

Program Targets Digital Literacy Divide Where It Lives

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(TNS) — Johnie Brazile maneuvers his wheelchair every day the few blocks from his apartment at Sutliff I apartments in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, to the nearby Cuyahoga Falls Library to use the free Wi-Fi there.

Brazile likes to get on Facebook and play Texas Hold 'Em with other players online.

Now, thanks to a new project just launched by the Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority (AMHA), Summit County Executive Ilene Shapiro and Akron Mayor Dan Horrigan, Brazile can get free Wi-Fi in the common area on the first floor of his apartment building.

The ConnectHome Akron program is part of a national initiative started by the Obama administration and continued under the Trump administration and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to help close the digital divide for low-income families in Summit County, said AMHA Executive Director Tony O'Leary.

Akron is one of 55 communities nationwide chosen for the initiative. The city of Akron and Summit County co-sponsored the application.

Parts of the program include providing high-speed broadband, low-cost devices and digital literacy to low-income families across the country.

The Summit County program is just being launched and will take a few years to ramp up, said O'Leary. So far, three AMHA properties have rolled out free Wi-Fi either in a common area or at the entire property: At Sutliff I apartments, the free Wi-Fi in the first-floor common area was added two weeks ago; the Reach Opportunity Center in Summit Lake has Wi-Fi within its entire facility and Spicer Terrace, a 12-unit building near the University of Akron, has Wi-Fi throughout the property.

"Through the ConnectHome program, AMHA is planning to provide free Wi-Fi access at 12 high-rise buildings that serve senior citizens and people with disabilities as our first priority and eventually to more than 20 multi-family complexes," said O'Leary. The expansion of services is expected to occur over the next four to five years as funding and support is developed for the program, he said.

The national initiative does not come with any funding, so AMHA is including the Wi-Fi upgrades into its budget as it can and will be seeking donations from companies, too.

So many things are moving to the internet these days that access to the internet is almost a necessity, said O'Leary.

"There's a very high percentage of low-income Americans who cannot afford to be connected," he said.

It can also be a problem for school-aged children who need to do schoolwork on a computer or research, he said.

Part of the AMHA project is a website, <http://www.connecthomeakron.org>, which provides links to a service that can provide low-cost computers and laptops to income-eligible customers and links to digital classes provided by the Akron-Summit County Public Library.

While the ConnectHome Akron's initial focus will be AMHA-owned properties, any income-eligible individual in Summit County can use parts of the program such as the low-cost devices or free classes, O'Leary said.

During the first phase, the goal by the end of next year is to get free Wi-Fi to public areas and some residential areas of at least 10 AMHA properties, said Jason Colon, AMHA IT manager. AMHA is also exploring offering Wi-Fi to whole neighborhoods near Summit Lake, he said.

The second phase will look for grant money and opportunities to get access to free or low-cost devices, said Christina Hodgkinson, director of AMHA's resident services department.

Some of the program will also be educating residents on resources that already exist, such as free classes through the library or free Wi-Fi access at libraries, said O'Leary.

Since free Wi-Fi was added in the common area of the Sutliff I apartment building, Brazile said he's been downstairs a lot more.

He would spend more time downstairs, but usually hangs out on his tablet "until my tablet goes dead or I have to go charge it," he said.

Eventual plans are to put Wi-Fi throughout the Sutliff building. When that happens, Brazile said “I probably wouldn’t even come out of my apartment and that’s the truth.”

Brazile has a limited data plan on his phone, but tries not to use it too much since it’s costly.

Fellow resident Barbara Long uses her phone data to get on the internet, but tries not to run up costly overages. She has a brand new tablet, but she hadn’t been connecting to the internet since she didn’t have a data plan for it, so she was only playing games that are already on the tablet and which don’t require internet access. With the free Wi-Fi, Long predicted she would be spending more time in the common area.

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