

## ***PROVIDING FREE INTERNET CONNECTIVITY TO RESIDENTS OF AFFORDABLE MULTIFAMILY HOUSING:***

### **The Need**

Having a reliable internet connection and the ability to effectively use the internet has become a necessity in 2021, yet low-income households, have lower rates of in-home internet connectivity compared with higher-income groups. (Pew Research Center, May 2019). Many low-income households cite cost as the reason they lack high quality in-home internet access. In fact, research shows that only 1.1% of Vermonters have access to a low-priced internet plan (\$60/month or less). Compare this to the nearby state of Rhode Island where 89% of the population has access to a low-priced broadband plan. ([State of Broadband in Vermont](#), BroadbandNow.com 2021.). The Covid-19 pandemic has further illuminated the need for addressing the digital divide with access to medical appointments, education, public benefits, banking, civic meetings, etc. primarily available via the internet. Couple this reality with the fact that the BIPOC population traditionally has lower incomes and assets and you have an equity issue, plain and simple.

### **A Solution**

Vermont's affordable housing network, including non-profit organizations and public housing authorities operating in all corners of the state, is ready and willing to be a state-wide platform to improve broadband access and effective internet use and therefore reduce the digital divide between high and low income people as well as rural and urban. Nonprofit owners and public housing authorities house over 10,000 renters across the state. These households are some of our most vulnerable population, both in terms of income and in many instances, disabilities. In the Evernorth portfolio of over 3,500 rental units, 54% of the households earn less than 30% of median income; in the CSC portfolio of over 1,200 rental units, 68% of the households earn less than 30% of median income. Importantly, increasing broadband access via the affordable housing network will address the equity issue head-on. Our communities provide housing for residents with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds as compared to the state as a whole. For instance, 25% of Champlain Housing Trust and over 10% of Cathedral Square residents identify as non-white as compared to 6% for the State of Vermont (Vermont Department of Health data)).

There is a straightforward solution to this problem: owners of affordable multifamily housing can provide the service free of charge to the residents by installing building-wide modern WiFi devices to ensure bandwidth quality.. Evernorth & Cathedral Square Corporation have successfully installed this building wide WiFi approach at thirty properties and the response

from residents has been immediate. “I was able to cancel my internet service and spend the extra money on groceries” noted one resident.

The cost to install building wide WiFi is approximately \$10,000/property. With a \$3.0M set aside for this effort, owners of affordable multifamily housing could provide free internet service to 300 properties, reaching an estimated 9,000 low and moderate-income residents.

Such a one-time investment would bring direct relief to these households. The monthly cost for high-quality internet averages \$80/month, well above what is considered a low-priced plan. Assuming half of the households in these multifamily buildings switch over to the building-wide WiFi, the cumulative impact is over \$4M in direct savings to these low and moderate income renters.

This is less than a one-year payback to support economic mobility for low-income Vermonters and provides greater access to essential services such as telehealth, employment services and online education.

## Questions?

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