

NEWS

'I don't give up on my son but I give up on the system.' Covington works to bridge digital divide for students

Madeline Mitchell Cincinnati Enquirer

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When Ebony Friday, 38, got laid off of her “dream job” in the spring, she could no longer afford her son’s private school tuition.

So he lost his dream school.

Friday’s 13-year-old son, Emontaye, started at Holmes Middle School as Covington Independent Public Schools went virtual, in the midst of a global pandemic.

Emontaye was stressed, his mother says. He liked his old school, and getting one-on-one, in-person attention. Plus, the Fridays did not have access to the internet at home.

It wasn’t just difficult to adjust, Friday said. It was “impossible.”

“I don’t give up on my son but I give up on the system because it’s too hard to contact these people and try to figure (it) out,” she said.

Friday did not know how to help her son turn in paperwork, and quite frankly, she didn’t want him doing worksheets for hours on end, anyway. He can't learn like that, she said. Instead, she made up her own lessons. She said she made sure he read and wrote each day.

Friday is a self-proclaimed “fun mom” who makes up songs and dances to help Emontaye remember school lessons. She wants him to be successful, she said.

“I just did the best I could because it was so hard. I didn’t even know, ain’t nobody contacting me – I didn’t even know when school started,” she said. “I had no clue.”

Covington Connect

When it became clear that schools were going virtual, the city of Covington came up with a plan to address the digital divide plaguing its families.

In July, the city announced a \$2.5 million Covington Connect project: a partnership with Cincinnati Bell, the Housing Authority of Covington and Covington Independent Public Schools. Local computer firms Blair Technology Group and ReGadget and the Houston-based nonprofit Comp-U-Dopt also partnered with the city to help provide nearly 2,000 laptops for families in need.

Roughly \$1.5 million of the funding comes from federal and state Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding, officials said. Cincinnati Bell contributed about \$700,000 and Covington public school officials committed to contributing \$250,000.

"In a world where internet access is increasingly necessary to do everything from applying for a job to accessing health care to paying your rent to attending college to cashing your paycheck, too many families are effectively blocked from opportunities that many of us take for granted," Covington Mayor Joe Meyer said. "Digital access isn't a vague, symbolic concept – it's an everyday need."

The project planned to both expand internet access and distribute free devices: laptops, desktop computers, Chromebooks, etc.

Peter Bales, who managed the project, said they mapped out where schoolchildren live in the city to identify the most effective Wi-Fi access point placements, and came up with 124 locations.

He says Covington is "very progressive" in dealing with the digital divide.

"I've been in local government administration for 25 years and I think the things that the city of Covington (are) doing are absolutely on the forefront of what communities need to be doing," Bales said. "Bridging that digital divide and creating those inclusive learning environments are just fantastic."

Project workers began installing Wi-Fi access points in early October, Bales said. As of Tuesday, 53 access points had been installed, ready to go live in early December, and more than 1,000 devices had been distributed to Covington school-aged children.

Bales said the city plans to complete the project by the end of the year and help over 65% of Covington's public school students.

Housing authority opportunities

Simultaneously, as part of Covington Connect, the Housing Authority of Covington contracted with Cincinnati Bell to connect Latonia Terrace and City Heights to high-speed Wi-Fi, instantly aiding hundreds of families including Friday's.

Friday lives in City Heights, a Covington Housing Authority development just north of Latonia.

Housing Authority of Covington Executive Director Steve Arlinghaus says there are 820 children living in City Heights and Latonia Terrace, and child residents at those two developments make up about half of the student body at Ninth District Elementary and Latonia Elementary schools.

But Arlinghaus says the goal in bridging the digital divide in these communities was not just about the children. It was for the families.

"In reality that's where COVID-19, and I hate to say it that way, but it's been a blessing," Arlinghaus said. "Because it has given us the opportunity to do some things we would never have been able to do. And it also, it (shed) a light on what we're dealing with here."

Housing Authority of Covington Deputy Director Chris Bradburn said she's tried for years to get internet connectivity in these housing developments, but never had the funding to do so. With the CARES Act funds, they were able to prepay internet service for three to five years at all units in City Heights and Latonia Terrace.

"(COVID-19) exacerbated an existing problem, for sure," Bradburn said. "Our biggest issue was access. That was even before COVID. You know, access to services, access to transportation, access to child care, access to health care. At least now our families have a way to reach out."

Since losing her job as a direct support professional at Redwood, a nonprofit focused on children and adults with disabilities, Friday has been able to take advantage of the Housing Authority's partnership with the Brighton Center. The partnership created a "City Futures" jobs plus program, where career developer Lydia Erickson has been able to work with Friday on her career goals.

Friday gets emotional when she explains her relationship with Erickson. She says she calls Erickson all of the time, just to talk about everyday struggles and victories.

“Part of my job description is being able to just sit and understand and just... get to know residents, like Ebony,” Erickson said.

Erickson said there are a lot of parents in City Heights who have kids in daycare or at school, but are also trying to go to school themselves. It can be incredibly stressful, especially with a lack of resources available.

“I ain't gonna give up,” Friday said. “I’m gonna keep going. I gotta reach my goals, I can’t just sit here and do nothing because that’s not what I’m here for. I like to help people.”

'Thank God for free Wi-Fi'

Emontaye had health issues over the summer, Friday said, and her 4-year-old daughter Ezliah has chronic asthma.

Friday doesn't drive. In the past, she's had to catch a bus with her children to get to the doctor's office – a trip made all the more nerve-wracking during a global pandemic.

Internet access has allowed the family to use telehealth services.

Friday uses the internet to search for jobs, and for Zoom interviews. She can now do online banking and take online courses. She said she likes to explore different subjects on the internet to keep learning new things.

Even just knowing that internet resources are there for her to lean on helps out mentally, Friday said.

For now, Friday is staying home with her son, checking in on him every five minutes to make sure he's staying focused on virtual school. Things are better now than in the spring, she said. When the pandemic hit, everything happened so fast: she lost her job, Emontaye was taken out of school and she wasn't sure what would happen next.

Technology and Wi-Fi were the last things on her priority list at that point, Friday said.

But the programs and resources that came to her in the months that followed were a "blessing."

"It opened up a lot of doors for me," she said.