#WiFi4Homeless

Ensure Access to the Internet for People Living in Shelter
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The Need

- In November 2025, there were 101,978 people - including 34,393 children - sleeping each night in the NYC municipal shelter system. In the rest of New York State, there were 15,175 sleeping in shelters on any given night in 2023.
- State regulations do not require WiFi to be provided to shelter residents. However, it is an essential tool that could reduce the length of residents' stays and facilitate their successful exit into permanent housing by helping them advocate for themselves and accessing vital resources in order to self-actualize.
- 75% of NYC shelter residents surveyed agreed that internet access would help improve their living circumstances. Further, survey respondents noted that if they had access to the internet while in the homeless shelter, they would use the internet to find permanent housing, find a job, access other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, seek medical care, doing schoolwork, and basic communications such as accessing email and social networking.

Why do people in shelters need access to WiFi?

- Without reliable internet access, shelter residents cannot search and apply for permanent housing or jobs, apply for government benefits, stay connected to friends and family, access basic entertainment, or obtain necessary medical care.
- Many critical services have become reliant on internet-based platforms as we have moved to a hybrid world post-COVID. Everything from legal services and virtual court appearances to counseling and telehealth is now offered remotely and often preferred by service providers. Poor or no internet connectivity leaves many shelter residents unable to effectively participate in services needed for their well-being.
    - This includes medical devices reliant on internet access, such as heart monitoring devices. Without internet access, these devices cannot send critical real-time data to doctors.
- When reliable internet access is not available in shelters, people need to use their extremely limited financial resources to buy monthly cellular data plans or utilize free public WiFi (e.g., in public spaces, libraries, or coffee shops). This modest access is insufficient and impractical.

    - Self-paid cellular plans often include limits on minutes or data and may not work in shelters with bad cell service.
    - Public WiFi does not provide the data protection or privacy needed to conduct sensitive personal business, in particular, for things like telehealth visits or privileged conversations with a lawyer.
- This is not just an issue of technology access; it is also an issue of racial justice. New Yorkers of color are disproportionately represented among those experiencing homelessness. Eighty-eight percent of homeless single adults and heads-of-household in family shelters identify as Black or Hispanic. An estimated 56% of single adults sleeping in DHS shelters are Black, compared with 24% of the New York City population. Any policy that bridges the digital divide for homeless New Yorkers is an essential step to address racial disparities in both the City and the State.

What does #WiFi4Homeless achieve?

- State-funded temporary housing facilities would be required to provide internet access with sufficient signal service to all residents in common and private areas of each shelter. Staff could not refuse access to residents in shelters where WiFi is already being paid for by the provider. Temporary housing facilities include, but are not limited to, family shelters, adult shelters, domestic violence shelters, runaway and homeless youth shelters, and safe houses for refugees.
- Pursuant to litigation on behalf of homeless students during COVID-19, New York City installed WiFi in shelters housing school-age children. However, there is no ongoing right to WiFi and families have experienced WiFi outages even though internet access is necessary for students to submit school assignments. It also failed to address the needs of children throughout the rest of the State to complete their school assignments and participate in remote learning. Neither did it help adult shelter residents engaged in GED, vocational, or college course work, who do not live in qualifying shelters, yet face the same barriers to remote learning as school-aged children.
    - Education is critical to an individual's ability to participate in society. It promotes the social, economic, and intellectual well-being necessary to live a stable life and avoid homelessness. For shelter residents, education may reduce the length of their shelter stay and facilitate their exit into permanent housing.
- Based on inspections of single adult and adult family shelters, the Coalition for the Homeless estimates that 50% of New York City shelters already provide WiFi access.
- The State would facilitate, fund, or reimburse temporary housing facilities for the cost of providing internet access through the ConnectAll program. It would require an estimated $5 to $10 million to support WiFi installation in shelters across New York State. The ongoing monthly costs for providing WiFi are reimbursable to shelter providers under state regulations.

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