

North Carolina



Fair Share CDC

'Creating the world we want, one Leader at a time!'

Digital Divide Case Study: Giving the Disconnected and Disenfranchised a Voice

North Carolina (NC) Fair Share CDC is a statewide, multi-issue membership, advocacy and leadership development organization. They combine leadership identification and cultivation, community organizing and interdependent community development to address current issues and systemic problems in North Carolina. They provide a vehicle for change.

Before change can happen, communication must. And much of NC Fair Share CDC's communication happens because of technology, specifically the Internet. The organization relies heavily on Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology which runs the large mobile phone banks that connects them with the community and requires a significant amount of digital bandwidth.

The real work, however, happens when staff leave the office and connect with constituents -- poor disenfranchised African Americans who have voices that are not being heard because of the digital divide. They lack the skills and the tools needed to contribute to change.

"Our goal is to get more candidates in the pipeline and more people into the online voter database," said Akiba Byrd, NC Fair Share CDC's Executive Director. "We win when we get the disengaged to participate. Getting them access to all of the resources the Internet provides, both for information and for leadership development, is part of the solution."

Like many organizations trying to cross a digital divide that keeps them from achieving their mission, NC Fair Share CDC needs to reach audiences on both ends of the age spectrum, each with their own unique challenges.

Younger audiences are the most disenfranchised. For the young poor, NC Fair Share CDC leverages technology to provide training to help them develop leadership skills and create independence, planting the seeds for future success. Younger audiences are often more familiar with technology. The Internet access youth have is through school or friends, and is unfortunately not always consistent. The gap seems to be bigger in rural areas and ethnic communities.

The *disenfranchised 55+ crowd*, however, is most vulnerable. For this audience, the ability to get them immediately registered in the Voter Access Network (VAN), which serves as the organization's CRM, is key. The form is online, paperless and effortless. Without access to the Internet, and the training NC Fair Share CDC provides, this would not be possible, nor would all of the other benefits Internet access enables. "If we can help this important audience set up and understand how to use the Internet, we have a positive impact on their retirement security, healthcare decisions, show how to access banking and other accounts online, train on social media for information and to connect with family, and follow and engage with elected officials and government agencies," Akiba said. "They no longer have to sit and wait for the mail. When they are up to speed with technology, anything is possible."

3509 Haworth Dr., Suite 303, Raleigh, NC 27609
919.786.7474 ~ www.ncfairsharecdc.org

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With a presidential election looming, and local elections happening in the interim, the need to give NC Fair Share CDC's constituents a voice continues. They are part of a coalition of 40 nonprofits with the potential to reach more than 750,000 members in the North Carolina network in 100 counties. Additionally the organization engages in special campaigns, such as retirement security, with more than 30 organizations in 17 states.

Wish List: Affordable Internet

As a part of the 2015 Digital Adoption Survey conducted by NTEN and Mobile Citizen, nonprofits were asked to suggest ways industry partners could support them in closing the digital divide. NC Fair Share CDC's wish was for affordable Internet without barriers. "The financial burden is huge for a nonprofit organization so the more we spend, the less impact they have. When we save money on Internet, we can do more, hire more, serve more," added Akiba.

Akiba H. Byrd, Sr., M.Ed. is the Executive Director of North Carolina Fair Share, CDC located in Raleigh, NC.