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Human Services leaders want to help Greenwich clients clear the digital divide

Comments [Tatiana Flowers](#) Feb. 27, 2021

GREENWICH — Monica Bruning was working as the director of Greenwich’s Human Services programs when the world went into lockdown nearly a year ago as the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

For Bruning, it became “exponentially” more difficult for clients to access program applications including applications to receive basic necessities, such as medical insurance, energy assistance or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for food.

Human services leaders and their clients were operating in a new dynamic. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the social distancing required, had created a new need for clients to get access to computers and internet service.

“A lot of clients have smartphones. But it’s not enough, to be able to access these other applications,” Bruning said, using job and benefits applications as an example where there is a digital divide, and computers are needed to better complete the “paperwork.”

Greenwich Human Services leaders are now working to raise \$10,000 to purchase 50 computers for clients. If they are successful, an anonymous donor will match the money, allowing the organization to reach their goal of providing 100 computers to local families in need.

Case managers are working with the commissioner of Human Services to create a list of criteria of who would be first in line to receive a computer.

Bruning, now chairperson of the Human Services Foundation Fund, said leaders will likely start by prioritizing families with specific needs, such as those

receiving education or certification training online; parents of children with special needs who need support services online; and others who also need computers for work or their children's education.

Laura Poschar, a case manager for the Human Services Department who has 64 clients, said the new computers would give recipients a sense of increased independence. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, she has been filling out applications for her clients.

“But it's really denying the clients the opportunity to see for themselves, and it's not the way you really would want to conduct case management, because the whole idea is to really help a client discover for themselves how to go through these processes,” she said.

Darian Jones, coordinator for the Greenwich RITE Program, [helps job seekers find work opportunities](#), through the Family Centers program.



Family Centers Reaching Independence Through Employment (RITE) Program Coordinator Darian Jones chats with his client Mia Sambo, of Greenwich, in his office at Family Centers in Greenwich, Conn. Monday, Jan. 6, 2020. Sambo used the Family Centers RITE program to help land her dream job at an assisted living facility and start school full-time to become a social worker. Tyler Sizemore / Hearst Connecticut Media

He's not involved in the fundraising, but he was approached by Human Services leaders, who asked whether he has clients who need access to computers.

It definitely is a concern, Jones said. Dozens of clients have missed out on job opportunities because they applied using their cellphones or tablets, on small screens, causing them to make mistakes or miss important interview questions, he said.

"You can't see everything on the screen, and you don't see where you make mistakes. It's not as easy to edit. In some situations, the application is requesting you to put in your resume and you can't upload your resume as a document through your phone," Jones said.

"Now you're submitting an application where they requested the resume, without a resume, which usually means that it's thrown out," he added.

Often, Jones fills in applications for clients after they have made a preliminary attempt, but he said it often proves difficult and creates a barrier for clients already struggling to obtain basic necessities.



Yessenia Cordova, a parent who receives services from Greenwich-based Family Centers, is pictured receiving a computer from the human services organization. Contributed / Family Centers / Contributed Photo

Family Centers, the nonprofit where Jones works, has provided laptops or tablets to a dozen local families since the beginning of the pandemic.

“In all cases, the devices became the permanent property of our clients. In some cases, the computers enabled clients to continue to work remotely, while in others, it was used to support distance-learning for kids,” said Jim Vivier, chief advancement officer for Family Centers.

“Because Family Centers provides a continuum of health, education and human services, we’re uniquely positioned to help children, individuals and families for whom the pandemic has presented multiple obstacles,” he added.

Many of Jones’ clients received a device through that program, and he saw an uptick in the number of clients who applied for jobs. In the organization’s Literacy Volunteers program, students were better able to engage in English as a Second language course, enhancing their speaking skills. Clinical staff were able to hold face-to-face virtual meetings with their clientele, Jones said.

“Everyone who received a computer definitely benefited from it — be it the program or the clients that they were trying to help,” he said.

That’s why Jones is a staunch advocate of the Greenwich Human Services Department’s computer drive fundraising initiative.

To donate, visit www.greenwichdhsfund.org/donate/ or send a check to the Greenwich Human Services Department at Town Hall, 101 Field Point Road, Greenwich CT 06830.

tatiana.flowers@thehour.com @TATIANADFLOWERS