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Disconnected and Disenfranchised: Internet Accessibility and Affordability in Philadelphia

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Taymee Alamo doesn't have broadband at home to study for her GED. She doesn't have a smartphone to check on friends and family on Facebook.

"I have welfare phone, so if I don't get on my man's phone ... I can't really get internet access," she says. "I don't know too many people that I grew up with that can afford a desktop much less a laptop ... and even if they could afford it I don't know if they can afford a monthly payment."

For many like Taymee in both Philadelphia and across the country, lack of accessibility to the internet is a recurring and increasingly prevalent burden. For a service that is treated by many as a necessary social and economic utility, there is an overwhelming lack of representation in who can access it and by which means.

The demographics which largely represent those without internet are the elderly, the less educated and the poorer Americans.

As our digital technology becomes more portable and powerful, users are relying more heavily on smartphones and tablets for their everyday internet use. According to a Pew report in 2015, broadband use at home has begun to plateau, causing a shift toward mobile platforms. The same report also indicates these users depending on mobile devices are more likely to run up against data-cap limits, and more often cancel or suspend their data service due to financial constraints. However, the monthly cost of broadband was heavily cited as a reason for not having it in the home, which directly correlates to major disadvantages for uses requiring desktop computer accessibility, such as finding a job and accessing healthcare information.

"There's just some things you need to do on a computer for lots of jobs," says Jennifer Kobrin, the Director of myPLACE & Digital Initiatives for the [Philadelphia Office of Adult Education](#). "There's just some things that you need to do on a bigger screen. I don't know that smartphones will take over everything."

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If affordable, open access to the internet is a requirement for citizens to engage in the everyday necessities of modern life, what happens when government entities get involved in providing that service to the public? For Chattanooga, Tennessee, it was to get large corporate internet service providers (ISPs) to set up fiber optic connectivity to its citizens. When the companies saw the potential for lost revenue and backed out, [the city set it up on their own dime](#). In 2016, their publicly accountable, city-run ISP nearly doubled its breakeven, cut its unemployment in half since 2008, provided roughly \$1 billion in economic benefits, and was the single largest taxpayer in the city.

It's not much different for big cities like Philadelphia, where ISPs like Comcast and Verizon do much better business. Pennsylvania has already given Verizon nearly \$20 billion in subsidies and tax breaks in exchange for fiber optic connectivity for the entire state; a promise which was never fulfilled on [four separate occasions](#). When Philadelphia tried to set up its own municipal broadband in the mid-00s, it returned very little interest from ISPs, much like in Chattanooga. However, when they finally recruited Earthlink to set up wireless networks across the city, [the resulting service was unreliable and underwhelming](#). Without the proper technology, it is hard to expect effective and sustainable training and subsequent literacy with the public, which only deepens the digital divide.

Out of the ashes of the failed municipal broadband service, a call for accessibility and education was answered by the [KEYSPOT program](#). KEYSPOT was originally developed from partnerships with the city, the library system and Drexel University, and funded by the [Broadband Technology Opportunities Program \(BTOP\)](#) as part of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009. Composed of over 50 free and open-access computer labs in community centers throughout the city, KEYSPOT has created a collaborative effort to provide both the technological and educational means for its citizens to have the agency to securely and intelligently utilize the internet.

"We know that people here in the community are underserved and we want to make sure they are actually on the same platform as others in the city or around the country," says Aisha Dennis, Vice President of Operations for the [Philadelphia OIC](#). "And so that's what we do as the KEYSPOT with targeting those communities and those neighborhoods that are underserved."

Tisha Dougherty, another Lutheran Settlement House regular, places high value in the KEYSPOT services.

"Just knowing that the help was here, just making that first step was a lot. It was awesome for me. I mean I'm so glad that it was here because if this wasn't here, I don't know what else I would have done," she remarks.

KEYSPOT can be followed on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

KEYSPOT locations can be found on [their website](#). For more information about digital literacy in Philadelphia, please visit the [Office of Adult Education's website](#).