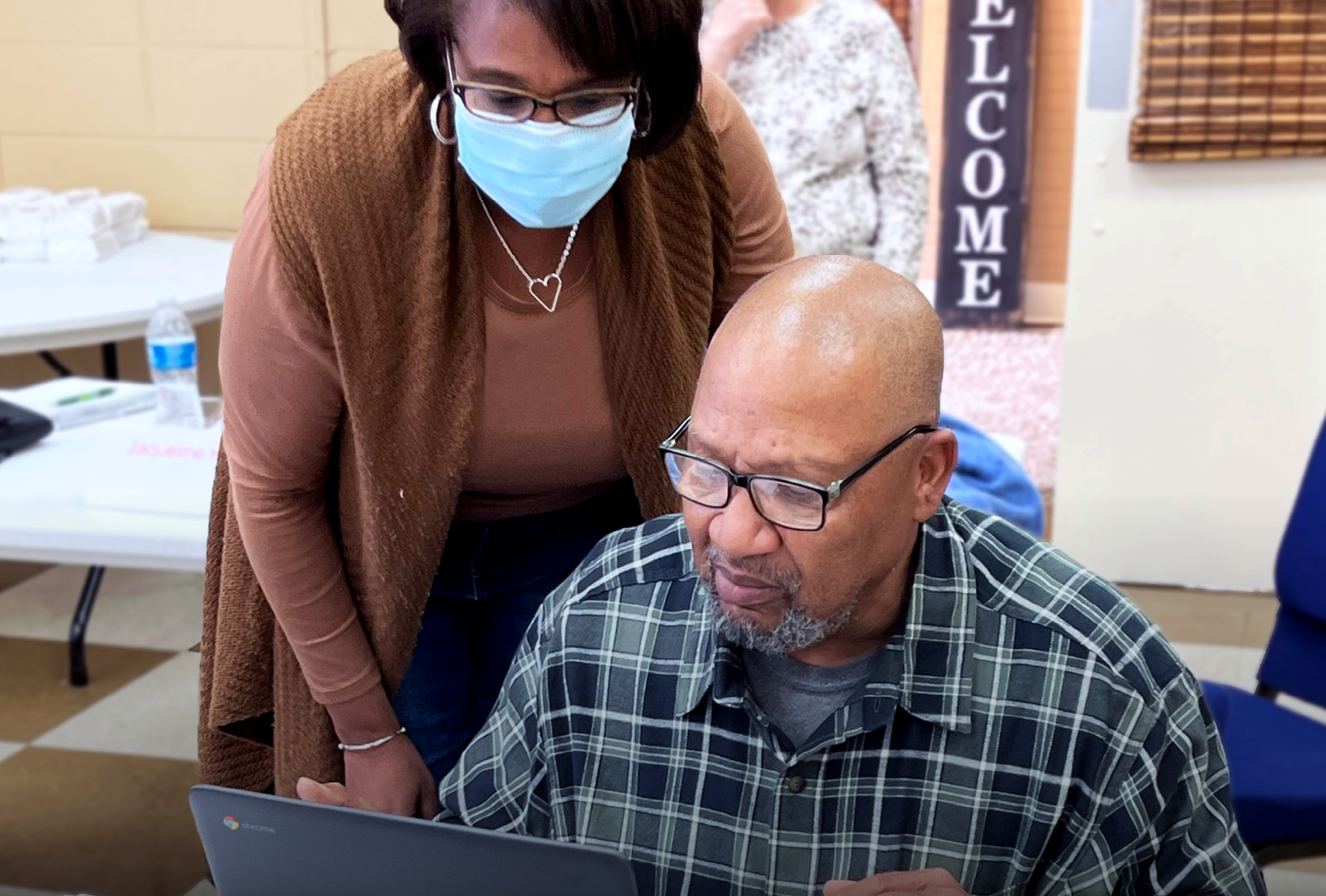
9

Embrace the Community Feeling

For many elderly community members, opportunities to connect with others are few and far between. The ACTNow program provided these residents with a space to regularly socialize with their peers, which resulted in a strong sense of camaraderie and connection among participants. Additionally, the project team found that using more advanced students as mentors to help coach less knowledgeable students provides a sense of responsibility, investment and pride.

“ The unity was sometimes like a family reunion. Some of them were meeting new friends or someone they hadn’t seen in a while. That’s not something tangible, but it’s something that really makes a difference because it gave them somewhere to go, and it makes them feel as if they accomplished something.

JACKLYN WEIR | ROSS program service coordinator, Friendly City Resident Council



Looking Ahead

As a result of the ACTNow pilot project, the newly formed Senior Citizens Advisory Council will continue to explore ways to engage Columbus's elderly community through additional programming, targeted resources and other opportunities for meaningful connection.

“ Seniors need things to do too, and this project just opened up another avenue for us to put our thinking caps on and figure out what more can we do. So, for Columbus Light and Water, we've taken the initiative to start a Senior Citizens Advisory Council where seniors can come together. Some of those meetings are going to be on Zoom, because now they have what they need to engage and share with us what's missing or things we're not getting right from a senior citizen's perspective. We wouldn't have thought about that had we not been a part of this program.

DR. ANGELA VERDELL | general manager, CLW

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

ACTNow: Access, Connectivity, Tools

Pilot Project Case Study