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Neighborhood Allies, Computer Reach, University of Pittsburgh Work to Deploy Laptops to Families in Need

Pittsburgh, PA (March 27, 2020) - As schools and workplaces in Allegheny County issued stay-at-home and remote work directives, families without computers and internet access felt the squeeze.

Local nonprofits such as Circles Greater Pittsburgh, Hazelwood Initiative, Wesley Family Services, and Center of Life began to reach out for computers.

Meanwhile, Neighborhood Allies' 2020 initiative to develop four Digital Inclusion Centers in Pittsburgh target neighborhoods had been put on hold due to the Governor's ban on all non-essential businesses. "Our contractors couldn't leave their homes, our design team couldn't travel to take specs-- we were completely on standby," explained Vanessa Buffry, Neighborhood Allies' Senior Program Manager for Digital Inclusion. "Yet suddenly, the Digital Divide was thrust into prominence. There was no way we could sit by idly." Scrambling to devise a solution, Buffry reached out to Computer Reach to ask if they had the capacity to meet demand. Computer Reach's answer was straightforward: they had thousands of computers, all missing adapters.

Neighborhood Allies worked with funders to repurpose internal funds from their Digital Inclusion initiative to purchase 1000 adapters. Then they received bad news: with supply chains crippled around the world and borders closed to customs, the cheapest way to acquire such a large order (direct from a Chinese factory) faced an uncertain wait time of a month or indefinitely longer.

Yet Pittsburgh families needed computers *now*.

Desperate to find a solution, Neighborhood Allies called upon all local businesses and the Pittsburgh Technology Council to donate any 90w Dell adapters their IT departments may be sitting on.

When word reached Lina Dostillio, Associate Vice Chancellor of Community Engagement at of the University of Pittsburgh, she immediately began working with the Office of Government and Community Relations and the Office of the Chief Information Officer to access University procurement channels to domestically source the chargers. The University covered the cost difference and was able to expedite shipping. Dostillio then set about activating University staff and students who were working remotely to start to set up a 'Virtual IT Help Desk' and funnel other volunteers to Computer Reach in order to crash the production timeline.

"The University took our expected timeline from two months to two weeks and threw in their complete support for all operational aspects. We couldn't have done it without them," remarked Computer Reach's CEO, Dave Sevick.

While the adapters were en route, Sevick was in conference with the Allegheny County Department of Health and WHO to obtain clearance on sanitation protocols, so they could activate their volunteer network to get the 1000 laptops up and running. Two days before the chargers arrived, the health department cleared Computer Reach's meticulous safety

process: workers in the warehouse are to maintain a 10-foot interpersonal distance, wash hands frequently, and sanitize equipment in strict accordance with WHO standards. "My goal is to make it like South Korea in here." Sevick chuckled.

After the chargers arrived on Friday, March 27, Computer Reach volunteers and staff began an arduous process to 'audit' each individual laptop, running checks on battery life and other components, then installing a new hard drive and downloading operating system software.

By the end of the first day, nonprofits across the county had placed hundreds of orders. On the second day, Theodore Dwyer, Chief Accountability Officer of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, reached out to the team. Dwyer knew many PPS families could not connect to remote coursework. With the prospect of access to the critical hardware, PPS started an online survey to chart a census of the digital divide in Pittsburgh. Within hours, it was clear that the district would need not just hundreds, but thousands, of computers. This initiative was a step in the right direction.

Yet with so many barriers surmounted, there is still a way to go before computers will be ready to deliver in the next two weeks. To cover their operational costs while making the computers affordable for PPS and other non-profits, Computer Reach launched a crowdfunding campaign and is soliciting letters of support from partners and PPS (including their Census data) to tap into COVID-19 emergency relief funds. Meanwhile, local businesses can donate excess Dell 65w and 90w chargers by mailing or dropping them off at the Computer Reach warehouse at 1 DRV Dr. in Wilkinsburg.

"One silver lining of coronavirus lockdown is that it's thrown light on the severity of the Digital Divide and enabled us to assemble the brightest minds around this critical challenge." said Buffry. "Until the PPS census, we had only an abstract idea of the scale of the problem. Now we know precisely where to target aid, how many devices are necessary, and we have a process in place to deliver results."

"When our Digital Inclusion Centers come online in the next year, we will be able to build upon this network to truly upskill our students and workers, preparing them for the digital workforce of tomorrow."

About Neighborhood Allies | neighborhoodallies.org

Neighborhood Allies' mission is to support the people, organizations and partnerships committed to creating and maintaining healthy neighborhoods. They strive to support this mission by creating community partnerships, connecting distressed and transitioning communities with valued/vetted resources, and communicating and celebrating progress and success.

About Computer Reach | computerreach.org

Computer Reach makes technology available to people most in need through refurbished equipment, computer literacy, training, and support.

About the University of Pittsburgh | pitt.edu

The University of Pittsburgh is a state-related research university, founded as the Pittsburgh Academy in 1787. Pitt is a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU), which comprises 63 preeminent doctorate-granting research institutions in North America.

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