Many D.C. communities lack the tools to connect online, but that’s slowly changing

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Editor’s note: We always knew there were two Washigntons — one defined by the haves, the other by the have-nots, largely and historically split across racial lines. That delineation has gotten substantially more pronounced with the pandemic. The DMV Divide is a series that delves into how that widening economic divide is manifesting in — and jeopardizing — various aspects of the regional economy, including in workforce development and education in this installment. We explore the racial history that brought us here and the efforts underway to bridge the gulf.

Check out our previous installments on housing, access to capital and food and health care.

Lou August pulled up to an unassuming loading dock in downtown D.C. in his gray SUV and U-Haul trailer.

His lead technical assistant, David Davis, started piling monitor after monitor from a dolly into the back of the trailer. To any onlooker, the 76 devices sitting in the trailer looked like they were headed to be recycled.

They were, in a way. August is founder of Wilderness Technology Alliance, a D.C. nonprofit that’s been gathering donated computers and distributing them through community partners to the city’s low-income communities since 2000. After a pit stop at WTA’s Silver Spring warehouse, where they’re scrubbed and parts are
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replaced, the 76 monitors will end up in the hands of D.C.'s unemployed and underemployed — frequently residents who aren’t the most digitally savvy, who live in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, who are elderly or young students living out of reach of broadband.

The hoops for those facing the digital divide are interconnected, ones groups like Wilderness Technology Alliance are trying mightily to eliminate: If you don’t have a job, you can’t afford a $400 tablet or laptop or $50 in monthly internet costs. If you don’t have a device, you can’t go online. If you don’t have broadband access or fiber in your neighborhood, your device is useless anyway. If you don’t know how to check emails, use a search engine, upload documents or log onto Zoom, the fastest Wi-Fi and most up-to-date MacBook can’t save you.

And if you don’t have all three, particularly during the pandemic’s painful stints of social distancing and remote work, you miss out on applying for unemployment, job postings, community college classes or other training that could boost your skills or allow you to conduct telehealth appointments, online banking, daily tasks and, in many cases, any job itself.

For August, who worked for IBM until 1982 when he quit to import computers from Taiwan to Seattle, the answer is in unused hardware. “If you’re leasing computers to somebody and those millions of computers come back every three years to be replaced with new computers, what are you doing with the old ones?” he asked. “Putting them back on the market may not be in your best interest.”

Instead, he said, “think about the number of people in D.C. who use computers at work. We should be able to end the digital divide in two months.”

Step one: Devices and connections

August said the first of three steps for solving the digital divide is the easiest: The devices already exist. If every company operating in just D.C. donated their older laptops, monitors and servers during each routine tech upgrade, the city’s households with limited connectivity would see that turn around.

That said, there are still hurdles. WTA, like many nonprofits, struggled to keep up with mountainous demand during the pandemic. And nowadays, there are supply chain logjams that make it difficult to find hard drives and power cords to accompany the donated devices.

But the more companies that contribute, the more that shortage will ease. WTA recently was awarded an AT&T Foundation grant to provide computers, coupled with training and support, to 2,000 more low-income D.C. residents for the next two years, August said.

Last year, global architecture firm Gensler started collecting laptops to give to WTA in what’s now an ongoing partnership. Last month alone, the firm gave 100 laptops that would have landed in
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“[WTA] is actually distributing their equipment to areas that we actually really have a passion to reach.”

Then come the monthly internet packages, which locally can run between $30 and $60, depending on the speed and service provider, among them contenders such as Verizon Fios, RCN, Comcast’s Xfinity and Windstream.

In D.C., however, those services don’t reach upward of 3,000 residents at all. Another 6,000 residents are connected, but the internet speed is so slow, below 25 megabits per second, that it’s not even classified as broadband based on Federal Communications Commission standards, according to Broadband Now. That need is concentrated in wards 5, 7 and 8 — much of D.C. east of the Anacostia River, as well as communities surrounding Catholic and Gallaudet universities, according to new data by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

“If you’re building out slow internet, that’s not doing anyone any favors,” said Jenna Leventoff, senior policy counsel for Public Knowledge, a D.C. nonprofit that advocates for greater broadband access. “Often, it’s low-income consumers who are faced with it.”

The NTIA, in June, launched the first interactive map to show broadband access and speed in areas with higher poverty levels. Based on public data from the U.S. Census Bureau, FCC, M-Lab, Ookla and Microsoft Corp., the map shows more broadband gaps in the region’s areas with lower incomes and greater representation of people of color. Before, it was difficult to track exact ZIP codes and census tracts that lacked digital access.

“To ensure that every household has the internet access necessary for success in the digital age, we need better ways to accurately measure where high-speed service has reached Americans and where it has not,” FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel said in a June statement. “The latest mapping effort by NTIA is a welcome new tool that provides valuable insight into the state of broadband across the country.”

Part of the issue is the region’s varied population density, from western Loudoun to Logan Circle, for instance. And while a mile of broadband infrastructure in Arlington might cost the same to set up as a mile of fiber cables in Alleghany County, the difference in revenue is drastic.

“If I run fiber down a mile of road in Arlington, I can get a lot of customers who will pay me for access to that fiber monthly,” said Evan Feinman, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam’s chief broadband adviser. “If I go out to a rural area, there may be just three or four customers they reach. Even paying a monthly expensive bill, it’s
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still not going to near the cost of laying the fiber. The private sector was never going to make enough to do this on its own.”

Step two: Scaling up the skills

Digital tech advocates note a key nuance: There's a difference between the digital divide (those who have devices and internet and those who do not) and digital redlining (those who have access to technology but don’t have the ability to use it for their needs).

At the height of the pandemic, both needs surged. The team at D.C. nonprofit Byte Back addresses the latter, providing free technical and professional skills training for adults in the D.C. area and Baltimore. It also launched a loan laptop program from scratch. That meant collecting even more used and refurbished computers from the Wilderness Technology Alliance and bringing on a staff member to manage the program and provide IT support.

Byte Back also moved its classes to a virtual environment, where they still mostly live today, allowing flexibility to those juggling work, child care and transportation hurdles, said Margot Nitschke, a grant compliance specialist at the nonprofit. And now, the organization runs a similar program for SNAP.

“Because we’re able to do that right off the bat, SNAP came to us and said, ‘Hey, you've had this program going for six months now, and seems like it’s been really effective. Can you run the program for us?’” Nitschke said, referring to the organization's loan laptop program.

Many of the households Byte Back works with receive subsidized Wi-Fi from the D.C. government, but that doesn’t solve their communication hurdles. Nitschke said some find that internet access slows significantly when it’s overloaded — “especially when you have a number of people in your family on it, and same with the internet provided if you have kids,” she said.

But once the residents are on, they can pursue certifications in Microsoft Word and Excel as a pathway to administrative work, or in CompTIA+ for entry-level IT jobs. And programs like that are growing, from BlackGirlsHack in Alexandria to the Helping Other People Excel (HOPE) Project offering IT training in D.C.’s Ward 8.

At Byte Back, trainees are working in learning labs and taking seats in classrooms at its North Capitol Street NE office. They’re arriving through word-of-mouth an ad they saw, or perhaps a referral from the D.C.’s Department of Employment Services, through workforce programs like Project Empowerment and D.C. Career Connections, Nitschke said. “We work with students to try and proactively identify if there are areas of support that can keep them in the program,” she said.

Step three: The corporate equation

In addition to collaborating with municipalities, some companies are establishing their own funds to provide support. They see the benefit in bringing more local residents up to digital speed — they
are, after all, potential future customers and, more notably, colleagues as the tech workforce’s needs continue to snowball and competition for talent keeps tightening.

“This is a long-term investment in the communities where we operate our networks, where our employees live and work, and where we have all of these incredible local relationships,” said Charlie Douglas, Comcast’s vice president of corporate affairs. “We have to get as many people with digital skills and connected to the internet as possible.”

Comcast launched a program in 2011 called Internet Essentials, which offers discounts for internet service and grants or giveaways for computer hardware and laptops, coupled with in-person and online computer skills training. To reach those who most needed it, Comcast said it distributed grants to existing entities that were already teaching digital skills to households in underserved communities.

“What we find is you have to have partners in those universes who can get to those distinct populations,” Douglas said. “Those organizations are the most trusted voices in the community, and they are sought after by local residents for guidance and advice.”

Initially for students receiving reduced and free lunches at school, Internet Essentials has since grown to serve veterans transitioning into civilian life, people living in public housing and Pell Grant recipients. The program now reaches 10 million people at their homes and, this year, stretched to offer free Wi-Fi in community centers, including 38 locations for D.C. residents without stable housing.

Comcast Business also recently invested $28 million to expand its fiber-optic cable or fatten its existing services in the region for nearly 7,000 local businesses in all, including in D.C., Montgomery County, Ashburn, Dulles and Leesburg, with additional plans for Tysons. But the company is also looking to cellphone and computer makers to collaborate on more fixes.

“No single entity is ever going to solve the digital divide. It takes every kind of company that can provide connectivity,” Douglas said. “There’s a whole ecosystem that needs to come together to make the community connected.”

Meanwhile, T-Mobile launched a $10.7 billion project in 2020 to offer free internet service and mobile hot spots to unconnected households that include schoolchildren. That’s newly linked 135,000-some students in D.C., Maryland and Virginia, said spokeswoman Lisa Belot.

Another internet service provider, McLean-based Kajeet, has partnered with local school systems, libraries and nonprofits, including library systems in Alexandria and Prince George’s County, to increase connectivity for everyone from adult job seekers to school-age children. It also essentially donates Kajeet Wi-Fi hot spots, called SmartSpots, to Good Projects, an antipoverty nonprofit in the District that then spreads that connectivity to 500
local families and even Fairfax County school buses so students can log on during their rides to and from class.

“There is a greater, growing realization, I think, that there are great returns to be had from investments in closing the digital divide,” said CEO and Chairman Daniel Neal, who founded Kajeet in 2003. “We don’t think of closing the digital divide as an expense. We view it as an investment — an investment in people connecting to resources that make them more engaged and more productive and more part of the fabric of our economy and our society.”

College agendas tackle digital gap

Educational institutions have ramped up work to continue bridging the digital gaps and boost workforce development, corralling pandemic aid into opening up computer labs, collaborating with local companies for apprenticeship and internship opportunities, and launching accelerated skills training.

In one case, a loan laptop program has mushroomed into the newly created Center for Digital Access & Learning at the University of the District of Columbia, tailored to students without computer or internet access. The $260,000 project was funded by the CARES Act, allowing for faculty and staff to receive digital literacy training and students to access the types of classes, schoolwork, degrees and certifications that help them compete in the tech realm.

“The pandemic thrust the university into really solving problems around digital access,” said Carl Moore, UDC’s assistant chief academic officer, at the center’s open house in November. “Since then, it has kind of blossomed.”

When the center fully opens in January on UDC’s Van Ness campus, it will include learning pods for computer labs, broadband connections and Wi-Fi extenders, digital labs with virtual and augmented reality tools like Oculus headsets, and space for both hybrid classes and business meetings for up to roughly 130 people at a time. While the center will prioritize UDC’s students and faculty, it will be open to D.C. community members, too.

“We want to make sure that we’re that educational resource in that way,” Moore said. “It’s a larger intentional strategy that we have to meet the needs of our learners and the District in a broader way.”

Other D.C.-area groups are working to create a pipeline from underserved communities into the tech field, including Capital CoLAB, a coalition of local universities and an arm of the Greater Washington Partnership. Its latest effort, the Digital Tech Credential Scholarship, will offer up to 2,000 students of color or female students $2,500 toward the completion of digital tech courses at 17 partner universities, including Bowie State University, George Washington University and Virginia Tech. Corporate funders from Deloitte Foundation to Northrop Grumman Foundation to T. Rowe Price have contributed toward a total $5 million investment in the program for the next five years.
“Rebuilding the workforce to represent what America actually looks like means we might be able to finally tackle the idea of generational wealth inequalities,” said Amy Gilliland, president of General Dynamics Information Technology and a CoLAB advisory member, during a July press conference. “If regional employers don’t try to capitalize on the current moment and think about diversifying who they hire, they risk 60,000 digital tech jobs going unfilled annually through 2025.”

— Hannah Denham and Jin Ni

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