Bridge to Connectivity: Hotspots Partnership

A Report on Efforts to Bridge the Digital Divide During the COVID-19 Pandemic (updated 2.10.22)

Background

Marin Promise Partnership’s Backbone Team began supporting the work of Partner institutions to address the Digital Divide in April 2020. When the COVID-19 Pandemic hit, all learning moved online and illuminated digital access as a key equity issue. The Marin County Free Library (MCFL) and numerous local school districts came together with support from the Backbone Team to launch a project to deploy over 1200 hotspots across Marin County. The hotspots were an immediate solution to get students connected to their teachers and school community from home in the midst of the crisis of the pandemic. Through close collaboration and support from the Backbone Team, Partners were able to identify how many hotspots were needed while simultaneously developing a budget and funding plan.
to meet the need.

The hotspots deployed included a data monitoring service through Kajeet, which allowed schools and libraries to monitor usage and continuously improve when a percentage of the devices were initially not showing consistent usage. As Partners implemented this crisis-response, the Backbone Team quickly realized the need for the project to pivot to a broader, long-term plan to address digital access inequities in the county. The Partners, with support from the Backbone Team, collaboratively engaged in a needs assessment to identify key challenges related to service area limitations, digital literacy, and asset-tracking. The project team also made shifts to other connectivity solutions where needed.

The crisis response of the hotspots project illuminated needs and built bridges that evolved into a focused, collaborative effort to identify long term solutions to address the digital divide in Marin County. The project also strengthened and built upon Partners’ existing family and student engagement efforts to advance educational equity. These shifts to a long term focus and the expansion of collaboration among Partners are among the most valuable outcomes of the investment in the hotspots.
## Summary of Outcomes & Key Learnings

**Outcome 1, Student Access:** Increased internet access for students with immediate learning needs in the crisis.

- The Hotspots Project provided 800 mobile hotspots as an immediate response to the crisis in May 2020, with up to 1200 purchased over the course of the school year across all Partner districts.
- For 475 families, the hotspots were an essential daily resource throughout the school year with over 50K school-use hours logged.

### What We Learned

**Hotspots are an effective intervention to provide home internet access** in cases where cellular service is available and families know how to connect the hotspot to their device. Barriers to effectiveness include cellular reception, bandwidth issues, and insufficient tech support for users.

Hotspots are a particularly effective intervention in multi-family dwellings where broadband connection is inaccessible.

### Strategic Next Steps

**Leverage federal funds through Emergency Connectivity Fund to continue service** for hotspots currently in use, based on adjusted request numbers. Four MCFL proposals were submitted and all were granted, totalling $440k in federal grant awards toward continuing and expanding connectivity and device access in Marin.

**Expand library branch digital resources into a flexible, long-term lending program.** Tech Connect Packs include a combination of a chromebook, wifi hotspot, and a technology guide in multiple languages. The library will have 250 hotspots with unfiltered, unlimited data ready by Fall 2021. Additional Tech Connect Packs were funded through the Emergency Connectivity Fund.

**San Rafael City Schools (SRCS) will continue a hotspots distribution program through T-Mobile.** They currently have 700 active hotspot accounts in distribution at a cost of $10 per month (12 month contracts).

**Comcast Internet Essentials emerged as an alternative connectivity solution** that connects to existing broadband, offers a discounted service, and allows the school district to be the account holder to mitigate any previous credit barriers to activating service. In some cases where hotspots were not reliable, the schools worked with families to transition to Comcast Internet Essentials if the infrastructure was available in the home.

**Continue Comcast Internet Essentials** in partnership with school districts in cases where this is the preferred connectivity solution.

In other cases where multiple families were living in one dwelling, a hotspot device still appears to be the best option.
**Outcome 2, Systems Change:** Increased collaboration across library, school technology leaders, and community members to close the Digital Divide.

- Marin Promise Partnership was invited to join Digital Marin to lead the Education Work Group, which convened a number of education technology stakeholders alongside a cross-sector effort to develop a countywide roadmap to reliable, affordable digital access for all. The needs assessment leveraged learnings gathered through the hotspots project.

- The Marin County Free Library, Marin County Department of Information Services & Technology, and the Partnership’s Backbone Staff collaboratively secured funding to hire a year-long Education Pioneers COVID Response Fellow to add capacity in bridging from the short-term hotspots project to a longer term strategic plan to address the Digital Divide. The Partners involved in the Hotspot project shifted their from the hotspots project to a broader initiative toward digital inclusion during the recovery phase of the Pandemic.

- Through the hotspots data-tracking process, SRCS and the Backbone Team collaborated to identify a need to collect student-level data on connectivity, devices, and digital literacy in their homes in the Student Information System. This was not happening across any Marin school districts, so Sarah Ashton (CTO at SRCS) and Abbie Ridenour (COVID Response Fellow) brought a proposal to pilot this for any interested districts as a part of the MCOE Countywide Tech Committee.

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<td><strong>Thorough data tracking of digital needs was de-prioritized in the crisis.</strong> School districts were not systematically and proactively collecting data from families to identify digital access needs at the student level for every enrolled student.</td>
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<td><strong>Insufficient data tracking during the crisis</strong> created barriers to identifying needs, tracking assets, and deploying solutions. Therefore, asset tracking between districts and libraries was, in some cases, disjointed, making it difficult to identify and address gaps.</td>
<td>Through the fall 2021 registration process, <strong>SRCS and several other districts surveyed every family to assess home internet connectivity and digital literacy needs</strong> as part of their student information system update. The process will be monitored as a strategic pilot through the county IT Directors collaboration to encourage this practice across the county. <strong>The Digital Marin project will add guidance in the strategic plan</strong> to encourage all districts to capture an aligned data set of digital needs in student information systems that will provide a county-wide picture of where connectivity gaps persist at the household level.</td>
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| The hotspots set the stage for additional funding opportunities that came through in the 2021 American Rescue Plan. Due to the collaboration and learning, schools and libraries could act quickly and convene to apply for federal funding. | Digital Marin and Marin Promise Partnership hosted a convening on the **Emergency Connectivity Fund** and attendees included school technology leaders as well as library leadership. Applications for funding hotspots and other connectivity solutions were submitted mid-August and awards were committed in the fall for the following partner institutions, among others in Marin County: San Rafael City Schools, Marin County Free Libraries, Shoreline Unified School District.  

**Shoreline Connectivity Collaborative** formed in May of 2021 to address specific geographic and infrastructure barriers to connectivity in the West Marin region. The collaborative secured funding through ECF for an innovative approach to internet connectivity through Starlink Technology and coupled it with a proposal for parent digital literacy support, leading to collaborative fundraising of a $300k project, securing funding from SUSD, MCF, WMF, and other individual donors. The collaborative project, supported by the Backbone Team, included leadership from MCFL, Parent Services Project, County of Marin IT, and SUSD. |
**Outcome 3, Family Engagement:** Improved family engagement with library and digital resources.

- Everyone who received a hotspot was also issued a library card, increasing access to library resources. MCFL added 101 new users during the hotspot device distribution which allowed for new engagement as well as opportunity for referral to other essential services to some of those same families.

- MCFL took a whole-family engagement approach to meet needs for the family -- not just the device -- which led to an increase in support provided for rental assistance, tutoring, food resources, and books by mail.

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<td><strong>Digital literacy appears to be a major barrier</strong> for an unknown number of families. Families and schools in some cases lacked tech support and knowledge to keep the hotspots functional within the home. They also lacked the ability to diagnose and navigate alternative connectivity options. Once connected, additional community support was needed to stay engaged at school through the various technology platforms and devices.</td>
<td><strong>Several school districts have updated their Student Information Systems to include a field for families to request introductory technology workshops.</strong> This information will be available to school leaders in fall 2021 to proactively provide support and learning for families. <strong>Marin Promise Partnership hosted three convenings of digital literacy workshop providers in fall/ winter 2021,</strong> as a response to clear interest in collaborative action among community-based providers and local districts, along with a <a href="#">landscape analysis</a> of digital literacy providers currently working with parents in the Marin community.</td>
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<td><strong>Community-provided resources can accelerate whole-family engagement in the educational process.</strong> The hotspots were a connection from the school and library to the home. During the summer, the library called families with hotspots with a specific set of questions to assess digital access and other resources needed.</td>
<td><strong>The library now has lists of students and families who at one point during COVID needed connectivity,</strong> and they have identified targeted ways to offer additional support in other key areas, including <a href="#">after-school tutoring and literacy programs such as Reading Buddies</a>.</td>
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