



## TECHNOLOGY

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# Lack of Internet access makes climb out of poverty harder

*De Blasio administration and grassroots groups aim to address NYC residents on wrong side of digital divide*

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by [Golda Arthur](#)

Marsha Robinson celebrated a milestone this year. She earned an associate's degree in applied science.

If this accomplishment seems ordinary, take a look at the odds stacked against her: She is in her late forties, is a single mother of four children and lives in the Bronx, a borough of New York City where 30 percent of residents are below the poverty line. But by far the biggest challenge, she said, was living in public housing with no access to the Internet.

"Oh, my God, it wasn't easy," she said.

She attributes her success to a fair amount of determination and discipline. And the digital van.

The van, a mobile computer lab, is a project of the New York City Housing Authority, the city agency responsible for public housing. The van travels across the city's five boroughs, bringing free broadband access to areas that have none.

Robinson couldn't afford a laptop or her cable bill and had no computer literacy when she started her program. During those two years, she would visit the van faithfully each week for hours at a time, taking her handwritten assignments to be typed up and printed out.

There, she would do research, complete online classes and look up the Latin medical terminology she needed to know. Some of her research was basic. “I didn’t know what a blog was when I started out,” she said with a laugh. “I had to Google it.” Her kids would go along and do their homework in the van.

Robinson is one of an estimated 2 million New Yorkers without Internet access at home. More than a third of households below the poverty line do not have home Internet access, according to the Center for Economic Opportunity. So for the city’s poorest, paying bills, doing homework and applying for jobs are harder still.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio is focusing efforts this year on bridging this digital divide between the technology haves and have-nots as part of his broader agenda for economic justice.

Declaring that Internet access is no longer a luxury but a necessity, his administration announced plans to spend [\\$10 million bringing free high-speed broadband service to five public housing developments](#) in the city.

An estimated 60 million Americans lack Internet access at home, and given how much of our lives depend on online interactions, the consequences of being on the wrong side of the divide are substantial.

Robinson welcomes the mayor’s initiative but said, “It took the president to bring this to light,” referring to Barack Obama’s announcement earlier this year that he would [expand a program bringing high-speed Internet access to low-income households](#) all over the country.

In New York City, small-scale community innovation isn’t waiting for government to take the lead.

Take Stuart Reid and Doug Frazier, veteran digital entrepreneurs who created a wireless broadband network at the Harlem Hospital Center. The network also works as a backup emergency communications system for the hospital and provides free Wi-Fi to the rest of the neighborhood.

“Although there’s a proliferation of smart devices, people are lacking basic broadband in the home,” Reid said, pointing out that smartphones often have their limitations.

Frazier said that people who can't polish their resumes or apply for jobs online are less likely to gain employment, further deepening income inequality. "The people on the wrong side of the divide won't be the ones getting the contracts and the jobs," he said.

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**Tony Marx**

president, New York Public Library

The people behind an innovative project in the Red Hook neighborhood in Brooklyn are also convinced of technology's ability to level the playing field. The pioneering [Red Hook Initiative](#) installed a mesh network of wireless nodes in the neighborhood in 2012. As a measure of how successful its work has been, it will soon be involved in de Blasio's efforts to help bring Wi-Fi to the city's public housing.

Red Hook is a fairly isolated part of southwestern Brooklyn, cut off from the rest of the borough by an expressway and poorly served by public transport.

When Hurricane Sandy took its toll on the area, the small-scale mesh network kept people connected during the storm and the recovery that followed.

The Red Hook Initiative also created the Digital Stewards program, a yearlong fellowship teaching tech skills to neighborhood residents ages 19 to 24. Jaebi Bussy trains the participants and says it's about not just learning how to take apart a computer but also giving people tools to reshape their lives.

"It's the ability to make choices," he said. "So they're not stuck with what they have. They now have the information and the power to make a difference."

Quentin Dalton, a 21-year-old newly minted digital steward, grew up in the nearby public housing projects.

"A lot of times, you can't pay your phone bill or try to scrape up enough money to pay the cable bill," he said. "So the free Wi-Fi makes a big difference." Dalton

recalled that he once failed a middle school project because he couldn't research or print out an assignment.

Tony Marx, the president of the New York Public Library, told a story of seeing a high school student with an old laptop on the steps of one of the libraries he visited. Although the library was closed, he said, the boy was using the building's Wi-Fi to do his homework.

"He was a couple of miles away from one of the richest neighborhoods in the city," said Marx. "That he had to have the crumbs off the table is shocking."

This year, the library system will lend Wi-Fi devices to people who lack home Internet access, aiming to reach 10,000 households. The devices can be used for up to a year for free and was made possible by funding from Google and backing from de Blasio's office.

"Here's this technology, which is the most amazing gift of discovery in terms of giving people skills, and whole swaths of our population are left in the dark," said Marx, adding that even in the digital age, the library has a role in helping people learn and keep pace with change.

To this end, the New York Public Library offers free tech classes at its branches, teaching a range of skills, from sending emails to coding.

"If you give people the tools and potential to learn and engage, they're already one step closer to solving the digital divide," said Marx.

Robinson agreed wholeheartedly. "Technology brings economic opportunity," she said firmly.

She has bought a laptop and is working on her bachelor's degree. She continues to use the digital van. "They taught me to fish," she said. If there were increased access to technology for people like her, she added, "you'd see more people out here fishing."