

**INTERNET ACCESS****Pandemic exposes the digital divide in Southern California****By Brooke Staggs***bstaggs@scng.com**@JournBrooke on Twitter*

Jessica Lopez's struggle to afford home internet service has always been inconvenient, making it tough for her 6-year-old daughter to do school assignments or for Lopez to complete online forms occasionally required by her employers at the

Hilton of Anaheim.

Now the coronavirus pandemic has moved her daughter's kindergarten entirely online and shuttered her hotel, eliminating her job busing tables. And Lopez said her lack of internet access is forcing some tough decisions.

Though she's trying to obey stay-at-home orders, the 24-year-old mom said she's had to

**INTERNET » PAGE 12**



Tiffany Mitchell, director of youth and community partnership for Project Hope Alliance, displays a Wi-Fi hot spot the nonprofit supplies to homeless Orange County families.

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# Internet

FROM PAGE 1

regularly drive across town to her parents' house so her daughter can do her schoolwork and she can apply for support services. But her dad is still working a public job deemed essential, so every visit brings new worries about exposing her daughter to the virus.

"It's been very difficult," Lopez said. "Are the kids just not supposed to do any schoolwork?"

There are nearly 700,000 households across Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties that do not have internet subscription services, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent American Community Survey from 2018. That's more than 12% of all families across the four counties, with Orange County boasting the best connectivity and San Bernardino County narrowly edging out Los Angeles County for the lowest percentage of households with internet subscriptions.

That digital divide has narrowed in recent years, thanks to government, nonprofit and corporate intervention, coupled with research on how lack of internet hurts student test scores, job success and more. But, as with so many other gaping holes in the safety net, the coronavirus pandemic is shining a light on how many families still don't have steady internet access at home, with people of color most affected.

## Virus amplifies need

That access is needed now more than ever.

With schools across California shuttered through the end of the school year, educators are scrambling to set up distance learning programs for some 6.2 million K-12 students across the state. But early reports show a significant portion of students aren't engaging, with trouble accessing online schoolwork viewed as a common hurdle.



Project Hope Alliance CEO Jennifer Friend, right, says the pandemic has exposed the lack of internet service for at-risk families. With her are Tiffany Mitchell, director of youth and community partnership, left, and case worker Karla Alvarez.

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People who can't afford internet access are more likely to hold low-wage service jobs that can't be done from home, regardless of their internet status. But those people also are more likely to be out of work right now, which means they need support such as unemployment that's largely being handled online as physical offices are closed to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Internet access also is important for other reasons, helping to ward off depression and other mental health issues that can be triggered by isolation.

Research from previous disasters shows that social support goes a long way to reducing the adverse effects on mental health, according to Merritt Schreiber, a psychologist at UCLA Medical Center who specializes in trauma triggered by emergencies. But during the coronavirus pandemic — and the need to eliminate person-to-person contact — Schreiber said social support has to be virtual, making electronic connection essential to "flatten the curve" for the psychological impact of the crisis.

"We must facilitate electronic social support to reduce the stress of COVID-19) and the sense of

isolation and loneliness, particularly for those living alone," Schreiber said, encouraging virtual play dates and scheduled FaceTime chats between school peers.

But many outlets that families once relied on for free internet, such as after-school programs, libraries or the local Starbucks, are closed due to the coronavirus.

## Push for funding

That's why Democratic Party of Orange County Chair Ada Briceño and other local leaders are pushing to get money for internet access in round four of federal stimulus funding, which is already in the works to buffer ongoing impacts from the coronavirus pandemic. They also want connectivity issues to be tackled by state and local relief packages, with a hope that changes made to combat the economic and social stresses the epidemic now will lead to long-term help for at-risk families.

"I really, really do believe that we are going to be better and stronger for the kids at the end of this because we now see what was previously invisible," said Jennifer Friend, chief executive of Project Hope Alliance, a Costa Mesa

nonprofit that works with homeless children and families.

Some companies, agencies and organizations are helping to fill the gaps.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Wednesday announced that Google will be providing 4,000 Chromebooks to California students, and offer three months of free Wi-Fi to 100,000 rural households across the state.

Internet service providers — including Comcast, Charter Communications/Spectrum and Cox Communications — also are offering free installation and subscriptions for 60 days. Limitations apply, though, with Charter's offer limited to households with K-12 or college students living at home and the Charter and Cox offers limited to low-income households. Those providers don't cover all areas.

Since Lopez has no idea when she'll be able to return to her job at the Anaheim hotel, she worries about signing up for a temporarily free or reduced program that will auto-renew and stick her with big bills down the road.

Some school districts are loaning out Wi-Fi hot spots along with devices such as Chromebooks. But availability varies, with reports of some families struggling

to get devices or information about what's provided.

"It's disingenuous to claim that children have the ability to access their education online when they literally don't have access," Friend said.

Friend pointed out the irony of her local school district using email to ask if she had internet access and a device for her own child to use at home.

"If I didn't have either of those, I wouldn't be able to answer either of those questions," she said.

## Wi-Fi hot spot project

Project Hope Alliance has worked to narrow the digital divide by passing out Wi-Fi hot spot devices to Orange County families who've been living in their cars or motels. A month ago, the group ordered 140 more Wi-Fi hot spot devices — at nearly \$40 each, with data subscriptions that cost \$30 a month — so they could help when schools started closing locally. But with demand so high, Friend said they still haven't received that initial order. Instead, they found 40 more hot spot devices through resellers so they could start getting them into people's hands now.

Single dad Matthew Sanchez of Santa Ana received a hot spot device and a

Chromebook through Project Hope Alliance.

Sanchez, 43, paid for home internet until recently. But he's in recovery from his 33rd and 34th surgeries, linked to complications from a gastric bypass surgery that in 2011 landed him in a coma for several months and in the hospital for nearly three years. Sanchez's immune system is still so vulnerable that his doctors don't want him to leave the house during the coronavirus pandemic, making work impossible. So he dropped internet service to trim expenses.

That's left him feeling isolated, just as he was trapped by the four walls of a hospital room for so long. And since school campuses closed a few weeks ago, Sanchez said his 12-year-old daughter, Amber, has been trying to keep up with her schoolwork using his smartphone.

"I know that we're not the only ones," Sanchez said. "But it's been really, really, really challenging."

The hot spot device from Project Hope Alliance is proving to be crucial. It's helping Sanchez stay connected and Amber to catch up in school. Soon, Sanchez may use the device to keep his own education moving forward.

Last year, Sanchez went back to college for the first time since 1996. He's studying to become a registered nurse, to give back to the nurses who saved his life a decade ago. Sanchez took a semester off for his surgeries, but was planning to start school again this summer. Now it's looking like even summer classes might be held online. So until he got the hot spot device, Sanchez feared he might have to push his dream of becoming a nurse even further down the road.

Sanchez said he hopes the coronavirus pandemic will prompt the government and others to step up, so the digital divide won't hold anyone back from pursuing their dreams when this crisis is over.