indynet

FROM ACCESS TO LITERACY:

LESSONS FROM ONE CITY'S QUEST TO HELP ADDRESS THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

INTRODUCTION

Not having reliable internet access is not an option for families today. From accessing education to applying for jobs and receiving healthcare, internet connectivity is a must. The COVID-19 pandemic substantially increased our dependence on the internet, and also illuminated gaps in internet access and digital literacy across the U.S. – particularly for children and adults in low-income urban neighborhoods.

In response to such gaps, Indianapolis took an innovative approach to addressing the digital divide for thousands of K-12 students who lacked high-speed internet at home. The philanthropic, corporate and nonprofit communities partnered with the City of Indianapolis to launch the Indianapolis eLearning Fund, which secured more than $13 million in philanthropy and federal pandemic relief funds to provide connectivity and devices to Marion County K-12 students without high-speed internet or computers at home. Recognizing that subsidized hotspots were a short-term solution, community partners also worked together to launch a pilot network serving families in targeted geographies to provide free, high-speed internet for eLearning purposes at both the K-12 and college levels. In tandem, leaders of Indianapolis' pilot worked to engage the community so that qualifying residents could take advantage of the free internet they were offering.

This pilot reinforced two realities. First, sizeable inequities exist when it comes to high-speed, at-home internet. While there is significant national momentum underway to address these inequities, the second reality remains: as more people who previously lacked reliable internet access are now able to obtain it, many do not understand how to use the available tools or even how to use the internet itself.

This report includes the lessons learned from the pilot – and the related community engagement – to provide guidance to other communities seeking to close the digital divide and increase digital literacy. What follows seeks to inform how we approach what must become a reality as we emerge from the pandemic: a heightened focus on digital literacy to reduce the inequities in accessing the internet.

THE DAWN OF INDYNET

In March 2020, when the pandemic shut down the world and closed America's K-12 schools, roughly 38,000 Indianapolis students were left without sufficient high-speed, at-home internet. For those without adequate home internet, learning was sporadic. It took place in parking lots, via public Wi-Fi and through unstable mobile hotspot connections. For too many students, a lack of reliable home internet made it impossible to access their education consistently.

> *38,000 Indianapolis students were left without sufficient high-speed, at-home internet.*

To address this, local foundations, corporations, government leaders and technology organizations came together to launch the Indianapolis eLearning Fund in April 2020. The fund sought to address Indianapolis' digital divide so that all students could access online education–both during the height of the pandemic and in the future.

At the start of the 2020-21 school year, the eLearning Fund provided T-Mobile hotspots as a short-term solution to address students' lack of eLearning connectivity. Simultaneously, in April 2021, the Fund launched the Marion County Dedicated eLearning Network Pilot, also referred to as indynet. Two Indianapolis foundations – the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation and Lilly Endowment Inc. – and the City of Indianapolis (via CARES Act funding) collectively provided $1.8 million to launch the pilot.

Residents who lived within the radius of the seven pilot sites – which included six K-12 schools and one community college – qualified for indynet. Students could use the network only for eLearning purposes on school-issued devices, and personal device use was prohibited. To provide oversight of the pilot, the Indianapolis eLearning Fund established a Community Advisory Board consisting of technology and financial leaders from schools, libraries and other government institutions; representatives from local nonprofits

INDYNET REVEALS NEED FOR LOW-TO-NO-COST ACCESS AND DIGITAL LITERACY

The indynet pilot helped make affordable internet accessible to families across Indianapolis. Prior to the pilot, the monthly cost to schools for a wireless hotspot for students from low-income households ranged from $20-30 per user. Moreover, schools did not have funding to cover the full extent of the need for their low-income student populations. Since the start of the pilot, internet service providers have lowered their prices, and one carrier – T-Mobile – launched a program to provide free mobile hotspots to qualifying students across the country, including in Indianapolis.

In addition, in May 2022, President Joe Biden's administration negotiated an agreement with nearly 20 internet providers to offer discounted rates for wired at-home internet to income-qualifying families. The pledged rates of $30 per month can be offset by federal subsidies from the $1 trillion infrastructure package that passed in 2021. This program effectively makes access to wired home internet free of charge for families who qualify for other federal subsidies or meet federal poverty thresholds.

During the six months of their engagement work, The Mind Trust and United Way signed up 280 interested participants in the targeted geographic pilot. This was despite headwinds, such as the difficulty of engaging residents during the winter months following the rollout, and competition from a flurry of other internet access solutions, including hotspots that were provided to every student in Indiana through philanthropic support and federal grant funding secured by the Indianapolis eLearning Fund that landed ahead of the pilot rollout.

However, one perhaps unexpected finding of the pilot and related eLearning Fund hotspot deployment effort was the need to further educate people how to use the technology in a way that is approachable and relevant. For example, some eligible students chose to use mobile phones to complete their homework instead of connecting laptops to the internet via hotspots, despite difficulties completing assignments like essays when using a small keypad. Other students took hotspots home but never activated them. Pilot stakeholders attributed some of these choices to a lack of understanding about how to connect to the internet using free connectivity options.

As a May 2022 report by the digital advocacy group EveryoneOn put it, "The digital divide is not primarily a technological problem, but instead a social problem.... The social nature of the digital divide means people-driven solutions have to be the main part of the equation, and this entails having people in the community, i.e., boots on the ground to address the problem."

This widespread interest in accessing the technology makes it clear that states, including Indiana, must invest in urban communities when allocating federal and other funding to address the digital divide. The underlying point is also clear: helping people understand the technology itself should be the focus when expanding internet access. indynet's work to engage Indianapolis residents in free, at-home internet solutions offers critical lessons to inform the path forward.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING MORE DIGITALLY INFORMED COMMUNITIES

Establish Trust Within the Community

When The Mind Trust and United Way set out to inform Indianapolis residents about indynet, they knew it would be key to leverage trusted relationships both groups had already established. To that end, they mobilized The Mind Trust's team of Neighborhood Education Advocates, a diverse group of leaders, activists and educators who resemble the families residing in indynet coverage areas. The NEAs worked to build upon existing relationships within their communities to promote awareness and interest in the pilot. This included door-to-door canvassing efforts to sign up interested residents on the spot.

Developing these relationships was key – especially since the service provider for indynet was a little-known brand compared to large internet companies, which made some residents skeptical. As The Mind Trust and United Way wrote in a report about the program:

> *"To succeed in launching a new program, it is key for authentic trust to be developed in the community. **Many of these under-resourced neighborhoods targeted by the indynet effort have been historically taken advantage of** and have good reason to distrust government solutions. Some families expressed their discomfort in signing up because they thought it was too good to be true, or they assumed the program was a scam because they did not recognize the indynet brand yet...**Our most reliable strategy to secure interest was through community outreach and NEA strategies**. A direct connection was key to gain trust and explain the program clearly."*

The NEA strategy mirrors a recommended best practice nationally. The EveryoneOn report, which is based on focus groups with residents from groups who most suffer from the digital divide, as well as organizations seeking to address the gap, highlights the concept of "digital navigators." These are community residents trained to help their neighbors navigate digital resources, such as discounted internet plans and free computers. Many communities have piloted these efforts, and digital navigators have played a key role in helping families access new federal subsidies for home internet.

Along with trusted messengers, reaching people in familiar places is critical. Data show that people have greater trust in community institutions such as libraries and local nonprofits than they do government and internet service providers. Because of this, it is key to build relationships with local organizations that can serve as hubs to connect with residents around digital literacy efforts.

> *"As an educator and NEA, I see a great need for this program. During the height of the pandemic and virtual learning, **there were many students in my class and at my school who were unable to join class reliably** due to issues with connectivity. I think the strategy of promoting the pilot to libraries, schools and community centers was a good one."*
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> - JaVaughn H.

With indynet, The Mind Trust and United Way conducted outreach to more than 150 Black and Latino churches, businesses and community organizations, and they equipped interested entities with flyers, social media toolkits and talking points to inform residents interested in the program. Given the number of residents who use the library as a place to access the internet, they also partnered with the Indianapolis Public Library to conduct tabling events to generate sign-ups. Schools were also key partners in the effort and helped reach students and families directly about indynet as a resource for home internet to support eLearning needs.

Address Language Barriers Head-On

In developing their outreach efforts, The Mind Trust and United Way were intentional about ensuring Spanish speakers could access the information they shared. They engaged bilingual NEAs so that language would not be a barrier to enrollment. They also ensured the indynet website and other resources were translated into Spanish, given the significance of Indianapolis' Spanish-speaking community. However, the company responsible for installing indynet technology had few bilingual installers, which made it difficult to get some residents the internet access they needed.

As the two organizations wrote in a summary report of their engagement efforts, "Bilingual communications were absolutely necessary in the neighborhoods we

targeted, and because our engagement teams were able to enroll customers in Spanish, there was an expectation that program installers and service technicians would also be Spanish-speaking."

In some cases, The Mind Trust and United Way had to address these gaps by sending bilingual NEAs to the installations to help translate, which could be inefficient. What's more, when the installers could not communicate with residents, it eroded the credibility The Mind Trust and United Way worked hard to cultivate through their NEA-driven approach.

Language gaps also can create barriers to digital literacy and uptake in other areas such as healthcare. For example, research by the National Institutes of Health "All of Us" Research Program found Spanish-speaking Americans are skeptical of potentially beneficial healthcare tech devices such as fitness trackers. This is in part because the name "tracker" – absent the colloquial context a native English speaker has – implies the devices may track a user's physical location, which raises suspicion and can create mistrust.

In any effort to scale digital literacy efforts across Indianapolis and in other communities, it is key to ensure digital navigators and others supporting the efforts can connect in the diverse prominent languages spoken in the city, beyond just Spanish.

Use Plain Language that Resonates

The Mind Trust and United Way quickly discovered the power of clear, straightforward language when sharing the benefits of indynet. "We learned directly from families to make our messaging, collateral and website as simple and understandable as possible," The Mind Trust and United Way wrote in their summary report. "While we were eager to communicate every benefit of the program and how it surpassed the quality of other low-cost carriers, that did not resonate with our target audience."

The audiences The Mind Trust and United Way were seeking to reach through their engagement efforts have limited time to digest dense, technical information about technology solutions that feels irrelevant to their practical use of the product. Recognizing this, the organizations' community engagement and marketing leaders distilled 3½ pages of details about the pilot into concise marketing collateral centered around the use of plainspoken language.

Peter Hanscom, Chief Marketing, Communications and Community Relations Officer at United Way, emphasized that for community-facing messaging on a complex issue, it's critical to sell the "destination," rather than the "vehicle." In other words, people don't care how the technology will be delivered; rather, they are interested in what impact it will have on their lives. The indynet website, flyers and one-pagers were designed with this framework in mind. The website, for example, featured a prominent sign-up button and easily accessible maps of the service areas so potential users can quickly determine their eligibility.

Put Community Engagement at the Heart of Tech Solutions

When thinking through solutions to provide digital access and literacy, it is critical to place the end user (e.g., residents who qualify for free high-speed internet services) at the heart of any strategy. Shannon Williams, The Mind Trust's Executive Vice President, shared this advice:

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*"Make **community engagement** an integral part of your strategy from the beginning, rather than an afterthought."*

From a technical standpoint, if something new is being built, it should be developed based on how the consumer will use it. And, when it comes to delivering digital literacy, it is critical to share information in a way that meets audiences where they are.

The EveryoneOn report advises setting up a "one-stop shop" where people can receive all the technical support, enrollment assistance and skills training they need – ideally at a venue where residents are comfortable and familiar, such as a library or community center. By requiring multiple steps in different locations, people are more likely to disengage in the process.

The Mind Trust and United Way identified long sign-up processes as a barrier to enrolling families in the indynet pilot. "For those who had school-issued devices, many families complained that the process had too many steps. Families became disinterested or unavailable when scheduling dates to install their devices in their homes." What's more, when NEAs made connections

with families and got them interested, it was easy to lose them in the process when handing them over to the company responsible for installing the connection. A more streamlined process with one key contact would have alleviated that challenge. And, making the installation process simpler – more akin to accessing a hotspot or using a code to unlock Wi-Fi – also would have increased use, as many families didn't like the idea of scheduling an appointment to have a technician set up another modem in their home.

In an era in which work, learning and consumption of other content are integrated and, in some cases, interchangeable, community engagement experts involved with indynet also underscored the challenges of prohibiting personal devices from being used by the network. This prohibition proved to be a challenge in selling the indynet offering. Given families' pressing needs to use the internet for other services, such as finding employment and accessing telehealth, it limited the utility of the network.

Finally, it's critical to plan a digital engagement strategy based on the environment where digital access and literacy efforts take place. As one example of this, Indianapolis – like many cities – has a robust school choice landscape, and as a result, students may attend a school that is not necessarily near where they live. This reality challenged the model of the pilot, which was based upon schools handing out devices to students so they could be used within the geographic boundaries of the school building. Those boundaries put the network out of reach for students who commuted to their schools from several miles away.

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*Continue the work of independent Neighborhood Education Advocates as digital navigators who vet low-cost service options, and as neutral arbiters, **connect residents to those options**.*

THE PATH FORWARD

indynet's Community Advisory Board decided to sunset the pilot in May 2022. Expanded access to free high-speed internet drove this decision, including internet service provider initiatives such as T-Mobile's Project 10 Million (which several Indianapolis schools are taking advantage of) and the Biden administration's efforts to expand high-speed, wired home access. "The combination of these two new initiatives offering free connectivity for low-income households was a game-changer," said Claire Fiddian-Green, President & CEO of the Richard M. Fairbanks Foundation, which was the largest funder of indynet. "These two options did not exist when the pilot launched."

With internet access increasing in availability in urban areas like Indianapolis, attention has now turned to the critical need to sustain community engagement efforts around digital literacy. The focus now is on ensuring families have the necessary technical support, understanding of internet options, and digital literacy skills. One model for continuing this, which was proposed by The Mind Trust and United Way, would be to continue the work of independent NEAs as digital navigators who could vet low-cost service options and, as neutral arbiters, connect residents to those options, along with other digital literacy resources, such as in-person and online courses.

"Even with expanded access, digital literacy is still a large problem in our community," The Mind Trust and United Way wrote in their summary report. "To unlock the full potential of these online tools, families need to know how to appropriately use them and the ways expanded technology can improve their lives." Those looking to expand digital access and engagement should bear this in mind and follow the lessons that communities such as Indianapolis have learned by taking on an ambitious project to engage residents in digital tools.

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Free and reliable high-speed internet to keep every student connected at home