

Program spotlight #3: Helping Residents Cut the Cord and Move ‘Beyond Cable’

Challenge: Cable costs place a heavy strain on household budgets: the average US household spends about \$217.42/month on cable – more than all other utilities combined (\$205.50/month). Even when residents want to “cut the cord”, confusion about devices, channel lineups, and internet speeds can keep them locked into high-cost bundles.

Action: Drawing inspiration from our colleagues at KC Digital Drive, we launched Beyond Cable workshops that walk residents through streaming devices, speed needs, channel lineups, and monthly budgeting. We utilized handouts, plan-comparison guides, and a simple decision flow to maximize its effectiveness.

Impact: Dozens of residents were empowered with the knowledge and confidence to manage their entertainment budget without losing the content they care about. Using simple checklists and side-by-side cost comparisons, participants identified realistic ways to save thousands of dollars a year (~\$1,600 on average), stop paying for unwatched channels, and avoid pitfalls like phishing “activation” scams.

Resident Spotlight: A Family Acclimates to the US Through Digital Savings

When I first met Basma*, a resident who had recently arrived from war-torn Syria with her family, she was juggling the pressures of resettlement with a monthly phone bill that kept creeping upward. As an English Language Learner, she had unknowingly signed up for a burdensome bundle she never meant to buy, with add-ons like Amazon Prime stacked on top of a basic plan. Maintaining connectivity was non-negotiable – school calls, health portals, and staying in touch with family depended on it – yet the plan details and maze of customer service phone menus felt impossible to navigate in a new country.

Understanding her frustration through our shared mother language of Arabic, we spent hours navigating customer service calls together to negotiate a reduction with her phone service provider. By the end, we secured an initial \$100 reduction on the next billing month, which rolled into a \$50 discount for every month thereafter. Basma allocated those savings towards a budget for her children’s after-school activities, allowing her family to better integrate into their new community with dignity and hope.

Her story underscores a broader truth I learned during my service: affordability, not availability, is often the greatest barrier to digital access. When families can afford to stay online, connectivity shifts from a monthly strain to a springboard that can support integration into new communities, better health access, and consistent learning.

*Name has been changed for privacy.

Additional initiatives

Digital Inclusion Asset Map: Fragmented information made it hard for residents and partners to see who offers what, and where gaps exist. Hence, we collaborated with the Greater Pittsburgh

Digital Inclusion Alliance (GPDIA) to develop the region's first Digital Inclusion Asset Map, to catalog services, accessibility features, and language support. The result is a shared planning tool to identify 'digital deserts' and target digital inclusion programs where they are needed most.

Supporting Small Businesses: Scattered data limits our ability to directly support Pittsburgh's small businesses. Therefore, I restructured our organization's internal directory documenting small businesses who had gone through our Get Online Grow Online (GOGO) program with clear data standards and workflows and improved usability for staff. Today, over 400 MWBEs are easier to find and serve – accelerating technical assistance and more strategic investments.

Digital Divide Simulation: Reports alone cannot convey the lived realities of living on the wrong side of the digital divide. Thanks to KC Digital Drive, our team secured a license to plan Pittsburgh's first Digital Divide Simulation, an experiential event that helps cross-sector leaders feel the barriers residents face and align on strategic action plans. Set to launch in October 2025, this event positions Neighborhood Allies to deepen stakeholder engagement and sustain momentum beyond my service term.