

WILLIAMSBURG

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From a customer service standpoint, it's been fantastic."



Approximately 3,000 people do not have access to 25 Mbps wired broadband

- "Many of our residents have to make tough decisions... do I pay my rent? Do I buy food? Internet access can be further down that list," says Mark Barham, Director of Information Technology, City of Williamsburg.

8.51%

of the population (or roughly 7,000) are stuck with one or fewer options for broadband access

- As a small municipality, one Internet provider covers 93.4% of the town—leading to a spike in the price of home Internet. Over the past few decades, residents who are unable to afford these monthly bills have found themselves caught in a digital divide.

2,749



workers based in Williamsburg are operating primarily out of their home via telecommuting.

- 65.73% of those telecommuting workers take home less than \$75,000 per year.
- Cable bundles are capped at approximately 1TB which is more than what 99% of what customers use.
- 60% of Williamsburg residents indicated that they would be in favor of raising taxes for the purpose of providing free or cost-reduced Internet access to all residents.

*According to US Census in 2019 **As of May 2021

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A Connected Community: The City of Williamsburg

A City-Wide Equity Initiative

The City of Williamsburg, Virginia is home to 15,000 residents, half of whom are students at the College of William & Mary.

As a small municipality, one Internet provider serves the whole town – leading to a spike in the price of home Internet. Over the past few decades, residents who are unable to afford these monthly bills have found themselves caught in a digital divide.

To Mark Barham, Director of Information Technology at the City of Williamsburg, this inequity is unacceptable. “Many of our residents have to make tough decisions... do I pay my rent? Do I buy food? Internet access can be further down that list.” Long before the pandemic, the Williamsburg City Council had established a vision for a connected future – in which every resident has sustainable access to the Internet – as part of their city-wide strategic plan.

“Our vision was to treat Internet access as a public utility – much in the same way that the tax money residents pay is used for water, trash removal, we wanted to work towards providing Internet connectivity as well.” says Barham. In response to city-wide surveys, over 60% of Williamsburg residents indicated that they would be in favor of raising taxes for the purpose of providing free or cost-reduced Internet access to all residents.

COVID-19: Addressing the Burgeoning Digital Divide

This municipal initiative was accelerated when the pandemic hit, resulting in an immediate shift to remote school and exacerbating the need for equitable connectivity for all residents. Within a matter of days, broadband Internet access had become a prerequisite for everyday activities like working, attending school, accessing banking services, and receiving medical care.

“We had a digital divide before the pandemic, but when COVID hit, it became apparent that access to the Internet is absolutely critical,” says Barham.

Barham and the City Manager knew that Williamsburg needed to act. After securing funding for a six-month pilot program from the Virginia Governor’s Office Broadband Fast-Track program, which allocated \$30 million in CARES Act funding to support broadband initiatives across the state, Williamsburg began pursuing vendors who could help them bring the vision of city-wide Internet connectivity to life.

Partnering with Kajeet

Barham approached their incumbent wireless carrier to begin speaking about what it would take to connect entire communities. While the carrier was able to provide the network and connectivity, City Staff quickly learned that they would need a ‘last-mile’ vendor partner to help package, deliver, and manage the solution.

When Williamsburg connected with Kajeet, it became clear that a partnership with the managed IoT solution provider was the missing piece they needed. Not only were the multi-carrier connectivity and data and Sentinel device management platform offered by Kajeet attractive features to City Staff, but the company’s consultative approach and ongoing support made it a perfect fit for Williamsburg’s pilot program.

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Mark Barham, Director of Information Technology, City of Williamsburg

“It was really a partnership. Kajeet worked with us to understand the goals of the project and what we are trying to accomplish as a locality, and then married it together with the technology and Sentinel to manage it,” Barham shares.

129
low-income
households
connected

An entire
community
connected.



Bringing the Vision to Life

A crucial step of the initiative was identifying which neighborhood would be the best fit for the City's six-month pilot program. Highland Park, a low to moderate income neighborhood with many working families located around the corner from Williamsburg's City Hall, emerged as the ideal community in which to roll out this program.

"It was really a neighborhood that we could easily access, and one that we felt we could make a difference in the lives of those residents pretty quickly," Barham explained.

Next up was determining what hardware would be the best fit for this project. Kajeet presented City Staff with multiple hardware options, from which the team selected routers with external antennae to best maximize signal in areas of the neighborhood where coverage may be spotty. Williamsburg purchased about 129 routers from Kajeet, enough for each household in the community to receive one.

Launching the Program

With the major pieces in place, in March of 2021 City Staff began announcing the program to the community through dedicated outreach efforts. Once the word was out, Barham and his team set up four different weekly "office hour" time slots at a picnic table in Highland Park, in which residents could stop by, sign up for the service, and pick up their WiFi router. Residents would also receive a guide, developed by Kajeet, explaining how to set up and use the device.

"We just asked to see an ID, a water bill, or something else to indicate that they live in Highland Park. Then, we'd enter the information from the router, they sign our agreement, hand them the router and information sheet, and they would be on their way," says Barham.

Feedback from the Community

Many Highland Park residents are older and less familiar with technology, causing some initial concerns about ease of use. City Staff found, however, that these worries that were quickly put to rest once the Kajeet solution was deployed. Residents were able to easily follow the instructions to quickly install the device antennae, plug it into the wall, and connect.

"We had significant feedback from people talking about how easy the device was to use," says Barham. For one woman, who works as a nurse and is a primary caregiver for her 91-year-

old grandfather, this service has been life-changing. Since the Highland Park project outfitted her grandfather's home with WiFi, she has been able to set up a webcam and can now monitor his well-being while she is at work.

City Staff has found the Sentinel platform to provide powerful program management capabilities that would not have been possible working through a carrier.

"I wish I had a program like Sentinel to manage the other items that I manage on a daily basis. It is a single pane of glass access to every device, helps me understand usage patterns, level-setting expectations for what residents would use this for," shares Barham.

City Staff found that some residents were using the devices to stream entertainment videos continually – blowing through a great deal of their data allocation per month. Williamsburg has found the Kajeet filtering enabled through Sentinel hugely beneficial in managing data consumption across active devices, helping residents make the most of their data for important online tasks.

Overall, City Staff has found partnering with Kajeet to be a smooth and beneficial experience.

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Next Steps and Looking Ahead

Seeing that not all 129 routers were being actively utilized by Highland Park residents, Williamsburg recently decided to open this broadband service up to the whole city. "We have routers all over the city now in people's homes, and we're getting better and broader data sets to understand what works and what doesn't," says Barham.

Looking ahead, making broadband access a public utility is – and will remain – a priority for the City of Williamsburg. When asked what advice he would impart to other municipalities looking to roll out a similar service for their residents, Mark's guidance is clear. "Go big! Know your community, know your residents, and don't be afraid to fail."

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