

# Can New York close the 'digital divide' by spending \$1 billion? Here's the plan to try

[Gary Stern](#) - Rockland/Westchester Journal News, April 4, 2023

Imagine not being able to apply for a job online, or make an appointment with a doctor, or help your kids with their homework — or even access this article about people who can't do these things.

"It makes me really sad, because how can you even get by?" said Sal Valencia, who meets people in this bind all the time. He's an instructor for the STEM Alliance, a Larchmont-based nonprofit that trains people from all walks of life on how to do basic digital tasks, before giving them a laptop and a wifi hotspot.

"People come in with no knowledge at all," Valencia said. "How email works. What Google is. Nothing. It's difficult to start from that point. We go slow at first. Then it comes."



*At a recent class in Mount Vernon, organized by the Westchester Library System for people who were formerly incarcerated, Valencia showed 14 adults how Gmail works, how to put appointments on Google Calendar, how to attach a document from Google Drive.*

One student, Steve Singleton, a New Rochelle native in his early 60s, said that after serving in the Navy and working as an electrician, he didn't need computer skills. But now he does.

"When I first tried to learn it, it was frustrating and I backed off," he said. "I finally have the courage now. I still get confused. But I need the skills."

## Recognizing a social affliction

Singleton is part of a group of New Yorkers, of Americans, that many people first became aware of during the early weeks of the pandemic: those who do not have computers, access to wifi and/or basic digital skills. During the spring of 2020, it quickly became clear that many children in places such as Yonkers and East Ramapo could not access "remote" instruction and their parents and guardians were not equipped to help.

In little time, the so-called "digital divide" became a recognized social malady. But such maladies are usually difficult to cure.

"The thing about digital equity is everyone cares about it, but no one has owned it," said Margaret Käufer, president of the STEM Alliance.



*A teacher at Graham Elementary School in Mount Vernon hands out laptops to students on April 1, 2020.*

That may be about to change, thanks in part to the work of Käufer and like-minded, local advocates across New York.

And lots of cash.

Torrents of federal stimulus dollars from Washington are powering an ambitious, if little known, national effort is to close the digital divide — by setting up broadband wherever it's needed and finally connecting isolated and vulnerable people to the digital world that so many take for granted.

How ambitious? Joshua Breitbart, senior vice president of the agency overseeing the whole thing in New York, called ConnectALL, put it like this: "This is the largest effort at participatory planning and direct democracy that we really have ever engaged in."

## Money, in this case, is not the problem

The federal Digital Equity Act of 2021 will disperse \$2.75 billion to states over five years, with about half available to local groups like libraries and nonprofits to spend on face-to-face work with the digitally disconnected.

New York hopes to get between \$450 million and \$880 million from the pot in 2024.

But that's far from all: \$345 million coming to New York from the American Rescue Plan, the largest of the federal stimulus bills, has been targeted by Albany at digital connectedness. And last week, Gov. Kathy Hochul and U.S. Sens. Charles Schumer and Kristen Gillibrand said New York will get an additional \$100 million from the American Rescue Plan to expand high-speed internet.



*Limarie Carbrera, the director of data for the Westchester Children's Association, delivers remarks during the bridging the digital divide press conference at Pace University in Pleasantville, Oct. 4, 2022.*

Add another \$300 million in this year's state budget for the ConnectAll effort, and you have Hochul pledging to spend \$1.2 billion so "New York will continue to lead the nation in bridging the digital divide and making broadband available to all."

How will all this money be spent?

To comply with federal rules, New York is creating a digital-equity plan to submit to Washington.

Under those rules, the plan will have to spell out how the state will directly assist key groups, including low-income households, seniors, veterans, people with disabilities, residents of rural areas, people with limited English proficiency and the formerly incarcerated.

The state must also collect feedback from residents on what should be done, so "[listening sessions](#)" are being held around the state through April. A single session for the entire Mid-Hudson region — Westchester, Rockland, Putnam, Dutchess, Orange, Sullivan and Ulster — was held March 24 at SUNY Purchase. About 140 people attended, in person or online, the majority being advocates from grassroots organizations.

## Focus on local projects



*Lucinda Dudley, 56, of Mount Vernon, and her daughter, Jalissa, 32, of Mount Vernon, both take a class called Digital Pathways, at the Family Restoration Project in Mount Vernon Nov. 15, 2022. The class, provided by the STEM Alliance, a non-profit based in Mamaroneck, teaches basic internet skills to formerly incarcerated people.*

The clear consensus among people who understand the digital divide is that two things need to happen. The first is the installation of affordable broadband in areas that lack it, such as urban neighborhoods and rural areas.

The second is the funding of community-based agencies that know their local populations and can train people in their neighborhoods: nonprofits, libraries, workforce training centers, senior centers, local utilities and others.

"It's not that hard; it's very simple. Keep it local," Assemblymember Steve Otis, D-Rye, chair of the Assembly science and technology committee, said at the listening session.

"You need to find people where they are," he said. "You need partnerships."

Westchester is somewhat ahead of the curve and has local initiatives that can be expanded and copied, including these:

- In Yonkers, the Westchester County Association, the STEM Alliance, the city and other groups [set up the Y-Zone](#) — a section of Yonkers where residents are given Chromebooks, 15 hours of training, and a broadband connection.
- The Westchester Library System has equipped hundreds of low-income families with a computer and internet connection, and its ["Reconnect With Tech"](#) program with the STEM Alliance offers digital training to formerly incarcerated people.
- In December, AT&T opened a "digital learning lab" at the Urban League of Westchester's White Plains headquarters, where underserved adults and children can receive digital training and mentorship. AT&T also opened labs in Buffalo, Rochester, Troy and elsewhere.

## **Without training, a computer is a 'paperweight'**

The STEM Alliance is involved in most Westchester projects and Käufer has emerged as the region's chief spokesperson for the need to bring digital equity to New York through local programs. She helped lead last week's listening session.

"Training at the local level is critical," she said. "Otherwise, a computer is a glorified paperweight."

The nonprofit started as a group of moms who offered extra science, math and technology classes to kids. They saw the inequities separating kids from different communities, especially after school and during the summer.

When the pandemic hit, "we knew immediately what would happen to kids who do not have computers or don't know how to use them," Käufer said.

The STEM Alliance refocused on providing digital classes, in partnership with two dozen local groups and funded mostly by foundations. It has served over 1,200 Westchester people since 2020, giving a laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot to each after training is completed.

"This is another language, and if you don't know it, you're out," said Jalisa Dudley of Yonkers, who was taking the class in Mount Vernon for the formerly incarcerated. "I have one year of college and I'm going back. I need to be able to go on Zoom and do everything people now do."

## Waiting for computers at the library

The need is real.

It's estimated that 50,000 households in Westchester, one of the country's most affluent counties, do not have internet service.

The STEM Alliance says of the people it has trained — who are 69% Hispanic and 18% Black — 78% have no reliable internet or none at all and 50% have no computer.

Last fall, the Westchester Children's Association and Pace University [surveyed parents and guardians](#) about their digital needs and found that 31% said technological issues were making their child's learning more difficult. And 70% were not aware of government programs that make internet access more affordable.

The digital divide is a "lens through which to view many of the inequities that plague society today," said the WCA's Limarie Cabrera.

At the recent listening session at SUNY Purchase, Patricia Brigham of the Westchester Library System said that people who work in libraries know how serious the digital divide is.

"In our libraries in Westchester, every public computer is being used continuously, and people are waiting," she said.

###