

Sarasota Housing Authority helps families with necessary digital access

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Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Published 2:52 p.m. ET Mar. 5, 2021 Updated 8:59 a.m. ET Mar. 8, 2021



Two students engage in remote learning at Sarasota Housing Authority's Learning Center. The center is mainly for students, but it also helps parents and other residents with all kinds of important tasks, from applying for EBT assistance to staying in touch with their children's schools to accessing financial literacy courses. *Candice McLeod SHA*

Across the street from Sarasota Housing Authority's Learning Center, a young woman walks past the clotheslines that stand in every front yard of The Courts public housing complex to two nondescript gray portables. She says that she needs to apply for utility assistance but doesn't have the proper digital tools at home to get it done.

Candice McLeod, program manager for the Youth Thrive program at the learning center, approaches her, and the two of them head inside, masks covering their faces.

The center is mainly for students, but it also helps parents and other residents with all kinds of important tasks, from applying for EBT assistance to staying in touch with their children's schools to accessing financial literacy courses.

That help has been more important since the start of the pandemic.

Ken Waters, vice president of resident services for Sarasota Housing Authority, says that residents of The Court were hit hard by COVID-19. Many of the parents worked in industries affected by the pandemic. Losing jobs and having hours reduced became a common theme at The Courts and other low-income housing developments in the area.

When schools closed and children began remote learning, necessities of life still took priority over a decent internet connection and digital tools such as laptops, printers and cameras.

Sarasota County Schools distributed laptops and hotspots to students during the pandemic using an online survey, but many families lacked the digital access needed to fill out the survey or did not learn about it in the first place.

“My first recommendation would be to choose words very intentionally if you hope to compel people to take action,” Michelle Stears, family and youth services manager at Sarasota Housing Authority, wrote in a blog in May of 2020. “Instead of “Mobile Device Survey,” perhaps something more direct, like “Request a Computer for Your Child.”

Stears ended up filling out the surveys with 316 families.

Many parents also told the learning center that the Wi-Fi hotspots just were not cutting it. Especially for video classes, for which teachers require students’ cameras to show that they’re in class or they’ll be marked absent, or for assignments that required viewing videos or submitting large files.

Not only are the connections on the lowest end of what is considered “broadband,” the cinderblock walls of the apartments interfere with the signal. Many families use cell phones as a way to access the internet and encounter the same signal problem. Stears says that on top of not being able to afford reliable broadband service, a good amount of the families also have trouble affording their cell phone bill, leaving them without any way to connect.

Many came to the learning center for help accessing the tools they needed. The team there helped them with everything from registering for classes to participating in school district surveys to remote learning during school hours and after-school homework.

The number of students coming to the learning center was higher during school shutdowns, but they still expect an average of at least 15 students per day. And for the center’s after-school activities, “Students race from the school bus to here,” Waters says.

Beyond the tools families needed, other learning obstacles were recognized. “Zoom fatigue,” a phenomenon that affects children and adults, sets in. Middle and high school students at least get to switch classes throughout their day, but younger learners are expected to be in one class all day long. Being on Zoom for prolonged periods of time becomes difficult.

“Children aren’t prepared to just stare at a computer screen for hours and hours,” says McLeod, who joined the learning center team in June of last year. “And if they’re going to, you have to give them some play time in between, where they go outside, or play a game that engages them in a different way.”

Around the inside of the learning center, art supplies, puzzles, books and boxes of Legos adorn the shelves. McLeod and others use these as fun ways to engage young students between sessions of remote learning.



Students take an art class via projector at Sarasota Housing Authority’s Learning Center. *SHA’s Learning Center - Candice McLeod*



A group of students outside of Sarasota Housing Authority's Learning Center. *Sarasota Housing Authority's Learning Center*

The number of families utilizing the center has been so high that they have been expanding. They're installing a second portable that's nearly finished, which will be used mainly for their middle and high school students to learn, socialize and use digital tools.

Partnerships in the community have helped the center thrive. They collaborate with Ringling Museum's "Where Everyone Belongs" program for video art sessions. The Community Foundation of Sarasota County has helped fund the learning center so it can hire teachers for the afterschool program, continue with existing programs and develop new programming. Sarasota County's Contracted Human Services helps fund their Youth Thrive program.

The center goes beyond technology, too. They'll provide children with food and clothing when needed. If a student misses their bus, the workers often will give them a ride to school.

Waters, who has worked for SHA for 19 years, says that it's hard on some families to keep up with their student's learning. Some parents are single and working two jobs. Others are just trying to find a way to survive during the pandemic.

A greater reliance on technology during the pandemic has also highlighted the effect of a lack of digital access and tools for many low-income families. For them, the Sarasota Housing Authority's Learning Center has been a crucial resource.

"We want to avoid families in this community paying the ultimate price of their education during this pandemic," says Stears. "So we will be that reliable place they can count on for support."

This story comes from Aspirations Journalism, an initiative of The Patterson Foundation and the Sarasota Herald-Tribune to inform, inspire and engage the community to take action on issues related to digital access.