

Internet Access in the Lillian Wald Houses

A survey for the Lower East Side Girls Club of New York City

Prepared by: Zach Eveland and Heather Dewey-Hagborg

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Introduction

The Lower East Side Girls Club (LESGC) is a non-profit organization in Manhattan which offers educational activities for females ages 8-18 residing in the area. The Girls Club is currently working on plans for constructing an innovative new facility on Avenue D between 7th and 8th streets in Manhattan. Their vision is to create a structure which engages the community around them, offering artistic, social, and technological opportunities which would otherwise be unavailable.

The Girls Club has been working on a plan for offering free wireless Internet to members of the community surrounding their new building. They asked for our assistance in determining the practicality and impact such a project would have on the residents. We worked with a resident of the target neighborhood to develop a technology survey to assess the existing technological infrastructure. We then walked door to door administering the survey, allowing us to compile data on how much technology and education would be necessary for the residents to effectively utilize such an offering.

The Neighborhood

The building we surveyed is part of the Lillian Wald Housing Development, which is one of the original 10 public housing developments located in The Lower East Side. Located along Avenue D/ FDR Drive between Houston and 6th Streets, it has 16 buildings 10, 11, 13 and 14-stories tall with 1,857 apartments housing an estimated 4,536 residents. The development is multicultural and family oriented. It has a school located right off of Houston Street, a Daycare center, a Boys Brotherhood Republic for boys and girls and a community center. To qualify for public housing in New York City the total gross family income must not exceed the maximum income limits (\$35,150 for single person, \$40,200 for two people...) and the family must meet the New York City Housing Authority's (NYCHA) definition of a family. More information available on NYCHA's website: http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/assistance/app_for_pubhsg.shtml

The Survey

We developed the survey with the assistance of Herminia Colon Oliveras, a resident of the Lillian Wald houses in the surveyed neighborhood. The questions were designed to assess a few key factors:

1. What percentage of residents already have computers.
2. What percentage of residents have experience using the Internet.
3. What percentage of residents already have Internet access at home.
4. For those residents that do not have computers or Internet access at home, the primary reasons why.
5. What kind of infrastructure exists already for people to access the Internet and how it is utilized.
6. What level of interest exists among residents regarding the Girls Club's plan to offer free wireless Internet access.

Our Results

On two separate days in November of 2005 we walked door to door in a low income building on East 4th Walk in the Lillian Wald Houses. We knocked on every door, and out of a possible 120 apartments got a total of 54 responses. Of those households that did not respond many simply appeared not be home. 11 households indicated they were not interested in participating in the survey.

We found that 53% of the residents who responded to our survey had computers in their homes. Of the respondents, 26% have broadband Internet access at home and an additional 10% have dial-up Internet access. Of people who did not have either computers or the Internet the most common reasons were expense and technical difficulties. Another common reason was lack of time for learning how to use them. The existing resources people listed for accessing the internet included the public library, Henry Street Settlement, the community center, and their children's schools. Only 7 households said that they utilized these resources. When asked if they were easily accessible, people often said that the public library was difficult to use due to long lines and the short period of time allotted for use.

<i>Households who:</i>	<i>Number of total respondents:</i>	<i>Percentage of total respondents:</i>
Have one or more computers at home:	28	53%
Have Internet access at home:	19	36%
Have broadband Internet access at home:	14	26%

Table 1: Computer Ownership and Internet Access in Lillian Wald Houses

Of the residents we surveyed who had at least one computer at home, all but one is using some flavor of the Microsoft Windows operating system on PC hardware. One respondent is using a Macintosh with OSX. There is a mix of laptop and desktop systems but desktops predominate.

Our Conclusions

Our administration of the survey was conversational, and the most valuable information we gathered came from casual discussion. The overwhelming impression we were left with is that education is essential before any free technology could be effectively utilized. Many of the adults we spoke to had a difficult time discussing the questions because they did not have a firm understanding of the technologies being discussed. Before free wireless Internet can be useful it must be understood as a concept, along with basic computer and web skills.

The question of which is more important, machines or skills is a hot topic in the digital divide community right now. With the impending release of the hundred dollar computer lots of people are debating how useful these machines will be if they are simply put in people's hands without any training as to how to use them. The same issue is at

question here; we can hand out free Internet but without teaching people how to use it is it worthwhile? The conclusion we have come to is that it is not. In order for the community we spoke with to make use of a free Internet connection, education and creation of a technical support system will be necessary.

Municipal and community run free wireless networks are popping up around the country. From Philadelphia, PA to Athens, GA, to Cerritos and San Francisco, CA many cities have already put networks into effect or have plans to do so in the near future. It seems very unlikely a city as large and economically powerful as New York will fail follow suit. With this in mind it might be more valuable to work first on getting a municipal network approved for New York and second on ensuring that the Lower East Side Housing Developments get covered by this network when it gets built. Dave Pentecost has made progress in this area and has contacted several community organizations that are organizing wireless networks. He has also gained the support of at least one ISP that has an interest in this project.

One recognized obstacle here is the opposition that has emerged in other cities from commercial Internet Service Providers and telecommunications companies. These entrenched interests have often succeeded in encouraging state and municipal bodies to adopt laws and regulations that restrict the spread of free wireless Internet access. We are not aware of any pending legislation that would affect the ability of community groups to offer such access in New York City but this situation should be watched carefully.

We recommend that rather than spending time right now setting up and troubleshooting a free wireless network in the housing developments, the Girls Club could better invest their resources in setting up an educational plan for teaching basic computer and networking skills. This would allow the Girls Club to use its established presence in the community and relationships with leaders and citizens in the most beneficial way. One possibility might be to offer a training course which teaches all the information necessary to get started at home, and then give the trained individual an inexpensive machine to bring back with them. Doing this would have the additional impact of creating a network of well trained residents who could form a technical support team for their community.

With this type of infrastructure in place it will be easier to approach municipal government and other organizations having the necessary resources and experience to implement such a network. The residents of the area will also be able to benefit more fully from free broadband Internet access if they already have the skills and equipment to take advantage of the service.

In conclusion, if the physical technology and the technical infrastructure come together, offering free Internet to this neighborhood could have a wonderful impact. We fully support the Girls Clubs efforts in this pursuit, but emphasize that it should begin from the ground up; education, physical technology, technical support infrastructure, and then free wireless Internet.