

The Freedom Rings Partnership: Community- Focused Collaboration

Ashley Del Bianco and Kate Rivera 23 January 2013

Introduction

The Freedom Rings Partnership was formed in 2010 to tackle the problem of the digital divide in Philadelphia, where nearly one in two residents lacks reliable Internet access. The partnership seeks to address this problem by increasing access, both at computer labs and at home, and providing computer training that is integrated into broader social services programs. By taking a collaborative and community-based approach, the partnership has seen success in connecting residents to resources that allow them to improve their quality of life as well as in fostering capacity building and best-practice sharing in local nonprofit organizations.

The Digital Divide in Philadelphia

Think about all of the things you use the Internet for in your daily life. Now imagine not having that access while most of the people around you still do. That's the plight of an estimated 41%–55% of Philadelphians who do not have Internet access at home. This lack of access—and

the related resource and information gap—is termed “the digital divide.”

Basic computer proficiency and Internet access are necessary for finding a job, attaining an education, connecting with family, friends and the broader community and accessing information about health, benefits and transportation. Lack of Internet access correlates strongly with individuals who are lower income, those with lower education levels and minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics.

The Freedom Rings Partnership

The Freedom Rings Partnership was formed in 2010 to take a cross-sector, collaborative and focused approach to improving computer literacy and Internet access for the most disenfranchised and low-income Philadelphia residents. The partnership received two federal grants totaling \$18M under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, a part of the federal stimulus funding. Leveraged with matching support, this represented an infusion of \$27M focused on a community-based approach to the problem of digital inequity in Philadelphia.

Our goal is for all Philadelphians to have access to the Internet and know how to use a computer. We accomplish this by providing Internet access through our free public computer labs, called KEYSPOts; promoting low-cost, in-

home Internet options; providing training on computer and Internet use; and creating a broad-based awareness campaign about the benefits of computer and Internet access. This approach combats the main barriers to Internet access, price and lack of perceived relevance.

We help people like Kathy, who enrolled in a jobs program and took KEYSLOT computer classes at one of our partner organizations, People's Emergency Center. As a single mother, Kathy's goals were to develop basic computer skills, "find a decent job" and buy a computer so that she could help her daughter with her schoolwork. She completed basic computer training, began a specialist certification and secured employment.

So far, the partnership has

- Launched over 80 KEYSLOTS, or public computer centers, throughout Philadelphia,
- Provided over 170,000 hours of computer training to over 17,000 participants,
- Served over 266,000 clients with free computer access, and
- Reached over 4.1M people with broadband adoption awareness impressions through an extensive branding and marketing campaign.

Led by the City of Philadelphia's Office of Innovation and Technology and the Urban Affairs Coalition, the partnership comprises over 50 organizations, including

Drexel University, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department, People's Emergency Center, Philadelphia FIGHT, Media Mobilizing Project, the Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia OIC, One Day at a Time and YOACAP. KEYSPOTs, our public computer and training locations, are located primarily in existing community-based organizations (the ones named above in addition to other social service organizations) in neighborhoods with low broadband adoption. Computer use and training are integrated into the organization's other programs to provide a more comprehensive social services approach. Rather than approaching computer training as being about the technology, our focus is on the needs of our clients and how technology can support their goals.

While the federal funding necessitates a somewhat hierarchical structure, the partnership is highly collaborative, with working groups that make decisions and share best practices in training, marketing, website development, technology management and evaluation. This practice has fostered remarkably close bonds between partnership organizations, encouraging the sharing of information and referrals between organizations.

Early highlights from research and practice

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By codeveloping impactful partnerships with community-based organizations, higher education institutions, municipal government and residents themselves, the KEYSPOTs are beginning to demonstrate positive effects on individual and neighborhood social outcomes. They serve as hubs for computer and Internet access but also as safe, pleasant community spaces where goal-driven, learner-centered education happens. Although each center is geared toward the interests of the particular populations it serves, the partnership unites around the belief that forming and strengthening relationships through purposeful learning is central to engaging citizens and building community.

The partnership has engaged New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute to conduct an independent evaluation of the program's outcomes and the effectiveness of the partnership's strategies for improving digital access and adoption in Philadelphia. Further, researchers from Rutgers University's School of Communication and Information are conducting a qualitative analysis of the tangible social and economic effects of broadband adoption in Philadelphia's low-income communities. While the data collection is ongoing and the analysis is preliminary, formative evidence from both studies indicates that the partnership's community-based approach is having a positive impact on digital access and digital literacy outcomes in Philadelphia.

The emerging research themes illustrate the benefits of a

community-embedded strategy for doing this work. Initial research from Rutgers University suggests that successful digital training programs are embedded within existing community organizations, specifically those providing other services, e.g., healthcare, educational programs, housing services or workforce development. By bringing technology tools and expertise into existing organizations that already work with Philadelphians in their neighborhoods, residents are engaging in learning, work and community life in new and extended ways. For example, the early evaluation analysis indicates that KEYSPOt participants are developing their technology skills not only to search for employment and develop their resumes but also to gain new skills to apply in the workforce. While programs may offer direct access to employment, participants cite access to new social networks and material components such as a quiet place to work as equally important to their experience. The social bonds that participants are forming at KEYSPOtS are contributing to stronger community connections; participants are volunteering at the KEYSPOtS, creating media to share and using their skills to communicate with the wider community.

By providing technology training that is relevant to the goals and needs of participants, we are integrating digital learning into the organizational missions of our diverse network of partners. One partner has decided to expand its adult literacy programming because participants who

initially came for technology training have asked for further learning opportunities. The organization is recruiting both adult learners and tutors among KEYSPOt participants and the immediate community. Another partner now hosts two technology labs and has been able to expand its youth arts programs with extensive media production opportunities. A third partner has built new and highly popular programs for women in particular immigrant communities to learn both English language and technology skills.

The partner organizations are also strengthening relationships with one another by sharing promising practices and participating in partnership-wide professional development activities. The partnership has codesigned, sponsored and led two training roundtables for all of the KEYSPOt lab assistants and trainers; at these sessions, peers shared practical advice, instructional methods and content resources to enrich the knowledge base of the KEYSPOt community. Partners have also established both formal and informal networks for referring participants for additional digital literacy training and for other social services in which particular partners have expertise, such as housing, recovery services and educational programs.

Ultimately, the success of the Freedom Rings Partnership rests with its ability to reach and consistently serve the diverse communities and individuals of Philadelphia. Philadelphia is a major city with a large population with

significant social needs and few community resources, and the geography of the digital divide is starkly apparent. The Freedom Rings Partnership purposefully selected locations so that the neighborhoods least likely to have broadband access would be served through this program. To assess this measure of effectiveness, the partnership and its evaluators developed a “workstation user survey,” a brief, anonymous and voluntary questionnaire that appears at initial log-in at every KEYSLOT terminal. The survey collects basic demographic information from participants who are 18 years of age or older. The analysis of survey results to date indicates that KEYSLOTS primarily serve African Americans, women and people over 55, as well as Hispanics, of whom the majority are women. These promising results strengthen the partnership’s commitment to sustaining the community-based, mission-driven strategies that are reaching and serving communities with new access to critical technology and enhancing residents’ abilities to participate as workers, learners and citizens.

Looking to the future

The Freedom Rings Partnership has demonstrated the tremendous success that a focused, collaborative and community-based approach can have on a significant citywide problem. As the federal grant funds wind down in 2013, we are working to ensure that we can sustain and grow these collaborations. As our experience and

research show, community involvement and support are crucial components of our success. As we embark on the next phase of this journey, we ask for the Philadelphia Social Innovation Journal community's support and collaboration to close the digital divide in Philadelphia.

Author Bios

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Ashley is a program manager with the City of Philadelphia for the Freedom Rings Partnership's KEYSPOt program. Bringing a background in professional development, program evaluation, applied research design, strategic planning and adult learning and literacy, Ashley has worked in education and community-based contexts in Philadelphia and at the state and national levels. Ashley received her master of arts in government administration and a master of science in education (reading/writing/literacy) from the University of Pennsylvania, and her bachelor of arts from Smith College.

Kate Rivera, Urban Affairs Coalition

Kate Rivera has a diverse background, having worked in for-profit, nonprofit and higher education. She has an undergraduate degree in creative writing from SUNY New Paltz and an MBA with concentrations in entrepreneurship and finance from Drexel University. Currently, Kate works at the Urban Affairs Coalition, as project director for the

Freedom Rings Partnership, a citywide coalition that seeks to close the digital divide by providing computer access and training to low-income Philadelphians. She is the president of the Philadelphia Professionals chapter of Net Impact, a membership organization focused on using the power of business for social good. Kate is on the board of directors of Nationalities Service Center.