

New apartments help bridge digital divide

By Claire Bushey

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Who could blame Jeffrey Brown for letting his e-mail pile up, when checking it was such a hassle?

His options: Wake up early and snag a spot at LeClaire Courts' computer lab before the housing development's children commandeered the place. Walk more than a mile to the nearest library, which of course enforced time limits. Take two buses to his grandmother's house, or ride the train downtown to Robert Morris College.

But soon Brown will be able to check his e-mail - and apply for jobs online - from home. In June he and his mother, Trandella Chambliss, moved into Fountain View Apartments, a former Chicago Housing Authority property in Lawndale that's been redeveloped, wired for Internet access and outfitted with a free computer in every one of its 45 apartments.

The \$10.1-million apartment complex, which had its grand opening in June, is designed to help low-income Chicagoans access work and educational opportunities that increasingly are migrating to the Internet.

"We want to leverage technology to connect low-income people to the mainstream economy," said Nicol Turner-Lee, vice president for digital inclusion at the nonprofit One Economy. Started in 2000, One Economy provides affordable computers and broadband access to low-income people, as well as employing young people to train their communities to use technology more effectively.

In 2008, for the first time, more than half of Americans reported having broadband Internet access at home, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project. But only 25 percent of people with incomes of \$20,000 or less - the approximate median income in Lawndale - said they had the service.

This is the digital divide, and it's becoming more of a problem as more information and opportunities move online.

"Traditionally, you could go into a store and apply for a job then and there," Turner-Lee said. "Now 95 percent of the jobs can only be found online. If you don't have a computer ... guess what? You're not going to be able to find a job that breaks the poverty cycle."

The same pattern repeats itself in education. Jackson hasn't forgotten that when she moved to Maryland for two years, her daughter's school district issued her a laptop along with her textbooks.

"That was an eye-opening experience for me," she said. "To know that if this is the norm outside of the city of Chicago, outside of north Lawndale, and we're expecting our kids to compete with those same kids that have the access to technology, how can that be the case?"

Fountain View Apartments sits at the corner of Independence and Douglas boulevards. Fourteen years ago the corner was a backdrop for drug dealing and loitering, said Kim Jackson, director of Lawndale Christian Development Corporation, which redeveloped the apartment complex.

Neighborhood residents successfully battled the criminal activity, and when they won, they wanted the corner apartments gone. But LCDC, worried about losing affordable housing in Lawndale, persuaded residents to see the site's potential.

A decade later, LCDC had found a local contractor to redevelop the property when One Economy approached them with an enticing proposal: computers and broadband for the whole building, plus a way to pay for it.

To bring broadband and computers into low-income households, One Economy works with the National Equity Fund, a syndicator of low-income housing tax credits, to channel \$25 million toward technology, allowing developers to offer high-tech amenities they usually can only afford to offer to market-rate buyers.

The result in Lawndale is 45 apartments that rent from \$340 to \$1,025. Fourteen are reserved for CHA residents, five are rented at market rates, and the remaining units go to Chicagoans whose incomes fall at least 50 percent below the area's median income.

Broadband service is free for the first five years, as is the mandatory computer training class. Residents learn the basics of Microsoft Office, plus Internet safety, like not giving out personal details to spammers. If problems arise, residents can call support staff for help.

The apartment building isn't an isolated effort. One Economy is working to expand Lawndale residents' use of an existing community wireless network by providing affordable computers, free training for those computers and involving residents in creating content specific to their neighborhood, on the nonprofit's Web site TheBeehive.org.

Fountain view resident Sadiquia Mathis loves her computer. She uses it for her coursework from Malcolm X College of Chicago where she's a criminal justice major, for online shopping, job hunting and e-mail.

"Bill Gates is forcing you to use a computer," she said. "You can do online banking. You can pay your bills online. I think that's neat. You don't have to get out of your house to drive, especially nowadays with gas being so high."

Chambliss is just getting comfortable using her computer and is pleased by the privacy a home computer affords. She intends to use the Internet to research heart disease, cancer and myocarditis, three diseases that have affected her family.

"I don't know how you do it," she said. "But since it's here, I'm going to find out."