

Addressing internet connectivity disparities in Cincinnati

LC 5

Background

- Evidence shows that low-income status may lead to poor access to the internet, with many people having to go to outside locations e.g. the library to charge their phones and use the internet freely.
- While they serve the community in many ways, the largest aspect of St. Francis Seraph Ministries (SFSM) is the food service, distributing approximately 350 meals daily and 84,291 meals annually.
- When implementing a resource guide with our community partner, SFSM, clients were often resistant to access the online guide as they did not want to use their limited cellular data.
- Much of this population is experiencing homelessness. Lacking consistent shelter makes this population unable to utilize government-subsidized broadband programs like the Ohio Broadband Strategy. This lack of access necessitates programs for subsidizing cellular data access for those below 135% of the poverty line to improve community connectivity and utilization of health-improving public programs.



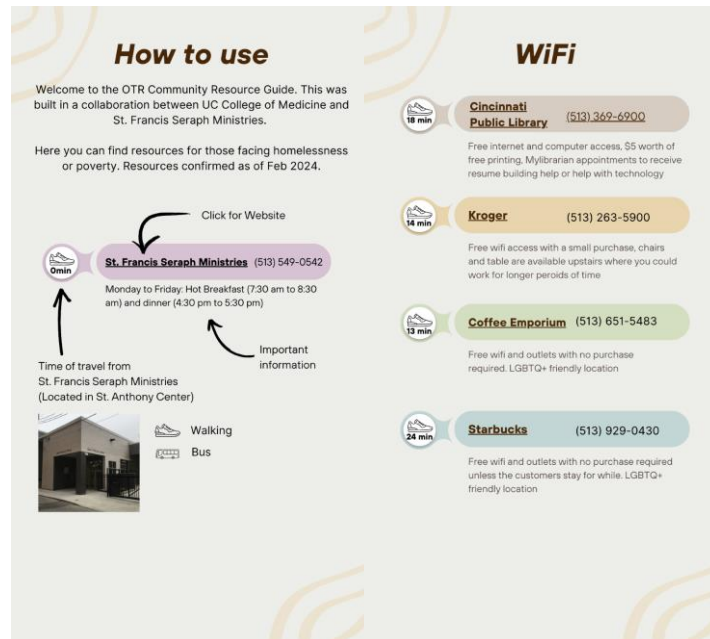
Social Determinant of Health

- The social determinant of health we are tackling is social and community context.
 - Access to mobile data services improve use of social resources, including expediting individual's pursuit of education, employment, and increasing access to medical care.
 - Mobile data would support improving social and community context to transform health outcomes.
- Only half of the SFSM clients were confident in their ability to access the internet.
- Homeless adults reported low rates of Internet access and limited ownership of computer or tablet devices (Rhoades, 2017).

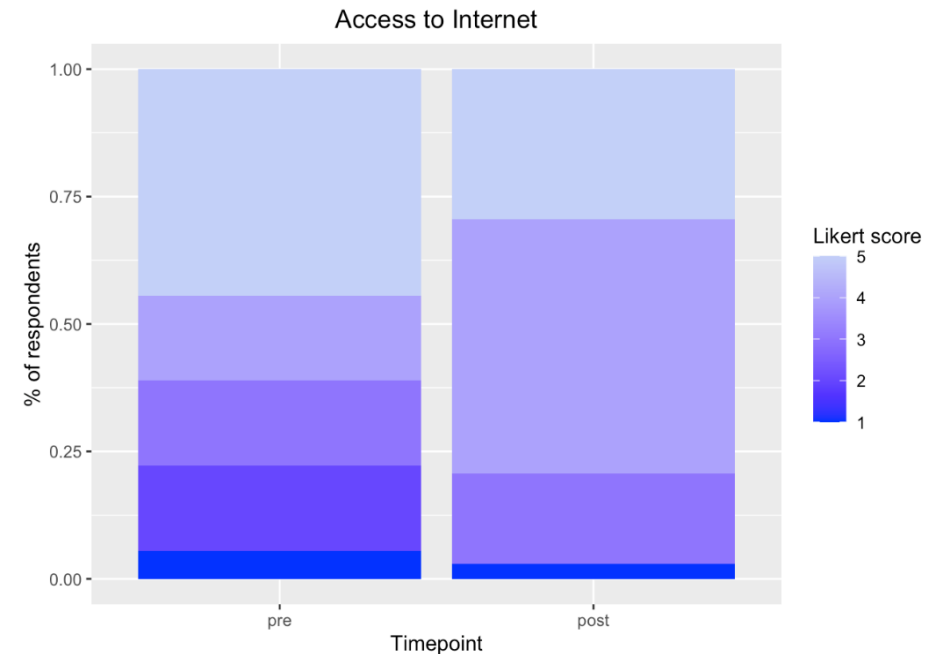


Project Overview

- Last year, we created an online resource guide for individuals experiencing homelessness in the OTR neighborhood to increase understanding of the availability of resources and how to use them
 - We conducted pre and post surveys and went from approximately 60% of the clients feeling confident in finding access to internet to over 75%
- After conducting surveys before and after the guide was created, we observed that while many clients had cell phones, they did not have access to cellular data to consistently utilize the guide



Resource Guide



Analysis of Access of Internet

Relevance to Target Population

- Increasing cellular service would allow individuals experiencing homelessness to increase their access to jobs and find shelters and food resources
- Access to mobile data results in decreased stress and anxiety for unhoused patrons and lead them to be more feel more connected and safe amongst their peers (Rhinesmith, 2023).
- Following the pandemic, more resources including social services and job opportunities are virtual, and unhoused individuals could greatly benefit from online connection

How the Government Can Help

- Lifeline is a program that used to exist and helped to provide significant discounts on broadband internet and telephone services for low-income individuals, however, this program ended in June of 2024.
- Advocating for individuals who qualify or qualified for the Lifeline Program to receive subsidized phone plans to aid them in finding jobs, resources, healthcare, and basic life needs.
- We are proposing and advocating for a subsidized cellular data plan at the municipal level to help individuals experiencing homelessness to become more consistently connected virtually
- Furthermore, many Lifeline Program approved plans require large upfront payments for multiple months of connectivity. We propose that the municipal subsidy should implement a flexible disbursement schedule that would improve access to plans requiring upfront payments.
- Another similar program is the Ohio Broadband Strategy established in 2021, with the goal of bringing high speed internet to those w/ connectivity issues. We believe that a similar analysis of those in need and creation of a grant would help our target population.

Sources

- [No Digital Divide? Technology Use among Homeless Adults - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [Smartphone Technology to Empower People Experiencing Homelessness: Secondary Analysis - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)
- [“It's one of the most important things we carry for us”: How mobile hotspots support people experiencing homelessness - Colin Rhinesmith, 2024 \(sagepub.com\)](#)