

Unlocking the Connection in Austin, Texas

by Mindy Ault

Background

When Google Fiber selected Austin, Texas as the second US city to receive its gigabit broadband Internet service, it awarded free high-speed broadband connectivity to 100 community institutions, including the Austin Children's Shelter, United Way, the Red Cross, every public library in Austin, and the Housing Authority of the City of Austin's (HACA's) Booker T. Washington multifamily property. At Booker T. Washington, the Google Fiber plan calls for installing broadband access for residents in a community computer lab, which includes classroom space and a workforce development site.

The connection to Google Fiber's fiber-optic network led HACA executives to ask whether Google Fiber could help them make a two-year-old strategic plan a reality: While HACA properties provide basic broadband connections in their community centers, the relatively high cost of broadband subscriptions means only a small number of residents have Internet access in their homes. Could a joint effort with Google Fiber achieve HACA's goal of bringing basic broadband Internet into each and every home? Recognizing the importance of having in-home Internet access, HACA's leadership decided to establish a partnership with Google Fiber to provide free basic in-home broadband access for residents at all 18 HACA properties.

COURTESY OF HACA

**Google Fiber representative
helping a resident.**



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As free broadband Internet becomes available to residents at HACA properties, increasing numbers of people will be able to enjoy the kinds of social advantages that come with connectivity: low-income families with children will be better able to keep up with schoolwork and communicate with teachers; adults seeking employment will be able to apply for more jobs online; and seniors and people with disabilities will be able to communicate with healthcare providers and prevent social isolation by keeping in contact with family members and loved ones.¹ Cost will no longer be an insurmountable obstacle for HACA residents when it comes to the benefits in-home Internet access can offer.

Unlocking the Connection

In an effort to achieve its strategic goal of digital inclusion, HACA developed the Unlocking the Connection project. Launched in November 2014, Unlocking the Connection is a community-based initiative to help low-income families gain access to opportunities afforded by in-home Internet connectivity, including improved capacity for employment searches, electronic communication with health care providers and teachers via email and online forms, and access to open-source educational materials. HACA's 501(c)(3) nonprofit subsidiary, Austin Pathways, is the entity charged with seeking funding and implementing the program.

Typically, each household subscribing to Google Fiber for in-home access would be required to pay a \$300 connection fee, but Google Fiber agreed to waive that fee for all HACA residents. In addition, free basic Internet access will be provided to residents in their homes at all 18 HACA developments for 10 years. To complement this broadband access, Austin Pathways has developed an Earn A Device program that provides refurbished desktop computers for residents who complete digital literacy training. The computers come free of charge through a partnership with Austin Community College and are loaded with free open-access educational content.

Based on Google Fiber's rollout plan and barring unforeseen complications, the first six of HACA's 18 properties, located in the southern portion of the city, should be outfitted with fiber-optic networks by June 2016.

¹Barbarotta, Linda. 2014. "Fighting Isolation with Technology," *LeadingAge Magazine*, July/August. Online http://www.leadingage.org/Fighting_Isolation_With_Technology_V4N4.aspx.

Financial Considerations and Partnerships

Altogether, the first phase of the Unlocking the Connection initiative is anticipated to cost approximately \$1.4 million, including the cost of in-kind services contributed by Google Fiber. Sylvia Blanco, Executive Vice President for HACA, acknowledged preparation of some initial projections for the second- and third-year costs, but these are being modified based on observations and learnings about the cost of deploying the program during the pilot phase.

Funding for the initiative is provided in part by the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, and by key gifts from in-kind partners, including the following:

- ▶ **Austin Community College (ACC)** is providing refurbished desktop computers for every household in the first six HACA properties and for the foreseeable future will provide retired computers for all HACA units as they come online. HACA and ACC are exploring ways in which ACC students can provide technical support and training to residents in the future.
- ▶ **IBM** has provided in-kind strategic planning services.
- ▶ **Freescal**, a semiconductor manufacturer, and **Rackspace**, a managed cloud computing company, have contributed funds for K-12 STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education that will enable children in public housing to gain valuable digital literacy skills.
- ▶ **The University of Texas Moody College of Communication** is evaluating the effectiveness of the Unlocking the Connection program through a formal evaluation.
- ▶ **EveryoneOn**, a nonprofit agency that works with telecom companies to ensure people in low-income areas have Internet access at discounted prices, is providing technical assistance to Austin Pathways.

Most recently, Austin Pathways was awarded grants from the City of Austin's GTOPs (Grant for Technology Opportunities) program and from the Central Texas Summer STEM Funding Collaborative, a consortium of funders that includes the KDK Harman Foundation. These funds enable Austin Pathways to provide a STEM initiative for children ages six through 14 and to fund a computer lab apprenticeship program to be offered to all HACA residents.



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Current Status

As of April 2015, the physical infrastructure—the fiber-optic cable—has been installed at the first site, Manchaca Village, and is nearly complete at Meadowbrook, the second property to implement the program. Internet modems have been installed in all the Manchaca Village units, and these are expected to go live by fall 2015. Digital literacy training has begun at Manchaca Village as well, and of the 33 households residing there, 18 now have an Internet-ready computer in their home, pre-loaded with software from **World Possible's RACHEL project** that provides free open-access educational content.

Implementation

In 2013, as part of a planning grant through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, HACA conducted a household-level survey of public housing properties in East Austin with questions about technology use. The results indicated that

in addition to very few residents having an email address, fewer than 30 percent of the households surveyed owned a desktop, laptop, or tablet device. Of those who did, only 28 percent had Internet access in their homes. While about 80 percent of residents surveyed reported having a smartphone, they also indicated this was their only access to the Internet.

It will take time to roll out this project across all HACA properties, but at the first site—the 33-unit Manchaca Village property for families—18 residents have elected to participate in the digital literacy classes offered by HACA as a pilot program with volunteer instructors from Austin Community College. To encourage participation in these classes, residents are offered the opportunity to earn their own computers by attending a minimum of 80 percent of the classes. Adult students at Manchaca Village with technical talent, or who are adept in assisting other learners, are now earning \$200 every six weeks by working as assistant trainers in the digital literacy classes at other properties.

Potential Benefits

In addition to educational, health, and social benefits, broadband Internet access is expected to provide other, peripheral benefits. According to Catherine Crago, who leads strategic initiatives for Austin Pathways, there are additional advantages to having internet access at home, some of which could yield operational cost and time savings for HACA as a whole. For example:

- ▶ Eventual use of Internet-connected thermostat controls could facilitate regulation of interior temperatures and potentially lead to energy savings for HACA.
- ▶ Preventive emergency medical service savings could result for units housing seniors or people with disabilities if they are equipped with Internet-based devices to alert caregivers or case managers when a refrigerator or cabinet door has not been opened for a set period of time, indicating the resident has not taken necessary medication.
- ▶ Time savings for social workers in HACA's Family Self-Sufficiency Program could be achieved with the use of a web-based smartphone app to check the status of a client's public assistance application or request income verification from Social Security.

Obstacles

Austin's Unlocking the Connection program, the first initiative of its kind for a housing authority, represents a successful collaboration among community-based organizations. However, there have been challenges to overcome along the way. One of the main obstacles in implementing the Google Fiber project was a \$10 household signup fee—separate from the \$300 installation fee—required by Google Fiber from every household connecting to the network. Because Austin Pathways and Google Fiber are both committed to making fiber-optic network access completely free for HACA residents, Google Fiber provided a grant to enable Austin Pathways to cover the \$10 registration fee for each resident.

Another challenge encountered by HACA was developing effective ways to promote the program to residents who may not see the need for owning a computer or accessing the Internet. As an alternative to staff members visiting each unit individually to share information about free in-home Internet access and digital literacy classes, HACA holds "Tech Férias"—informational fairs about the broadband project—onsite at residential properties. The Tech Férias are a way of introducing residents to the program in a group setting that is meant to be enjoyable as well as informational, and signing them up for broadband connectivity. At the first Tech Feria, held at the Manchaca Village property, computers were on display for residents to explore, and staff was available to advise residents about how they could earn a free device for their home just by signing up and attending digital literacy classes. In addition, HACA has utilized its monthly newsletter to communicate class schedules and dates for future Tech Férias.

A Collective Effort

HACA's Sylvia Blanco described the significant collaboration required by Unlocking the Connection, emphasizing that such a program must be a collective effort involving participants from local government, nonprofit, and corporate sectors. She remarked,

It takes a village. (A project like) this can't be handled by one entity; it has to be a collective effort. Make sure the mayor's office is on board (and that the) nonprofit and corporate community of your city is reached out to. It takes many hands to make this happen.

Blanco also stressed that such a program is not an overnight fix, stating that since it will likely take years to see the impact of this initiative, project sponsors and participants must be willing to maintain a long-term view in planning and implementation.

Ultimately, Austin Pathways, with significant contributions from Google Fiber and other local community partners, has created a successful model for bringing broadband Internet access to low-income households in Austin who stand to benefit from connectivity.

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