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UMB News

Wi-Fi for All: UMB Partners with Project Waves

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In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic when internet access is essential for work, school, and staying connected, the University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) is partnering with Project Waves ⤢ to bring free internet access to hundreds of families in West Baltimore.

Project Waves is a Baltimore-based organization founded in 2018 with the mission to close the technology gap that disproportionately affects low-income and minority households by providing highly available, transparent, and reliable internet access to families across the city.

The University of Maryland, Baltimore's Community Engagement Center is partnering with Project Waves to install Wi-Fi towers across West Baltimore to provide free internet access to hundreds of families.

"A lot of these disparities have been exacerbated by the pandemic," says Adam Bouhmad, 24, a Baltimore native and the founder and director of Project Waves. "There are students who aren't able to access online resources and be part of the educational system while they're at home, so being able to provide free internet access to families is definitely humbling. We see internet access as a human right and a necessary utility."

Roughly one-third of Baltimore City does not have access to broadband internet in their homes. As described in [the Deutsch Foundation's Digital Access and Equity Report in Baltimore City 2017](#) ⌐, the internet is arguably the most important communication tool of the 21st century.

"We're seeing this problem as a five- to 10-year issue," Bouhmad says. "No one's going to bridge this problem in a month or even a year. What this really takes is a broad coalition of support from communities and from stakeholders across the city, so there's much more work to do and a lot more relationship-building to be done."

By partnering with UMB, Project Waves can utilize the community relationships built and fostered through the University's Community Engagement Center over the last five years. Thanks to this partnership, Project Waves and UMB have connected more than 20 families in the West Baltimore area to the internet. They anticipate being able to connect 100 families by the end of July and then 300 families within the months after that.

"There is a critical need for stable, high-speed internet in light of the current pandemic," says **Barnard Smit**, program coordinator at the Community Engagement Center. "The idea that we share this city with residents who do not have access to a stable form of connectivity is unacceptable when the infrastructure is readily available and should be obtainable to all."

UMB has been a great support for Project Waves to reach a number of families in West Baltimore through communication efforts on several fronts including UMB's partner school, James McHenry Elementary/Middle School, as well as through grassroots efforts handing out flyers and knocking on doors.

"The ability to broadcast internet from the BioPark via the Community Engagement Center has enabled Project Waves to provide upwards of 22 students from James McHenry K-8 with high-speed internet access at home," Smit says.

Similarly, the guidance from the University network has resulted in the onboarding of 12 young professionals from Empower, a local organization providing opportunities in the tech industry. This partnership has facilitated a unique opportunity for young professionals in Baltimore.

"It is rare to find a job at a tech startup, let alone one that is so motivated in helping and improving the lives of others," Smit says.

HOW THE WI-FI ACCESS WORKS

Project Waves and UMB have been working together to install Wi-Fi towers on top of buildings in West Baltimore. There are currently towers in place on top of James McHenry Elementary/Middle School and the Baltimore Robotics Center. Project Waves plans to install towers in the coming weeks including one on top of the Poppleton BioPark parking garage.

In addition to the Wi-Fi towers, Project Waves has installed relay stations and sector antennas at several locations across the city including on top of UMB's new Community Engagement Center at 16 S. Poppleton St. The relay stations and sector antennas receive a signal from the Wi-Fi towers and distribute that signal out to the broader community across West Baltimore.

Community members can use this free internet access after contacting the Community Engagement Center. An installation team will come to the community member's home, set up an internet modem, and assist the family with connecting their devices to the high-speed Wi-Fi for free. After the modem has been installed and the devices are connected, Project Waves has a customer service team that will follow up with community members to make sure everything is working properly.

"Having this free access feels great, and it has definitely made my life easier," says Toniece Jackson, a resident of the Pigtown neighborhood. "I use it on all of my children's devices for both educational and recreational purposes. I also use it to tap into things in my community, so it has changed my life."

Project Waves, which receives funding from the Digital Harbor Foundation, recently completed a successful pilot phase of this free internet program in the Lakeland neighborhood in South Baltimore.

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