#LaptopHeroes share their stories

by: Jennifer Wilding

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Governments, businesses, banks offer advice for others who could donate too

The COVID-19 pandemic has driven Americans into their homes, where many remain as the virus continues to surge. The digital divide, which separates those with and without reliable broadband, computers and skills, has grown to a gaping chasm. One side has a connection to work and school and all the services it takes to keep life going. On the other side … isolation.

The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City donated 100 excess laptops in 2019 and 2020. It had initiated an effort to encourage other employers to do the same when COVID-19 hit. The Employer Laptop Challenge has kicked into high gear to meet the now-critical need. So far, 13 organizations have donated more than 1,800 devices.

If you would like to be a #LaptopHero, visit our website for more information.

Jeremy Hegle, a senior community development advisor responsible for digital inclusion activities, interviewed seven donors from governments, banks and for-profit businesses. Each #LaptopHero shared their story.

GOVERNMENT

Government donors often must work through elected officials to gain approval or pass an ordinance to permit donations. These donors suggest the hurdles may not be as high as they first appear.

City and County of Denver, Colorado

Anthony Gonzales, client computing manager

The City-County donated 400-450 desktop computers in 2020 to PCs for People, a Denver-based nonprofit computer recycler.

Previously, the City-County of Denver paid a for-profit company to destroy data and dispose of their discarded computers. Donating those computers instead saves money, Gonzalez said. "It's a no-brainer. If we go through a third party like an

electronics recycler, we have to pay for that. There's a budgetary expense, where donating is free."

Cost savings, though, is not the major reason to donate. "I think the biggest benefit is giving back to the people of Denver and to those families in need a device, especially with schools going remote and students not having the capability of using a computer at home," Gonzalez said. "That was a big one."

Gonzalez said the process was easier than he expected. "When we first started talking about donating computers to PCs for People, a lot of the feedback we got was that it couldn't be done. There were policies or ordinances or security limitations. But as we dug into it, we found that a lot of the hurdles that were placed in front of us were just hurdles that people had heard of or had thought about. They were not actually in place. So once we found out what really was in place and what we needed to do, it was pretty easy working with our council people."

City of Kansas City, Missouri

Rick Usher, assistant city manager

The City of Kansas City, Missouri, donated 650 computers early in 2020. The donation included laptops, monitors, keyboards and other accessories. They donated to Connecting for Good, a Kansas City-based nonprofit computer recycler.

COVID-19 isn't just a health emergency, it's an economic emergency, Usher said. "Even now, with the slow reopening of businesses, we're still highlighting remote work as a way that businesses should help with social distancing," Usher said. "With schools, we saw them very quickly jump from classroom learning to distance learning. The problem, then, is the digital divide. ... Our whole focus right now is keeping people employed and keeping kids engaged in learning."

The effort started long before the pandemic. About five years ago, the City of Kansas City, Missouri, established an upcycling agreement with the Surplus Exchange, which later was acquired by Connecting for Good. "The agreement allows the City to donate our surplus computers to a nonprofit organization for use in digital equity programs," Usher said. The City established a new agreement with Connecting for Good in 2020. "We had the computers available right at the time that you approached me about the Employer Laptop Challenge," Usher told Hegle, "so we thought we would dive right in and make this thing happen."

That original agreement required a change to a City ordinance. "What we saw was here was an asset that clearly has value in digital inclusion programs, getting computers into the hands of residents, students and small business owners who can't afford them," Usher said. "So we worked with the city council and our law department and our surplus property division and general services to do a few amendments to that chapter of our ordinances, and the city council approved it."

The agreement is one that can be used by most city governments, Usher said. "I've been trying to sell other local governments in the Kansas City region on this idea. Look at your ordinances. It's not always an easy process, but make the changes necessary for you to donate these items to nonprofits, and here's the agreement we use in Missouri."

BANKS

Alpine Bank, Glenwood Springs, Colorado

Beth Drum, senior vice president

Alpine Bank donated 420 Dell computers to PCs for People in 2020.

The Alpine Bank story connects two Kansas City Fed initiatives, Investment Connection (like Shark Tank for nonprofits) and the Employer Laptop Challenge. In 2019, the Alpine Bank CRA manager attended an Investment Connection event in Denver. PCs for People, the nonprofit computer recycler, was one of the presenters. Alpine had just upgraded to Windows 10 and had more than 400 computers sitting in storage sheds. The bank was interested.

"Of course, you can appreciate that as a financial institution we need to make sure we are getting rid of our computers in a safe, secure way," Drum said. Their investigation showed that PCs for People had "the gold standard of certification for data deconstruction." Alpine decided to donate.

Drum saw the need close to home. "I started to hear these really heartbreaking stories from our Boys and Girls Club here in Durango, Colorado, about kids and families that weren't able to pivot as quickly as we all had to and … do virtual learning. Maybe they didn't have a computer at all, or they were families of three or four kids and the parents are home also, and everyone's trying to work online and they have one computer. Just heartbreaking stories about how are these kids continuing to do schoolwork at home."

PCs for People picked up Alpine's 400 computers from a site in Rifle, Colorado, and headed back to its headquarters in Denver. Drum asked PCs for People to bring the 400 computers to Durango after they were refurbished. She then formed a committee including Alpine Bank, the United Way, the Boys and Girls Club, the Durango Education Foundation and the 9-R School District. The task: to identify families that need computers. "The application went out on a Monday, and within one week, we already had 215 applications."

On August 7, PCs for People returned to Durango with the 400 refurbished computers, each ready to be distributed. Drum's goal was to have at least 200 to 400 more computers to send back with them to Denver. To do this, the bank enlisted two business clients that are large tech support companies. The tech support companies are, in turn, sharing information about the

Employer Laptop Challenge with their own business clients, which also just went through the Windows 10 upgrade. "They felt like a lot of these businesses … were waiting and looking for that right way to refurbish, recycle, upcycle their computers."

Lead Bank, Kansas City, Missouri

Melissa Beltrame, chief marketing officer

Lead Bank and its employees donated more than 50 laptops and monitors in 2020.

Lead Bank's donation was driven by the bank's value of compassion. "With COVID-19 and the pandemic, we felt that the need to close that digital divide was more important than ever. … This was not a choice; this is what we felt compelled to do."

Lead Bank's chief information officer made sure data destruction was completed, "and then we were able to efficiently and seamlessly donate those devices to a great cause." And the outcome? "We hope that the impact of our small-but-mighty donation is to give people in lower socioeconomic areas or rural areas greater access to technology."

BUSINESSES

Mariner Wealth Advisors, Overland Park, Kansas

Carl West, senior inventory support specialist

Mariner donated 40 laptops, docking stations and chargers in 2020.

Mariner's donation was driven by the desire to help the community. "As you know, laptops are expensive and so when we can go out and give that to somebody in need and allow them to use the technology to better their lives, that's what Mariner wants to do." Mariner handled data wiping and reloaded operating systems in-house, then donated directly to Connecting for Good. Some laptops went to families with children who had switched to online learning, and to adults who needed them to earn a living.

Would Mariner donate computers again? "Yes, I believe so," West said. "We are always getting new laptops and there are always model changes and we are willing to give our resources for those that don't have the (funds) to buy for themselves."

SnapIT Solutions, Overland Park, Kansas

Neelima Parasker, president and CEO

SnapIt Solutions and its employees donated about 22 devices, mainly hand-held laptops with keyboards.

Parasker serves on the Kansas City Fed Community Development Advisory Committee, which provides feedback on the Bank's community development research, programs and resources. She told Hegle, "When the Federal Reserve Bank, and you in particular, reached out to us, we definitely saw the need. If we have additional devices that we can use to help out and be a part of our community to help be a stronger community," SnapIT Solutions wanted to do that.

Parasker says SnapIT Solutions would "absolutely" consider donating used devices again. "Definitely. It is an effort from our side to keep thinking about it and to keep pushing toward making that effort for society. … We have to do our part to grow the economy."

Burns & McDonnell, Kansas City, Missouri

Ray Kowalik, CEO and chairman

Burns & McDonnell donated nearly 200 laptops to Connecting for Good.

One catalyst for Burns & McDonnell's donation was the company's own experience during the pandemic, Kowalik said. "One critical need our communities continue to face is access to connectivity and computers. We are seeing it firsthand as a business working remotely and our employees who are supporting kids through distance learning. If you don't have access to a computer, many local school families and teachers cannot continue learning or educating without these resources. Supporting organizations like Connecting for Good is a direct way to help minimize the digital divide and broaden opportunities for our community."

Kowalik said he hopes the impact of the Burns & McDonnell donation will be to help people with online learning. "The access to remote learning is predicated on having a computer and internet access. And we know that the gap in learning is being widened during the pandemic by those with or without computers and internet access," Kowalik said. "We hope we can help in this digital divide and support Connecting for Good's mission to help those in need in our new learning environment."

What would you say to another employer or government administrator if they were skeptical about donating computers?

Anthony Gonzales, City-County of Denver

If someone is still skeptical after getting guidance on addressing security issues or on going through red tape, they should personally hand out computers to people who need them, Gonzales said. "I attended an event where we handed out laptops to a school set up for single mothers so they can get their diplomas. I think when you go there, you see the people, how appreciative

they are, and you realize how much they need this equipment. It kind of inspires you to do those extra steps."

Beth Drum, Alpine Bank

"I'd just reassure them that if a financial institution like Alpine Bank has approved PCs for People, then they can too. They can use this organization. We don't just give our computers to anybody."

Carl West, Mariner Wealth Advisors

Businesses that don't donate computers miss out on an opportunity, West said. "If you go out and show your organization in the community to be one that is not there just to make money, not just there to help themselves, but to go out and help others," he said, that benefits your organization. Also, donating laptops increases the number of people who can fill digital jobs. There are people who want a future in technology, "and maybe because of a lack of resources, they are not able to go out and get the equipment they need to be able to learn more…and to be able to do more things in technology. By having something sitting in your own hands, you are able to do things that maybe you couldn't do by going to a library. Because you are sitting there at home, you are able to do testing and all that."

Melissa Beltrame, Lead Bank

"My guess would be that the data destruction and security piece would be the primary concern, so I would say that's definitely a hurdle that can be overcome. Instead of having these pieces of technology and equipment going to a landfill, there's a better home for them. Why not focus on digital inclusion and donate this equipment to make sure we are working together to create a more digitally inclusive environment? … There's really no compelling reason why you would keep this equipment if it's just gathering dust at your office."

Neelima Parasker, SnapIT Solutions

"If there is a surplus, waiting and sitting at their company and not being utilized, you cannot find a better reason and a better time to do what you are supposed to do. It's a feeling of giving more than just a donation. This is so much to do with quick access to devices; it is more than giving money at this point," when the market for laptops has increased exponentially, Parasker said. "The value that you are putting in by donating, it is three times more value right now than keeping it and not using it or not utilizing it. It's more than just donating money. Donating devices makes more sense."

Rick Usher, City of Kansas City, Missouri

Connecting for Good and PCs for People are two of the several NAID-certified, nonprofit computer refurbishers in the Tenth District. "Mainly, companies are concerned about data privacy and the security of those devices. Connecting for Good … is certified to the same standards that for-profit companies that refurbish or destroy computers have to be. They've got a pretty rigorous procedure, so that concern really is addressed today. Then the benefit really is the social good, the corporate giving side. Most corporations and small companies have a foundation or some charitable giving arm of what they're doing. And there is just the goodwill to the company. Bob Akers (the founder of the Surplus Exchange) developed an ROI for donating computers versus selling them in the commodities market. It shows that there's a higher ROI in the business community for donating computers rather than selling them as surplus, because you're also creating opportunities for economic mobility, education, employment and success for the local residents."

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Jennifer Wilding, a community development specialist for the Kansas City Fed, provides communications, engagement, and research for the community development department.Wilding edits the Kansas City Fed's community development newsletter, "Community Connections" and takes on special projects. For example, she serves as project director for a community-engaged research partnership. The Kansas City Fed, a nonprofit and a neighborhood organization joined together to hear from neighborhood residents about broadband internet. The report will be shared nationwide.Before joining the Kansas City Fed in 2018, she was executive director of Consensus KC, a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in public policy and civic engagement. She worked on philanthropically funded projects in metro Kansas City, and for clients here and around the U.S.Wilding holds a B.A. in urban affairs from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.Her hobby is letterpress printing, using a 1,500-pound cast-iron press from the late 1800s.Highlights of her work include:Getting to 'We Have a Deal." The three-part article shares how Investment Connection bridges bankers and community-based organizations. The article is on Fed Communities, the national website about the Fed's work in communities.Disconnected: Seven lessons on fixing the digital divide. A layperson's guide to putting broadband, devices and training within reach of a community.Focus groups with unemployed individuals and with people from nonprofits that serve them, held in Chicago, Detroit, Denver and Kansas City.**About the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City**The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., make up our nation's central bank. We work in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. The Kansas City Fed's territory includes Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Our headquarters is in Kansas City, with branch offices in Denver, Omaha and Oklahoma City.The Kansas City Fed Community Development Department promotes economic development and public understanding that leads to progress for lower-income individuals and communities. Our focus areas include community development investments, digital inclusion, small business / entrepreneurism, and workforce development.

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