



Josie Boyle (left) demonstrates to Eastern Park Apartment residents how to use the Lenovo tablet. PHOTO: Courtesy of CTN

“Access to the internet is a human right...”

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As society becomes more dependent on internet access for everything from healthcare to maintaining contact with distant friends and family, those without the technology and the skills to take advantage of that technology are at an increasing social and economic disadvantage. [Community Tech Network \(CTN\)](http://Community Tech Network (CTN)) has a 13-year history of providing digital skills training while helping their learners acquire home internet and an internet capable device.

In 2018, the City Administrator’s Committee on Information Technology’s Office of Digital Equity

(continued)



Home Connect learner, Baofei Miao, unpacks her Home Connect lesson.

PHOTO: Courtesy of CTN

conducted a citywide Digital Divide Survey, which looked at technology usage, access, skills, barriers, and perceptions among a representative sample of over 1,000 San Franciscans. This study found that low-income residents, seniors, limited English speakers, and people with disabilities, i.e., the most vulnerable residents suffered the most significant and consistent gaps in technology usage, access, and skills: the most vulnerable were the most disadvantaged.

Roughly a quarter of low-income residents and seniors do not use the internet, with 10 to 28 percent of this group lacking access to high-speed home internet or mobile access. Fewer than two-thirds could be characterized as internet users with basic digital skills, compared to 86% of the general population. Significant gaps also existed across racial categories (Black and Latino) and geographies, particularly among communities of color.

Pre-Covid, CTN offered a 12-week training program ([Sunset Tech Connect](#)) at partner agencies to students recruited by that partner. In line with their

goal of eliminating the digital divide, CTN sought partners at senior centers, community centers and other neighborhood sites in low-income, minority communities.



Luis Mascarenhas (right) working at San Francisco's Moscone Center COVID-19 mass vaccination site, invites his CTN instructor, Lauren Woolley (left), to receive her first COVID-19 vaccine dose. PHOTO: Courtesy of CTN

THE PANDEMIC PIVOT

As Covid forced public services and essential information to move online, many people were left without access, exacerbating the long-standing disparities of the digital divide, and making the need for digital equity more urgent than ever. When facilities closed, “desperate seniors started calling CTN. Libraries and training programs closed and they couldn’t get access anywhere,” recalls Stephen Minor, CTN Senior Program Manager.

In response to the shelter-at-home decree, CTN modified its program to offer remote one-on-one training through a new program called [Home Connect](#).

Home Connect is a five-hour program (five one-hour sessions) for seniors and people living with disabilities who have limited or no access to computers and the internet. The program teaches basic computer literacy, how to use telemedicine, order online, communicate with friends and family, and stay safe online. Volunteer digital coaches are available for post-training support.

[Luis Mascarenhas](#) is one of the program graduates. “Before, I was lonely and depressed. The tablet allowed me to connect with my brother in London whom I hadn’t seen in 20 years.” He also uses his tablet for music, games, and exercise. The Chair Yoga class has been so effective he “no longer needs to take medications for aches and pains.” Most importantly, it’s given him a place in the community. When the Moscone Center opened for vaccines, Mascarenhas took his tablet to Boeddeker Park to help people register. That led to work at the Moscone

Volunteers Trained and Active in 2021 91

Supported Languages

Mandarin • Tagalog • English • Spanish • Cantonese • Russian

Learners and Internet Access 2020-2021

With Access 72%

Without Access* 28%

* CTN helped those enrolled without internet service apply for access through low-cost programs offered by Comcast Internet Essentials and AT&T.

vaccination site where he uses his computer skills to help applicants complete forms. Eventually, when CTN begins offering in-person classes, he hopes for a job “teaching how to use the tablet.” It’s changed his life, now he wants to help others change theirs.

Like their Sunset Tech Connect program, CTN loans pre-configured tablets (primarily Lenovo) to students without access to computers; students may keep their tablets once they complete the training.

Because the older buildings in the Tenderloin, SOMA, Bayview, and the Mission, where many Home Connect students live, do not have the bandwidth to connect to the internet, CTN loans hotspots that students can use for the six to eight weeks it takes to complete the program and become comfortable using the equipment, and refers the family

to the federal government’s Broadband Benefit program, fcc.gov/broadbandbenefit for a long-term connection.

Jack Huck lacked internet connection until CTN loaned him a hotspot. “Next thing I know is I have about a dozen people looking for me.” Huck uses the connection to keep in touch with friends and relatives back East, and to read books and watch movies.

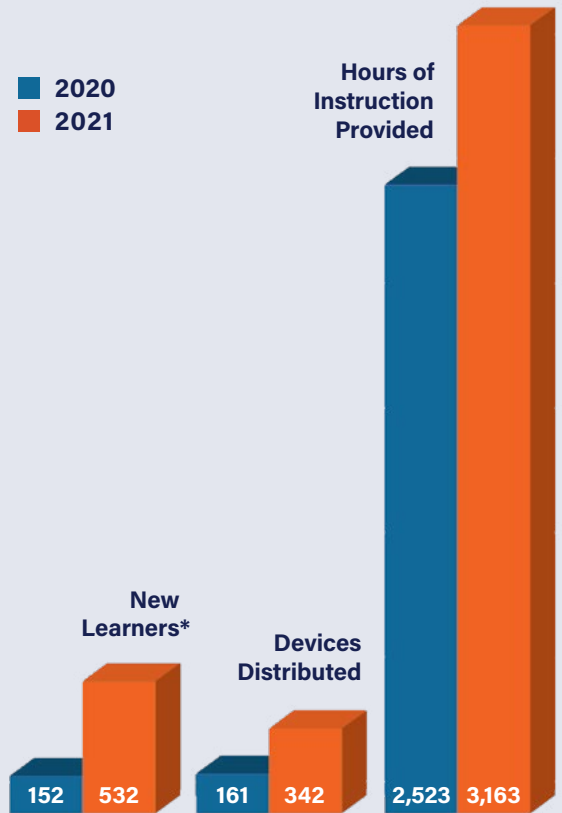
In the months between April 2020 and August 2021, Home Connect received 584 referrals for service and distributed 456 tablets. Seven referrals were from seniors who had their own device but did not know how to use it. These students bypassed Home Connect and were referred directly to a digital coach. 165 learners (28 percent) did not have internet service.

Pre-pandemic, funding was premised on on-site

training. Fortunately, the San Francisco Department of Disability and Aging Services agreed to modify their contract to support Home Connect. AT&T, Metta Fund Newhall Foundation, and individual donors also stepped up.

CTN works with [forty-five partner agencies](#) in San Francisco and “definitely is looking for more referrals from partner agencies.” CTN believes that access to the Internet is a human right and that those without the skills to use a computer are at risk of social and economic disadvantage.

CTN’s mission remains consistent, but the pace of change means the goalposts are constantly shifting. The agency is committed to using its years of experience to help organizations move their communities online.



* The 152 new learners in 2020 reflects the period when CTN developed and piloted the Home Connect Program (virtual), which became operational in 2021.



After graduating from the Home Connect program, Luis Mascarenhas received a replacement Fire tablet from CTN to continue his training.
PHOTO: Courtesy of CTN