

ALDÍA

Bridging the Divide: Philly's Digital Crisis

By Dominique Johnson | February 24, 2016

Harriet Acham repeatedly had problems with her home internet. She would lose the signal only for it to return. An annoyance given the fact that Acham and her family of three depend on a strong internet connection in order to complete daily tasks, like her children's homework assignments.

Her internet provider, Verizon, would send technicians to assess the problem but still, Acham said, the problem persisted for weeks. Verizon attributed the situation to a blown fuse box, and eventually fixed it. But in the time between, Acham said that she and her family felt totally disconnected.

"We had nothing," Acham, 51, said. "No home phone, no internet no anything."

Acham's son, a junior at Boys Latin of Philadelphia Charter School, had projects that were due but he was unable to fulfill the assignments because of his internet connection and had to take a failing grade.

According to Acham, the teachers were notified about her home situation and asked that Acham's son find an alternative source for internet connectivity.

"He has a phone, but that's limited use," Acham said. "Our library is under renovation so we would sometime have to go to someone else's home, but we still would be unable to get the right information or to get it printed out."

Prior to switching to Verizon, Acham had Comcast but because her husband had lost his job they were unable to keep up with the payments.

She had known about Comcast's Internet Essentials Program, affordable internet for low-income families, through information she had received about it from her son's school but she and her family had never been a part of it. Once her service had been terminated because of an outstanding balance she turned to Verizon.

Acham has struggled with the learning curve of new technology, she added. When she was in school, there was no formal education of the technological advances of today. They were only talked about amongst friends.

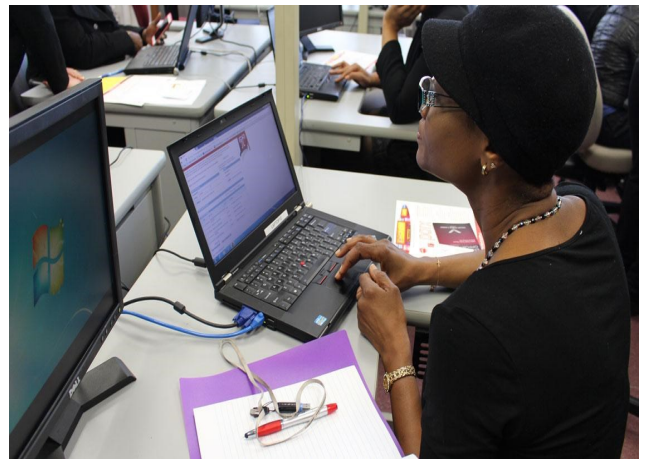
Since the internet has become a necessity, there's been much conversation about what can be done to bridge the gap between those with access and those without.

There are Philadelphians who can attest to not owning a computer or laptop of their own, only being able to connect to the internet by the use of smartphones. There are those, like Acham, who rely on their local library to use the computers.

Levels of Disconnect

A Pew Research Center analysis last year found that most American homes with school-age children do have broadband access—about 82.5 percent, about 9 percentage points higher than average for all households.

With approximately 29 million households in America with children between the ages of six and 17, this means that some five million households with school-age children do not have high-speed internet service at home, according to Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey data.



Taken at the Philadelphia OIC, one of KEYSPOt's sites, this participant uses her time to register for jobs online.

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Low-income households – especially Black and Latino ones – make up a disproportionate share of that five million.

“As for what the digital divide actually is, there are the have and the have nots,” Harry Fishburn, digital innovation and literacy specialist for [Philadelphia's Office of Innovation and Technology](#), told AL DÍA. “As technology continues to flourish, and as all of these different things become more tech heavy, everything that you use to be able to do in person and you had the online option, is now becoming totally automated.”

In addition to his work with the OIC, Fishburn is also part of a larger network called the [KEYSPOT program](#) — a city-wide coalition of community groups committed to bringing Internet access, training and technology to all of Philadelphia's communities.

Fishburn is also a part of [E-gadget Helpdesk](#), a service that was introduced in the winter of 2012 aimed at helping the digitally illiterate understand how work their new devices such as tablets and smartphones.

“I've definitely seen people lost, I've definitely seen people like, where do I start?” Fishburn said. “But then there's also all of this stuff with bills, forms, applications for benefits. General communication with professional and personal contacts, everything is becoming more and more online. And so with the skills to be online you need the basic fundamental skills to be comfortable with a computer.”

Fishburn said that he understands the argument about getting online: If a person owns a phone, they are in some way being connected.

Still, he feels that more can be done in terms of digital literacy. Knowing how to use a phone is a great first step, but there are benefits to knowing how to use and operate a computer.

“Phones are pretty much the accessible ways for the low-income population because of phone prices, and if you lock into plans you can get a phone and get unlimited usage,” Fishburn said. “So many of that population you will see being able to get to the internet on their phones. That's great, but at the end of the day, to build the skills that are going to be useful in a workplace, yes, you can have your phone and it will give you some digital literacy but you have to have some underlying skills coming from the traditional computer.”

Fishburn said that there needs to be more affordable broadband at home, believing it to be one of the most pressing factors affecting the digital divide. He added that this issue could be resolved with the expansion of the Comcast Internet Essentials Program.

Starting the Groundwork

Since 2011, Comcast has invested more than \$240 million in cash and in-kind support to fund digital literacy initiatives nationally, reaching nearly 3.2 million people through our national and local nonprofit community partners.

[Internet Essentials](#) launched in August, 2011, and in just four years has connected more than two million low-income Americans, or more than 500,000 families, to the power of the Internet at home.

“We're seeing great strength in the program's momentum,” Bob Smith, Comcast vice president of community investment, said in an email. “The first two quarters of 2015 have been the best in the history of the program, both nationally and locally.”

The program provides low-cost broadband service for \$9.95 a month; the option to purchase an Internet-ready computer for less than \$150; and multiple options to access free digital literacy training in print, online and in person. Qualified families include those with at least one child eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program. And it's open to parochial, private, charter, cyberschool and homeschooled students.

In addition, children that attend a school where at least 50 percent of the students are eligible to participate in the National School Lunch Program are automatically eligible for Internet Essentials.

“We have focused on North and West Philadelphia through partnerships with organizations like Philadelphia OIC and Peoples Emergency Center where we support free digital literacy training and support their open public computing labs. Those efforts help drive not only digital literacy skills but awareness of the digital divide and Internet Essentials,” Smith wrote.

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"We also provide financial support for organizations like Congresso, Conicilio, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, YMCAs, PAL Centers, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and more who use that funding to build public computing centers and offer a range of additional digital literacy training programs."

Locally, more than 70,000 individuals — that's more than 17,500 families — have signed on to Internet Essentials. Smith says that the company has also invested more than \$875,000 in digital literacy training since 2011. The result? Broadband adoption rates in the region increased from 70.7 percent to 76.4 percent.

"Anecdotally, we have met hundreds of families who have benefited from Internet Essentials and have shared their personal stories of how the program has helped them improve grades, find jobs, apply to colleges, and more," Smith said. "For example, we have met individuals who took one or more free digital literacy classes who had never touched a computer before and now have the skills and confidence with using a computer and Internet that they are volunteering for community and church groups, managing lists, social media platforms, e-newsletters, creating flyers and more."

In Philadelphia, Comcast and the City will soon be partnering for five years with a local non-profit organization to provide low-income Philadelphians who don't have school-aged children an opportunity to participate in the Internet Essentials program at a rate of \$29.95, of which the customer pays only \$9.95 and the organization pays \$20.

But there's still work to be done.

What is clear is that no one company or non-profit, and no single government program, can single handedly solve the problem of the digital divide, Smith said.

The greatest challenge continues to be overcoming issues of relevancy and digital literacy, because if someone doesn't see the value of the Internet or understand how to use it, then you can't convince them that they need it.

Research conducted by the Census Bureau, the NTIA and the FCC, has found that the most significant reason for the digital divide is a complex mix of digital literacy issues regarding a perceived lack of relevance of the Internet, a lack of understanding about its value or usefulness, fear, and a lack of digital literacy. The other two barriers are the cost of having a home computer and the cost of the Internet service. Internet Essentials is designed to address all three causes

Acham said that she appreciates the city and Comcast for what they are trying to do, and that the price that Comcast has through the Internet Essentials program was a good idea.

Still, there are times when she finds herself reminiscing about former Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter's plan to provide the city with free internet through Earthlink. Unfortunately, that plan was not as successful as he had hoped.

"It would have helped us," Acham said. "Right now, we're ok but with education, having the internet is a need."

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