**WorkforceGPS**

**Voices of Experience**

**Digital Divide Innovations Part 1**

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Candelaria Mendoza: Yeah. So the Digital Inclusion Alliance started a few years ago in an effort to kind of bring in and define digital divide for San Antonio and bring in collaboration. So its intent was mostly to kind of bring the digital divide to the forefront and inform people about its impact.

San Antonio, of course, had made it to the list of one of the worst connected cities for its size, so it was an opportunity to kind of galvanize through stakeholders, through partnerships, through conversation about the digital divide and basically what we could all do together to improve that and ensure it wasn't something that continued to be a negative impact on those that are affected the most; which when you look at digital divide and its socio- -- its tie to socioeconomic issues, and we just wanted to make sure that we had an opportunity to have these conversations.

**Digital Inclusion Alliance**

And so the Digital Inclusion Alliance became that unifier where these conversations would be built and would be shared, and again, leading through this effort of collaboration and representation across the spectrum. So we had everybody from banks, schools to the city and even Workforce Solutions being stakeholders to that conversation of how we could work together to kind of tackle this digital divide in San Antonio.

Yeah. So the Digital Inclusion Alliance is basically a volunteer organization, and the city had already been kind of working in collaboration with them and UTSA and others to build a digital inclusion survey and assessment. So we pulled in the county, we pulled in this membership that we had around the alliance and we started doing a digital inclusion survey and assessment because we really wanted to get at the nitty-gritty of the three legs of the stool.

We wanted to know what the access to the Internet was for the community, access to devices and the level of comfort to that digital literacy skill. So before COVID hit, we had made a pretty big effort to pull that together for the city of San Antonio so we could really know where our most underserved and needed areas were. And so we did that work in collaboration with the alliance and others and we built a report; that, when we reflect on it and how it actually helped us quite a bit once the pandemic hit, because we had this survey and report of where our needs were and what our challenges were when it came to the digital divide.

And so when COVID here and you had all these agencies that were pretty normal or pretty used to the normal environment of being like, you know, you got your local library, you can go to your community center, you can go here, here, wherever, there was either free community Wi-Fi or computer labs, and that just those fallback plans just weren't available anymore because we've covered everything kind of shut down.

**Digital Inclusion Task Force**

So what we were able to do when the pandemic hit was the city kind of pulled together digital inclusion task force. Because the alliance is volunteer based, the city wanted to support this conversations with staffing and did a digital inclusion task force where multiple entities kind of brought together their challenges that they were experiencing for the pandemic. And so those were opportunities during those meetings to have ideations of, okay, you guys are going to work on a project, let's work on it together. We can try to push it through community engagement; so the website, so people know where to go to find resources. And a lot of it was tied back to ensuring that people had access to the Internet, whether it was students that was doing distance learning, whether was somebody that just wanted -- that just got let go from the job or found themselves unemployed and needed to fill out an application, we just really wanted to provide solutions to some of those challenges.

**Parking Lot Wi-Fi**

Yes. You know, the free Wi-Fi in the parking lot, we basically started making a little bit of categories when it came to the solutions that came about through this digital inclusion task force and offline conversations of what can we do now with the resources that we have and maybe with pulling a little bit of money together. And a lot of institutions had Wi-Fi networks or networks within their buildings.

And so the idea came about like, what if you bought a little bit of extra equipment and started pushing the signal over to our parking lots so that we could, at least in the short term, provide the community options to go to these parking lots and get the Internet that they needed her to apply for a service or look at the news or check for another job, whatever it might be. So we understood that it wasn't the ideal solution, but it was something to provide options on the table for those.

So, yeah, we worked with multiple agencies that did some things like that. So Workforce Solutions Alamo was one of them. The city did this with our library locations. We have 29 library locations. I think we were able to expand the free Wi-Fi. Most of those locations, we also added some extra, say, free Wi-Fi to access to a few community centers that was working with youth and families. And we had -- the school districts also did this in an effort to improve access to their families and their students.

So it was really kind of interesting and motivating to see how these organizations really step up and try to provide options to the community, regardless of what the challenge was that they had these places, these parking lots to go to and get Internet access, at least on an interim basis while we figured out a more long-term solution.