CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER

HOMELESS NEED INTERNET ACCESS TO FIND A HOME

How Access to Internet and Technology Resources Can Support Homeless Families Transition out of Homeless Shelters

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CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER

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ABOUT THE CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER

The City Bar Justice Center (CBJC), the largest division of the City Bar Fund which is the nonprofit affiliate of the New York City Bar Association, increases access to justice for low-income and disadvantaged New Yorkers by leveraging the volunteered time and expertise of the New York City legal community through an effective pro bono model. CBJC responds to the emerging needs of underserved communities, assisting over 25,000 New Yorkers annually through limited and direct legal representation, community outreach, and education efforts on a wide range of civil-justice matters including: homelessness, immigration, veterans assistance, small business development, consumer issues, planning and estates, cancer advocacy, and elderlaw. A dozen core projects led by experts in the field, over 1,500 pro bono attorneys trained and mentored by staff, and the largest free civil legal hotline in New York enable the CBJC to protect the rights, safety, and security of people without the means or support necessary to navigate our justice system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was the basis for a citywide #Wifi4Homeless advocacy campaign, launched by the New York City Bar Association, urging the City to provide reliable Wi-Fi and internet ready devices to New Yorkers in homeless shelters. Click the following link to learn more: https://bit.ly/2FFfGax.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In New York City ("NYC") during the 2018 fiscal year, 133,284 different homeless men, women, and children slept in the NYC municipal shelter system, including over 45,600 different homeless NYC children.[1] As recently as September 2019, an average of 62,391 homeless people, including 14,962 homeless families with 22,083 homeless children, slept each night in the NYC municipal shelter system. While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for these individuals, the ultimate goal of the NYC Department of Homeless Services ("DHS") is to prevent homelessness, to help residents regain permanent housing, and to reduce residents' lengths of stay in a shelter.[2]

However, NYC shelters are currently lacking one very basic and essential service that would help shelter residents to secure permanent housing and reduce their lengths of stay in a shelter: access to technology. Today, access to the Internet is considered a basic human right that includes the technology that will enable it.[3] Access to the Internet and the required technology to do so is critical for shelter residents to locate permanent housing and job opportunities, and to access applications for housing, government benefits[4] and other services.

In 2019, the City Bar Justice Center ("CBJC") conducted a client survey of current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. They found that if shelter residents had access to the Internet while in the shelter, they would use the Internet for the following purposes: finding permanent housing (70%), finding a job (60%), finding medical care (63%), accessing other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, Medicaid (45%), access to email (67%) and social networking (74%). Survey respondents indicated that access to the Internet would positively impact their lives.

Respondents also confirmed that the lack of Internet access led to further isolation and frustrated attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other essential benefits.

Cities across the United States have recognized that Internet access is critical for shelter residents. A synopsis of their efforts and how it can be applied in NYC is discussed below. An investment by NYC and DHS in enhancing access to technology (including Wi-Fi, Internet-ready devices and printers) in NYC shelters could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. This report outlines the ways in which DHS's mission can be better achieved.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Bar Justice Center recommends that New York City provide access to the following in every City shelter: (1) reliable Wi-Fi connections, (2) updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other word processing devices, and (3) Wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that maintain connection with the shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices. Access means that the Wi-Fi and devices must be made available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.

IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY FOR HOMELESS SHELTER RESIDENTS

DHS oversees approximately 580 shelter facilities across the five boroughs.[5] On each night in December 2019, these shelters housed an average of 62,590 homeless people. [6] In 2017, NYC spent $1.3 billion on family and single adult shelter services, a sum larger than outlays on libraries and parks combined.[7] This amount excludes hundreds of millions of additional dollars spent on homeless prevention efforts aimed at reducing the number of people entering shelters and rental-subsidy programs to facilitate exits from shelters.[8] In total, it is estimated that NYC is currently spending in excess of $2 billion on these services.[9]

While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for individuals, the mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness and to help NYC residents regain independent living in the community.[10] In a recent "Mayor's Management Report," DHS stated that one of its overarching goals is to "help individuals and families transition to permanent housing and self-sufficiency."[11] This means that the agency must not only ensure that "all temporary shelters for homeless individuals and families are clean, safe,

"and well-run," but also that it "[f]acilitate exits and minimize clients' length of stay in shelters."[12]

Despite that goal, statistics show that between December 2017 and September 2019, the number of adults and children in shelters increased by 2,458, or 4.1%.[13] In addition, as of December 2017, single adults were staying in a shelter approximately 100 days longer than they were, on average, in January 2014; and 37 days in the case of adult families (couples without children).[14]

Both family and single adult shelter clients must develop, with the provider staff, an Independent Living Plan (ILP). [15] The ILP forms are the core of a client's "[shelter] exit plan and an individualized pathway towards sustainable permanency."[16] But while state regulations require that certain services be provided to shelter clients, shelters are overwhelmingly lacking in one essential service for shelter residents which could reduce the length of residents' stay and facilitate their exit: access to technology.

A vital component to independent living in today's world is the Internet,

and NYC and DHS should strive to provide resources to homeless shelters to ensure that homeless men, women, and children in NYC are able to access the Internet. Internet access should be provided through Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, as well as through shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi, at no extra cost to maximize opportunities for the homeless population to regain independence.

NYC residents now use the Internet for almost every aspect of their daily life—to communicate with others (whether family or friends, or for educational or work purposes), to search for jobs, to create resumes for jobs, to apply for jobs, to search for housing, to apply for housing, to access government benefits and services, to search for educational opportunities, to complete applications for schools, to perform school work, to find medical providers, to access banking services, and much more. Widespread Internet use pervades all social and income classes and is particularly needed by the homeless, who lack a permanent address and landline telephone and require, perhaps more than others, the stability that is provided by Internet access.

Shelter residents need to be able to access the Internet to search for jobs, housing, medical care, and other benefits.

Shelter residents with children, who are a large percentage of the overall homeless population, need the Internet to help their children enroll and remain in school and perform schoolwork. In March 2020, the impact that lack of Internet access has on children in homeless shelters was further evidenced and exacerbated when, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, NYC public schools implemented remote learning. Unfortunately, over 100,000 students living in shelters or unstable housing in NYC were not able to benefit from this set up due to limited access to technology.[17] While the Department of Education is working to provide Internet – enabled devices with cellular technology, such as iPads, students have lost weeks of remote learning time waiting for such a device. [18]

The Internet is an invaluable resource for helping homeless residents return to self-sufficiency. Its potential uses and benefits are innumerable. A modest investment by NYC in enhanced Internet access could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. NYC needs to provide more resources to homeless shelter residents to access technology by providing access to Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, and shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi.

We propose that NYC set aside funds for enhanced technology access for shelter residents to facilitate the overarching goal of NYC homeless shelters—that they provide a temporary stopping point on a path toward self-sufficiency and independence.

SURVEY RESULTS

During the summer of 2019, the CBJC conducted a survey of current and former NYC homeless shelter residents to obtain information about their access to and use of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi while living in NYC shelters ("2019 CBJC Survey"). The results of the 2019 CBJC Survey are summarized below and confirm, among other things, that (1) NYC shelters do not currently provide adequate access to the Internet (in fact, the majority do not provide any access to either Internet-ready devices or Wi-Fi), (2) most shelter residents are not able to otherwise regularly access the Internet on their own and when they do, it requires them to self-fund costly cellular plans with funds that could be put to better use elsewhere, and (3) all shelter residents confirmed that improved access to the Internet would enable them to improve their living conditions and return to self-sufficiency.

In total, CBJC surveyed 84 current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. The surveyed residents had the following to say:
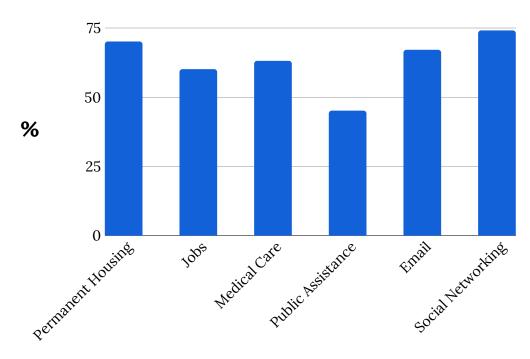
67%

WANTED TO BUT HAD NO REGULAR ACCESS TO INTERNET

56 survey respondents (67% of those surveyed) indicated that there were times when they wanted to access the Internet while in shelters, but were unable to do so, because the shelters did not provide Internet access and the residents were not able to get access via other means. Only 10 respondents reported having regular (i.e., daily) access to the Internet while staying in the shelter.

6%

WERE ABLE TO ACCESS THE INTERNET THROUGH THEIR SHELTER

Only 5 respondents (6% of those surveyed) reported being able to access the Internet through the NYC homeless shelter(s) in which they stayed. In contrast, to the extent that respondents were able to access Internet at certain points, the majority did so through a self-paid cellular plan (64 respondents, or 76% of those surveyed, reported having such a plan at some point or another) or through publicly available Wi-Fi, e.g., Wi-Fi available in NYC public spaces, libraries, or restaurants like McDonald's and Starbucks. For those residents with smart phones and self-paid cellular plans, 18% of those surveyed reported having limits on minutes or data for those plans that sometimes restricted their ability to access the Internet, despite having an Internet-ready device.

75%

AGREED
INTERNET ACCESS
WOULD IMPROVE
THEIR
CIRCUMSTANCES

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (63 respondents, or 75% of those surveyed) agreed that regular or otherwise improved access to the Internet for shelter residents would enable shelter residents to improve their circumstances, assisting in their efforts to find permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits (discussed further below). The CBJC Survey established that an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were comfortable using the Internet, affirming its relevance in their daily lives.

Based on their familiarity with the Internet, respondents said that if they had access to the Internet while in NYC shelters, they would use the Internet for the following purposes:

What Respondents Would Use Internet For

The 2019 CBJC Survey results present a clear picture of the current state of technology access at NYC homeless shelters: NYC shelters do not provide adequate (and in most cases, any) access to the Internet for NYC shelter residents. NYC shelter residents are in a constant struggle to find ways to access the Internet through other means, including spending what little funds they do have on Internet access. This lack of Internet access denies shelter residents of the many benefits that Internet access could bring, including resources that could help residents on the road to self-sufficiency and independence and to help residents retain some sense of normalcy and permanence in the midst of what is a very stressful experience.

As part of the 2019 CBJC Survey, CBJC also solicited personal anecdotes from the respondents describing how regular and improved access to the Internet would positively impact their lives. Respondents confirmed that the lack of Internet led to further isolation and frustrated their attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits. One respondent noted that "the Internet is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity." Respondents noted that shelter residents "need the Internet in order to search for apartments" and "need the Internet to find a job." Residents indicated that with Internet access, they "might have been living in an apartment sooner," and "having Internet service would have helped [them] get access to a better job." One respondent actually noted that "the only reason [they] got out of shelter was because [a self-funded Wi-Fi] HotSpot let [them] find out about Housing Connect [19], [but] a lot of shelter residents don't even know that exists."

In contrast, the lack of Internet limits those opportunities. One resident noted that the lack of Internet potentially cost them a job, stating, "It's like living in the dark ages here. I had interviews at [a company] and they were saying I was unresponsive but I wasn't. The issue was that I did not have Internet." As one resident put it, Internet access would provide a round-the-clock resource for information and assistance:

"Internet would give you access to everything you need whenever you want. Some case workers only work 9 to 5 so if I needed to search stuff at night to ask them about I could not. I learned how to get out of my situation by reading blogs and joining forums after I got [out]of the shelter. Unfortunately, people in shelter don't have access to that and it's sad."

Some residents reported being unable to pay for their own Internet service, meaning that without the assistance of the shelter or finding a place with publicly available Wi-Fi, it would be impossible for them to access the Internet. But even for those residents who could afford to pay for Internet access, the need to pay for Internet on their own deprived them of valuable funds that they could have put to other vital uses, like housing. Respondents reported using their very limited public assistance benefits intended for food and other essential items to pay for internet-enabled phones. Respondents noted that "it would be nice to get free Internet so [they] wouldn't have to use the little funds [they] have" on Internet access," and "access to Internet at the shelter would have saved [them] money because then [they] would not need to pay for a data plan." Because money is always a struggle for shelter residents, there are inevitably times when they cannot pay for Internet access and, as a result, cannot access

the Internet. One respondent noted, "I would run out of funds to pay my phone bill so I would not have Internet."

Beyond the benefits in terms of exit strategy and financial savings, residents also commented on the inability of their children to complete homework assignments while in the shelters due to the lack of adequate technology access, including Internet and printers that are needed for schoolwork. For example, one resident noted:

> *"Internet in shelter would help me do homework with my child. And it would also help because sometimes I need to print out forms but I can't do that and the case workers are not always available."*

Another respondent said something similar:

> *"My husband and I were discussing Internet service in the shelter a few days ago and wondered if the social worker would be kind enough to give us the Wi-Fi password so we could help our kids do homework."*

Based on the survey results and sample anecdotes summarized above, it is clear that more must be done in terms of technology access at NYC's homeless shelters. As discussed further below, we believe that NYC and DHS should enhance access to technology at NYC homeless shelters through both Internet-ready devices and publicly available Wi-Fi, as well as access to wireless or Bluetooth printers, or those that are connected to the shelter's functioning and accessible computers.

WHAT OTHER CITIES ARE DOING

NYC has long been a leader in providing temporary shelter to homeless residents. NYC now has an opportunity to lead the way in modernizing those efforts by providing technology access to its residents through the provision of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi to all municipal shelter residents. Similar efforts have begun in a limited number of cities across the United States, which recognize that technology access can be a turning point for homeless residents and which can serve as a start for efforts in the five boroughs. Below are a few examples of what other cities have done. More is needed and NYC can be a leader in these efforts.

In other U.S. cities, the views of homeless shelter residents with respect to technology access largely mirror the results of the 2019 CBJC Survey.

San Francisco

Shelter residents in San Francisco, particularly younger shelter residents, for example, cite smartphones and Internet access as the reason for shortened periods of homelessness.[20] Technology is used for connecting with social services, job searches, and finding permanent housing. One non-profit shelter, NextDoor, was able to get online for only $6,000 (approximately) of equipment supplied by a local Internet provider.[21] In 2016, a former NextDoor resident who spearheaded the initiative to get the shelter online co-founded a nonprofit, ShelterTech, to further help underserved communities get technology access and accelerate out of homelessness.[22] In 2017, ShelterTech received a grant of $97,454 for three years from the San Francisco government. ShelterTech is using the funds to provide various technology services to shelters and single room occupancy hotels.

ShelterTech focuses on three programs: (1) Shelter Connect, a program that works with Internet service providers to provide free Wi-Fi in shelters and transitional housing facilities, (2) an online housing and human services directory, and (3) step-by-step guides addressing common issues faced by homeless or at-risk individuals. [23]

ShelterTech expanded its Wi-Fi installations by 228% in 2018 and provided Wi-Fi access to 3,000 people through 7 Wi-Fi installations (including at 3 emergency shelters) and 200 portable chargers. ShelterTech's website indicated costs of only $50 per month to provide Wi-Fi to one shelter and $0.02 for Wi-Fi for one person for one night.[24]

Some residents of Wi-Fi connected shelters in San Francisco have credited their ability to find and obtain jobs online to simply having access to websites like Indeed.com and Craigslist.com.[25] Residents would not have known that some of these jobs existed without the Internet, as many jobs are posted solely online.[26]

Austin

Austin is another city that has sought to expand the services that it provides to its homeless population through the use of technology. According to the Ending Community Homeless Coalition ("ECHO"), a non-profit organization that plans and implements strategies to end homelessness in Austin and surrounding Travis County, over 7,000 individuals experienced homelessness in Travis County in 2018.[27]

In an effort to improve the lives of its homeless residents, the City of Austin's Office of Design, Technology, and Innovation Projects (the "Innovation Office") developed the MyPass Platform ("MyPass").[28] The project utilizes blockchain in order to give homeless people the ability to digitally store their vital documents, such as social security cards, health data and driver licenses, which "will positively impact homelessness services by helping them gain efficiency".[29] The Innovation Office's website states that its parameters of success for MyPass are efficiency of social service delivery, increased control and agency for homeless people, and to assist with benefit eligibility determinations for homeless residents.[30] The Innovation Office received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in June 2019 to develop MyPass over the course of one year.[31] Though MyPass undoubtedly will provide essential autonomy over to Austin's homeless residents, it is important to recognize that the use of this service assumes that its users already have access to Internet.

What NYC is Currently Doing

NYC has made a city-wide plan to increase the availability of Internet throughout its five boroughs, though this effort was not directed toward its homeless population. There is no current requirement for NYC homeless shelters, or for NYC itself, to provide access to technology to its homeless residents. In 2016, Mayor de Blasio announced the public launch of LinkNYC, which would transform the thousands of old payphones in NYC into hubs for free public Wi-Fi, phone calls, and device charging as well as tablet access to city services, maps and directions.[32] Though the stated goal of LinkNYC is "leveling the playing field and providing every New Yorker with access to the most important tool of the 21st century,"[33] within months after launch, "repeated complaints"[34] arose from NYC's sheltered residents because "some users"(35) were "monopolizing" the LinkNYC browsers for their personal use. The web browsers that were initially installed on the LinkNYC kiosks were subsequently disabled, and the extent of LinkNYC's permissible browsing currently is for "maps and city services".[36]

As the LinkNYC website describes, "[t]here are millions of people in New York City who don't have access to high-speed internet... LinkNYC's advertising platform also generates millions of dollars in revenue for New York City."[37] Providing a most basic service, access to technology, to homeless shelters would not generate millions of dollars in revenue for NYC, but it would give NYC's homeless population a chance to maintain autonomy over their lives. Moreover, the ability to use the provided technology to search and apply for housing, employment and government benefits would reduce these residents' stay in homeless shelters over time.

Perhaps then Mayor de Blasio's goal of "leveling the playing field[38] could be achieved.

Additionally, as discussed below, free public Wi-Fi alone, while helpful, is not sufficient. The cost of providing NYC homeless shelters with up-to-date technology available to all residents is greatly outweighed by the benefits and can often be the key difference in a person's path out of homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable homeless shelter residents to secure permanent housing and significantly reduce the length of stay in a shelter, NYC should supply every shelter with reliable Wi-Fi, modern and accessible Internet-ready devices, and wireless, Bluetooth or otherwise connected printers. Access to technology means that Wi-Fi and the devices must be available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.

Access to technology furthers the goals of NYC and DHS:

01   **BASIC NEEDS**
Including food, shower, safety, Internet

02   **HOUSING**
Ultimate goal is to find permanent accommodations

03   **JOB**
A job and access to financial resources ensures they won't lose permanent accommodations once they find it [36]

04   **WELL-BEING (PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH):**
Use of Internet for social interaction and entertainment (for parents, entertained children enables them to look for housing/jobs)

Access to technology cannot be limited only to Wi-Fi, onsite Internet-ready devices or printers, as each prong alone is not sufficient. As outlined in the 2019 CBJC Survey, while many shelter residents have smartphones through savings, phone-sharing, and programs like Lifeline[40], they often do not have access to sufficient data plans.[41] Without adequate data plans, users are unable to fully leverage the Internet and Internet-based applications.

Smartphones and Wi-Fi availability are not sufficient for many homeless shelter residents. Residents experience difficulty in completing applications on handheld devices and certain websites are not fully available on mobile devices. Furthermore, smartphones offer limited options to word processing applications needed to create resumes or complete homework assignments. Shelter residents also lack the ability to print applications that cannot be submitted online and homework to submit to school where Internet-ready devices, Wi-Fi and printers are unavailable.

CONCLUSION

As homelessness has continued to grow in the past decade, NYC and DHS can no longer focus only on temporary housing. Efforts must be made to reduce the time spent in shelters and the costs associated with longer periods of homelessness. Our recommendation that NYC should provide access day and evening hours to (1) reliable Wi-Fi, (2) updated Internet-ready devices, and (3) wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that are otherwise connected to Internet-ready devices, in every shelter is in line with the goals of NYC and DHS and the needs voiced by shelter residents. This is an opportunity for NYC to tackle the homeless epidemic in a non-traditional way and be a leader on this frontier.

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https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/lifeline-support-affordable-communications

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