Digital Divide Case Study: Hungry for Internet

Having Internet access is like having food. Everyone needs and deserves it, even if they cannot afford it. Thanks to nonprofit organizations like Minnesota's Neighbors Inc., people living below the poverty line are getting both.

Neighbors is a nonprofit providing emergency and supportive assistance services to low-income community members in northern Dakota County. They understand that hunger is often the presenting issue, but have learned that there is always something behind hunger and that technology can help. Organizations like Neighbors can distribute bread all day, but if the underlying issues are not addressed, the challenges that bring people to social service agencies will continue.

According to Rick Birmingham, Neighbors' director of development, "If we can have a positive impact on digital literacy, we can have a positive impact on poverty."

Today, this solution is an obvious one, but that was not always the case. When Rick left MAP for Nonprofits, a tech consulting nonprofit, to join Neighbors in 2012, he made some basic online changes. He updated the organization's website and added videos of clients telling their stories to try to make the food bank more inviting. He was surprised to learn, however, that few people were using either tool so these technology advancements weren't the answer. After all, if you don't have access to the Internet, or understand how to use it, the best website or an insightful video will have little impact.

What will have an impact is the work Neighbors is doing today to help their constituents get access to healthcare, housing, education and jobs.

For example, the digital divide was keeping Minnesota's poor from having equal **access to healthcare**. Many of Neighbor's clients were compelled to apply for MNSure, Minnesota's version of Obamacare, which was online. The people Neighbors serves were not, so in some cases, they had become eligible for additional assistance, but weren't able to take advantage of it because they weren't registered online. Neighbors worked with Dakota County and three local nonprofits to provide a computer and Internet access to offer one-to-one access to medical information for people living below the poverty line. Additionally, the program put a trained Dakota County social worker available to clients on site at the food shelves with a computer and Internet access to help clients sign up.

During the first year of the program in 2014, Neighbors screened 14,808 clients. With access to the Internet, and Dakota County workers in a location where the clients were comfortable, made a significant difference. During the first 6 months, 17.3% of the clients were uninsured and during the last 6 months only 5.6% were uninsured, eventually reaching 4.4% in the final month.

In addition to assisting Dakota County families with healthcare access, Neighbors, Inc. serves an area covered by three school districts. Unfortunately many of the children in the area do not have reliable access to the Internet or computers at home. These families may have a cell phone with Internet access, but they do not have the kind of **access to technology students need** to be successful in school and our modern economy.

That is why Rick will be the first to tell you that work still needs to be done, and that includes bundling computers, affordable Internet and training. It also requires bandwidth. As Neighbors' digital literacy program continues to evolve, it will become the 16th mission-critical program they offer. "I know there are programs that give the poorest residents in our communities some access, but that is simply not enough. I have a problem with an industry that thinks that those living below the poverty line deserve less bandwidth than their peers simply because they cannot afford to pay for it. It is unacceptable to think poor people would or should use it any differently than those that can afford to pay for the services needed to advance in life and work."

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Wish List: Survey Resource

As a part of the 2015 Digital Adoption Survey conducted by NTEN and Mobile Citizen, nonprofit were asked to suggest ways industry partners could support them in closing the digital divide. In addition to bundling computers, affordable Internet and training as noted here, Rick Birmingham added survey resource to his wish list. Neighbors continuously strives to understand their constituents in order to determine how their programs can be most effective. Ideally surveying would be done online, but as long as a digital divide exists, Neighbors will not do anything online that they don't also do on paper.