At a KEYSPOT public access computer lab.

Digital Literacy Alliance is the next chapter in Philly's rocky digital divide narrative

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The first move from the alliance — a coalition of 19 public and private orgs — is a grant program that seeks to fund a batch of digital literacy initiatives. Here's how that's a step above Philly's past attempts to bridge the digital divide.

If you were going to rally together a band of digital literacy advocates, you could do a lot worse than the lineup the **City of Philadelphia** just put together as part of the **Digital Literacy Alliance**.

The newly formed 19-organization collective, an initiative of the **Mayor's Fund for Philadelphia**, features companies like **Comcast** and **Verizon**, higher ed institutions like the **University of Pennsylvania** and **Temple University**, city government entities like the **Office of Innovation & Technology** and the **Office of Adult Education** alongside activism organizations like the **Media Mobilizing Project**.

With $850,000 in seed funding ($500,000 from Comcast and $350,000 from Verizon), the group is taking on a three-pronged

mission: providing financial support to digital literacy and inclusion programs in Philly, convening stakeholders and partners from diverse sectors and offer guidance on digital literacy programming and policy-making.

The first move from the camp is a grant program that, in its first round, will seek to dole out **$175,000 from that fund to back 10 projects** geared at offering digital education, job readiness, skill-building and access to technology.

Just like any ambitious Philly program focused on digital access would, news of this coalition made our minds flash back to **Wireless Philadelphia**, the **failed attempt to bring a network of low-cost WiFi hotspots to Philly**.

But there a couple of key differences that could herald different results this time around.

Having Comcast and Verizon on the table is a major one. Back in the day, Wireless Philadelphia — which both comms giants actively lobbied against — took a less-than-ideal offer from **EarthLink**, which eventually abandoned the contract.

(Important context here: After the program went bust, the **Freedom Rings Partnership** — which eventually became **KEYSPOT** — nabbed some federal funding and established

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some 70 access points across town. The federal funds later dried up and since then that number has dwindled to 48, but the scrappy KEYSPOT team still managed to provide 41,507 hours of digital literacy and job readiness training.)

Another important aspect not featured last time around: A multiplicity of players leading the charge and getting involved despite their own differences. It's gotta be a bit awkward for Verizon and Comcast to sit next to an advocacy group like Media Mobilizing Project, which has on more than one occasion offered resistance to both companies on issues like, er, access to digital services.

Life can be funny like that.

But perhaps the most important difference is that this alliance will get to focus its efforts solely on backing education and skill programs, and not in addition to infrastructure and equipment management as KEYSPOT currently does.

The Alliance and its grant program represent a wealth of potential for **Andrew Buss**, Director of Innovation Management at the City's **Office of Innovation & Technology** who largely oversaw the KEYSPOT initiative when it got its start.

"KEYSPOT created a physical and organizational network that supports access to and adoption of technology and the Internet," said Buss. "Now we have an opportunity to build on that infrastructure by funding creative programs."

But can this push be sustainable? Per Buss, for the Alliance to survive it needs to show its worth.

"Fortunately, we managed to sustain the bulk of the post-grant Keyspot program because I think everyone realized the importance of the program to Philadelphia's work around digital literacy," said Buss. "At the end of the day, funding is what sustains programs so just as with Keyspot, the Digital Literacy Alliance will need to show its value to sustain itself.

From **Hannah Sassaman's** chair as Policy Director for the Media Mobilizing Project, that value is not going to come from a top-down edict, but rather from a ground-up exercise in understanding a community.

"This new grant opportunity is going to teach us a lot about the myriad kinds of work that community groups, and other institutions and leaders, are engaging in to help get all of our neighbors across the digital divide," Sassaman said.

It's way too early to formulate a verdict on the fate of the Alliance. For the time being, we'll keep a close eye on the first batch of funded projects from the grant program. They will offer interesting insight into the collective's playbook for getting to everyone's desired outcome: Giving all Philadelphians a chance to use the internet just like you, dear reader, are doing right now.