Digital Inclusion and the Twin Cities Homeless Community

by Rebecca Orrick

Abstract: Digital literacy is an essential skill in the 21st century, especially for homeless individuals searching for housing and other resources to leave the streets. In partnership with Open Access Connections, this project investigated whether homeless individuals in the Twin Cities metropolitan area felt that existing computer-based social services were available and accessible to them. Through an inventory of locations where people can access computers and technology outside their homes at no cost, as well as private interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys with homeless individuals, the research determined that homeless individuals have access to more than 150 locations where Internet access is available for free, but that location, hours of operation, limitations on the duration or purpose for using the Internet, and other barriers frequently hamper access. In addition, a substantial number of the homeless individuals who participated in the research are effectively digitally illiterate. Those who are digitally literate reported using the Internet primarily to search for housing or employment, or to learn basic computer skills. The research suggests a number of best practices for creating a community technology center for homeless individuals. The research was supported by a grant from CURA’s Communiversity program.

As commissioner Mignon Clyburn of the Federal Communications Commission noted during her address to America’s Broadband Summit in March 2010, “Knowing how to read is no longer sufficient to be ‘literate’ in the 21st century. Basic literacy must be supplemented with digital literacy”—the ability to use computers and other digital devices to access and share information. Whether it is searching for health information online, obtaining directions to get to a job interview, or sending an e-mail to a loved one, individuals who do not have access to Internet technology are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to nearly every facet of modern life.

Although it is important for each of us to have access to Internet-based technology, it is especially important for individuals who are homeless. Finding housing and other resources to leave the streets becomes infinitely easier when one is comfortable performing basic computer functions and has access to a space where Internet service is available. Increasing the number of people who are digitally self-sufficient decreases the number of people dependent on case-workers and other overburdened social-service providers. In this study, I looked at the homeless population in the Twin Cities to investigate whether homeless individuals felt that existing computer-based social services were available and accessible to them.

The research described in this article was commissioned by Open Access Connections (formerly known as Twin Cities Community Voice Mail), an organization that provides free access to technology for low-income and homeless individuals. Open Access Connections wanted to investigate whether it would make sense to create an Internet center specifically for homeless individuals in the Twin Cities.

Other organizations that collaborated on this research project included Voices for Change, the Minnesota Center for Neighborhood Organizing, the Main Street Project, the Trans Youth Support Network, and Alliance of the Streets.

Methodology and Limitations

To understand where people who are homeless and low income can currently access the Internet for free, I conducted an inventory of places in the Twin Cities where people could access computers and technology outside their homes at no cost. I started with a list of community technology centers (also referred to as public computer centers, public-access Internet centers, or neighborhood network centers) that had been compiled by the Technology Literacy Collaborative, a Twin Cities–based digital literacy advocacy organization, then added computer labs in other locations that I identified through my research. In addition to making an up-to-date list, I compiled information on each center, including information on hours of operation, limitations on duration or purpose for using the Internet, and other barriers to access.

Having access to Internet-based technology is especially important for individuals who are homeless. Those without access to the Internet are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to finding housing, jobs, and other resources to leave the streets.
on hours, rules, and restrictions of use. I did not include in this inventory universities or other areas where access was intended only for students. However, many homeless individuals I spoke with reported using these facilities unofficially. For instance, individuals reported using these services by logging in to unsecured Wi-Fi or taking advantage of guest log-ins in college libraries.

To gauge feelings about the current levels of Internet access available for homeless individuals, I conducted 10 private interviews with homeless individuals and human-services professionals, led three focus groups composed of homeless individuals, and administered 89 open-ended surveys to homeless individuals at area shelters and at Project Homeless Connect. In addition, I received 20 messages in response to a question I posed using the Open Access Connections broadcast-messaging system. This messaging system works by sending a message directly to the voicemail inboxes of homeless and low-income individuals who are signed up for free voicemail services through Open Access Connections.

It is important to note several limitations to this research. First, individuals who are homeless are by nature transient, and there is no list of everyone who is homeless living in the Twin Cities. Therefore, I was not able to randomly sample all homeless individuals, creating inherent biases in the study. For instance, for the focus groups, individuals I spoke with were part of preselected groups of individuals working toward improving the conditions of homeless individuals, so their opinions were not necessarily representative of all homeless individuals. In addition, for the surveys, I had to rely on individuals frequenting shelters or visiting Project Homeless Connect, whose perspective might be different than the segment of the homeless population that is less connected to social services or shelters. My study had an inherent response bias as well, since individuals who took the time to answer my survey, attend a focus group, or respond to the broadcast message were self-selecting themselves as being inherently more knowledgeable about and interested in technology as a whole than the greater Twin Cities homeless population. Finally, my inventory of locations in the Twin Cities where individuals can access free Internet technology may be incomplete due to my being unaware of lesser-known centers.

**Findings**

This section summarizes findings from my research.

**Where Can People Access the Internet for Free in the Twin Cities?**

I identified 151 places where people can access the Internet and other technology for free in the Twin Cities (Figure 1). In both Minneapolis and St. Paul, people can access computers at libraries, workforce centers, nonprofits, parks and recreation sites, community centers, homeless shelters, and at various transitional housing locations. These locations offer a variety of different services and have differing restrictions on computer usage. For instance, some community technology centers are only available to certain clientele or only offer classes, whereas others are open to whoever wants to access the Internet. In addition, the range of assistance available varies widely; some centers cater to individuals new to computers, whereas others—such as public libraries—allow individuals to browse the Internet on their own.

Many existing centers have additional limitations. First, because of budget limitations, many centers are only open a few hours a day. Often these hours are weekdays during the day, making it difficult for homeless individuals who work during the day to use them. Public libraries are a notable exception, with many offering evening and weekend hours. Secondly, many centers have strict limitations on what people can do on the computers. If, for example, the computers at a particular center are designated for use only to secure work or to start a business, then the center likely will prohibit Internet access for other purposes. Although it might be argued that public libraries exist for this purpose, if someone needs one-on-one assistance using a computer, librarians may not always be able to offer the same degree of assistance that smaller centers might be able to. Furthermore, public libraries often restrict computer use to 30–60 minutes at a time. If someone is not familiar with computers, or needs to complete a more involved task on a computer, this may not be enough time. Libraries have started to address this issue by offering designated hours when individuals can work for extended times on things such as finding a job.

Interestingly, I identified 33 Internet centers that currently exist in shelters and transitional-housing locations. These have the characteristic of being private labs open only to residents or individuals involved in the location’s programming. Many of these labs are sponsored by private charities such as Catholic Charities, or public-housing agencies such as the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. In many cases, activities in these centers appear to be tightly regulated and task specific. For instance, at one shelter I visited, no computer free time was available for people staying in the shelter unless they were part of a specific group of people (such as individuals receiving Minnesota Family Investment Program Assistance or in the shelter’s job-search club). When guests did access computers, they could use them only to accomplish the specific task of the group for a tightly regulated period of time. In addition, these computer technology centers do not cater to the broader homeless population, just the ones who are lucky enough to have found a spot in that particular shelter and be part of a group with computer-access privileges.

I found that, although about a third more people lived in Minneapolis than St. Paul in 2010. Minneapolis has nearly twice the number of community technology centers as St. Paul (97 verses 54). Furthermore, public libraries, which represent the largest number of community technology centers, appear to offer better access to the Internet in Minneapolis than St. Paul in terms of time-limit and wait-list policies.

Despite the large number of places to access the Internet for free, the existence of these community technology centers is not common knowledge among homeless individuals. Although people often know that it is possible to access the Internet for free at the library and workforce centers, many of the homeless individuals I interviewed and surveyed did not know access to free Internet technology was available at many smaller centers. Given that each of these smaller centers has its own rules, hours of operations, and restrictions on use, it can be very tricky to navigate the system. For example, two out of the four locations where I surveyed homeless individuals offered Internet access; however, many interviewees were not aware that those services existed within the facility in which they were staying.

**What do Homeless Individuals in the Twin Cities Think about their Access to the Internet?**

For the individuals I surveyed, by far the most
commonly reported place for accessing the Internet was the library (48 out of 89 respondents). Individuals also reported that they access the Internet at area shelters, nonprofits, universities, at the homes of friends and families, and on their smartphones and laptops. However, many individuals specifically mentioned that they did not know of other public places to access the Internet besides public libraries.

Homeless individuals staying near downtown Minneapolis gave largely positive responses about their access to Internet technology, often citing the Minneapolis Central Library as having computer access normally available with no wait. In contrast, the homeless community in downtown St. Paul gave less positive responses, frequently mentioning that accessing computers at the downtown St. Paul library, which is near where many shelters are located, was very difficult, and often resulted in long waiting times. Several people mentioned feeling so frustrated with how difficult it was to access the Internet (due to their limited skills and long waiting times) that they effectively gave up trying. One St. Paul respondent explained:

I waste time when I go to the library. [I] use the Internet for one hour and wait for three hours.

People also expressed frustration over the 60-minute daily time limit in St. Paul public libraries, saying that it was not enough time to do the things they needed to do on the computers. For instance, one respondent in a focus group mentioned that he went to the library to fill out a job application, but his daily limit was up before the job application was completed. Another respondent voiced a similar sentiment:

If you’re not familiar with the Internet, you could spend a whole hour just trying to get on.

When I asked individuals who are homeless what they wanted to do on the computers, many wanted to search for housing or find employment. Others wanted to learn advanced computer skills, build a website, or just see what the Internet had to offer. Many respondents also mentioned that they wanted to use the Internet to reconnect with family and friends and to keep up with world news. One respondent stressed the importance of using online computer games such as Farmville and YouVille to acquire life skills, noting:

[They are] excellent ways to learn life skills, such as budgeting money, buying homes, and saving for what you need [or] want.

In addition to being a good way to learn life skills, computer games can also be good tools to build computer competency. However, because many computer technology centers specifically restrict individuals from playing games or doing other similar activities on their computers, a service gap exists. As a recent Social Science Research Council Report noted, the “path to becoming an empowered user who views the Internet as a resource or expansion of his or her world” involves lots of low-pressure activities, such as learning how to instant-message, send an e-mail, or play
The Internet is bad news—too many drug dealers and sex offenders.

In addition, some felt that accessing the Internet would not have any positive benefit in their lives, such as one respondent who said:

“When you’re on the street, [you] just go by what people tell [you], and it’s normally pretty good.”

Several individuals reported that they did not access the Internet because they did not know how to read, suggesting a larger underlying barrier to digital literacy: lack of access to remedial education. Despite these concerns and barriers, many homeless individuals acknowledged that it would be useful to have more Internet skills. In a focus group, one respondent mentioned that it was frustrating that everywhere he went people would tell him that if he wanted more information on a topic, he should “just look it up online.” Because this respondent did not know how to use computers, this made him feel more socially isolated.

**What Would Homeless Individuals in the Twin Cities Like to See in an Internet Center?**

When I asked people what they would like to see in an Internet center created specifically for homeless individuals, many focus group participants expressed a desire for a place that would be more than just an Internet center. Several mentioned that they sometimes felt uncomfortable in existing computer centers because learning how to use computers was such a daunting prospect. Instead, they wanted a place that had not only printers, fast Internet access, and copiers, but also creature comforts such as couches, coffee, and food so they could take breaks if computer tasks became too daunting. Many respondents mentioned that it would be useful to have an Internet center that was staffed with patient people who could teach them how to use computers. Other common themes included an option to save their work on computers (something that workforce centers, libraries, and many other centers do not allow) and having a phone near the computers so that individuals could be on the phone and online at the same time if need be.

**Proximity to Shelters.** Because many people who are homeless do not have reliable access to transportation, it is important that services for homeless individuals be located close to area shelters. Many (although not all) homeless individuals in the Twin Cities stay in shelters, which are generally located in downtown Minneapolis, downtown St. Paul, or south Minneapolis. Of these three locations, many homeless individuals I spoke with indicated that the area with the greatest deficiency in adequate Internet access was downtown St. Paul. Of the locations that do offer Internet access in downtown St. Paul, they noted that many of the existing centers had limitations. For instance, the central library has long waiting times; Listening House, a drop-in day homeless shelter, has computers but no Internet access; and Dorothy Day, another day homeless shelter, limits Internet access mainly to those conducting job searches.

**Safety.** Because many individuals who are homeless experience mental- or chemical-health struggles or are down on their luck economically, it is important that Internet centers for homeless individuals take measures to ensure that guests feel safe and equipment does not get stolen. This is particularly important if the Internet center is a stand-alone center that does not offer other services or is open at times when few people will be around. Safety issues were a recurrent theme in the surveys, focus groups, and interviews; individuals wanted to make sure that if a new center was developed, they would feel safe in it.

Safety and security could be addressed by having “bouncers” or other staff handle issues that may arise, or by installing security cameras or alarms. Community Technology Centers’ Network (CTCNet), a resource for community technology centers across the country, recommends that at least two staff members (paid or volunteer) be on the premises at all times that the center is open to reduce safety issues.

**Trained Staff.** Although it is important that all community technology centers make help available for those people who need it, it is particularly important in centers for individuals who are homeless. Learning to master computers can be especially difficult without a proper night’s sleep or when battling any number of other issues that individuals who are homeless face. In an interview, long-time homeless advocate Bret Byfield stressed the importance of having staff who are adequately trained to interact with people positively, so that the center is a welcoming place for individuals. He suggested that all staff be trained in a counseling technique known as motivational interviewing, “a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change.”

**Clearly Stated Rules.** Another issue of particular importance to the homeless population is that everyone who visits the center understands “who is in charge” and what the rules are. In one of the focus groups I conducted, participants stated that a major reason why Internet access was removed from the Listening House drop-in homeless shelter in St. Paul was because of fighting over who would use the computers, which stemmed from conflicts over unclearly defined rules.

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Best Practices for Operating Internet Centers for the Homeless

In addition to some of the recommendations regarding Internet centers suggested by my interviews, focus groups, and surveys, I identified the following “best practices” from researching Internet centers in the Twin Cities and in other cities around the country.

1. Do not underestimate the amount of planning required to start a stand-alone computer center. Starting such a center from scratch can be very expensive, difficult, and time consuming. If at all possible, it is best to partner with an existing initiative. Most computer labs do not exist as stand-alone centers, but within nonprofits and other organizations for this very reason. When searching for partners, the requirements of a good location and a shared mission should be prioritized.a

2. Advertise the availability of the center. Many computer centers have made the mistake of not advertising their services when they were just getting started, with the result that the labs were underutilized. If potential users don’t know about the center, they will not come.b

3. Establish consistent hours of operation. Visitors may become frustrated when hours change frequently, so it is often better to have shorter, consistent hours of operation rather than longer, but inconsistent hours. Many centers stretch their hours of operation through the use of volunteer staff, but volunteers may not be as responsible or reliable as paid staff. In addition, volunteers need to be recruited, trained, and managed, which can consume paid staff time.c

4. Track the demographics of visitors. Tracking demographics can be helpful for securing funding, and is required by some funders. It may be best to ask all visitors to sign in when they arrive, and new users to complete a short demographic questionnaire. Tracking such information as how visitors are using the Internet, and how successfully (i.e., the number of job interviews obtained, or the number of civic media projects completed), can also be helpful for securing funding.d

5. Clearly post rules for use of the center. This practice allows everyone who visits the center to understand what is expected of them. Typically these rules include such things as “No food or drink” so that computer systems do not get damaged, “Silence please” so that people can concentrate on their work, and “Be respectful of others” to set the tone for a harmonious environment.e

6. Establish a clear policy on whether to allow children in the center. If kids are permitted, they will have to be monitored closely so they do not damage equipment. If they are not permitted, some individuals may not be able to use the center because childcare is unavailable. The People Serving People shelter creatively addresses the issue by having an unsupervised play area situated next to the computer lab in a separate room. While parents are using the computers in the lab, they can monitor their children in the next room on a webcam.f

7. Establish a policy regarding whether or not visitors can save material on the computers. Centers approach this issue in many different ways. Project for Pride in Living does not allow people to save files on computers, but offers visitors a flash drive that they can purchase. Visitors to the Workforce Center are encouraged to save documents to their email. Waite House Neighborhood Center allows visitors to save materials on computers, and provides each person with a separate folder where they can save their documents. For privacy and security, folders can be password protected.g

8. Establish a policy on printing. Allowing unlimited printing can quickly consume resources. St. Stephen’s shelter solves this problem by requiring that all documents to be printed first be sent to a central computer staffed by a lab monitor, who must approve the print job. This prevents someone from printing a large document or multiple copies of a single document.h

9. Be leery of donated equipment. It is worth the cost to invest in new equipment if it means more reliable access for visitors and fewer maintenance issues for staff.i

10. Hire staff who can provide regular maintenance and troubleshoot computer, printer, and network problems. Purchasing new equipment can minimize maintenance and troubleshooting, but all computers will require some maintenance. Some Internet centers program their computers to automatically reset their memory every time a user logs off to keep them running smoothly and minimize maintenance issues.j

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a Personal interview with Catherine Settani, founder of the Community Technology Empowerment AmeriCorps Project, September 29, 2010; CTCNet, Center Start-Up Manual.
b Personal Interview with Angelina Nguyen, former staff member at Asian Community Technology Center, October 22, 2010.
c Site visit, Waite House Neighborhood Center (WHNC), October 13, 2010; CTCNet, Center Start-Up Manual. Centers can advertise volunteer opportunities at volunteermatch.org, and through community service offices at local colleges and universities.
d Site visit, People for Pride in Living (PPL), October 18, 2010; site visit, WHNC, October 13, 2010; personal interview with Angelina Nguyen, October 22, 2010.
e Site visit, WHNC, October 13, 2010; site visit, Dorothy Day, December 9, 2010.
f Site visit, People Serving People, October 13, 2010.
g Site visit, PPL, October 18, 2010; personal interview with Manuel Moore, Open Access Connections, December 9, 2010; site visit, Workforce Center, October 18, 2010; site visit, WHNC, October 13, 2010; personal interview with David Jordahl, homeless advocate and Community Services and Resources Network for Minnesota web developer, October 13, 2010.
h Site visit, St. Stephen’s computer lab, November, 4, 2010.
i Personal interview with Catherine Settani, September 29, 2010.
j Site visit, PPL, October 18, 2010; site visit, Minneapolis Central Library, October 13, 2010.
about who was in charge of monitoring computer usage.

**Conclusion, Recommendations, and Further Research**

This research highlights a number of Internet access issues for the homeless population in the Twin Cities. Although many places exist where people who are homeless could access the Internet free of charge, many respondents did not perceive that they have adequate access to the Internet. A substantial number of individuals were not aware that locations exist outside of libraries and workforce centers to access the Internet for free. In addition, many reported feeling intimidated by existing locations. Common concerns included feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of learning how to use computers, worry that no one would be available to help them if they visited a center, and concern that it would take too long to access computers or complete their tasks within the time limits for computer use.

Several recommendations emerge from these findings. First, it is important to spread the word about existing computer centers to the homeless population, particularly about computer labs with assistance available that exist in and near shelters. It is important to conduct both outreach to the broader social-service community and direct outreach in shelters. Minneapolis and St. Paul might consider assigning to a specific employee or department the task of spreading the word about community technology centers within their boundaries. In addition to maintaining a list where people could find a center suited to their needs, this individual could advertise in shelters and nonprofits. Messaging should include what individuals could expect at each center, such as restrictions on use, availability of assistance, and hours of operation. This information would help to ease the anxiety that people new to computers might feel when visiting a computer center for the first time. The City of Seattle employs someone in its Office of Technology who has had great success spreading the word about community technology centers. In addition to publicizing the availability of computer centers, Internet access for the homeless population could be improved by having computer centers close to shelters extend their hours so that they better meet the needs of homeless individuals. Expanding the range of activities for which people are allowed to use computers would also help people to feel comfortable in computer centers, and encourage those who wish to become digitally literate to take the first step.

In addition to spreading the word about existing centers, organizations in Minneapolis and St. Paul should also consider creating a new Internet center that specifically meets the needs of individuals who are homeless. Based on the results reported here, such a center would best be located in an area underserved by existing computer centers but near area shelters, such as downtown St. Paul. In addition such a center would need to have sufficient help available, be open during extended hours, and have staff trained in everything from crisis management to computer skills. Open Access Connections, the nonprofit organization that commissioned this research, would like to pursue such an Internet center, but it has been forced to temporarily postpone planning due to financial difficulties.

Moving forward, it would be useful to expand research about digital inclusion among the homeless population in the Twin Cities. Because my research sample was not representative of the homeless population in the area, it is not possible to calculate the percentage of homeless individuals in the Twin Cities who are digitally illiterate. However, for service planning, such information would be extremely useful.

One possibility for gathering this type of data would be to coordinate with the statewide homelessness study that Wilder Research organizes every three years. In this study, Wilder Research interviews nearly 10,000 homeless adults and children about their needs and current situation. If Wilder Research could add a question or two about digital literacy, meaningful data on this subject could be gathered.

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