

Whole neighborhood gets Wi-Fi

By Jessica Brown jlbrown@enquirer.com 9:31 p.m. EDT September 23, 2014



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When Oyler 10th grader Kayla Elliott wants to use the Internet after school, she has to go to a friend's house, the library or the nearby McDonald's.

Sometimes, she and her friends try to guess the passwords when notifications pop up on their phones that they're in range of a locked hot spot, she said.

Kayla is among up to 140 students – about 20 percent of Oyler's student body – who don't have Internet access at home. That makes it hard to work on homework, talk to friends on social media or look things up on Google.

But an announcement Tuesday changes that for her, er neighbors and their neighbors. In fact, it changes things for the entire community of Lower Price Hill.

Cincinnati-based communications provider [Powernet](#) announced it will provide free universal Wi-Fi to every man, woman and child in Lower Price Hill. Residents will now be able to access the Internet in their homes, in neighborhood businesses, on the sidewalk or even in cars parked on the street.

The [service](#), coupled with the donation of 50 tablets valued at \$16,000 to Oyler School and Community Learning Center, isn't just about providing a convenience. It's about creating equity in a distressed neighborhood, leveling a playing field that for too long has been lopsided, officials said.

"This is bigger than one school and one neighborhood," said City Councilman P.G. Sittenfeld, who chairs the city's education and entrepreneurship committee. "It's about what kind of society we want to be."

The goal, he said, is to expand. Other neighborhoods could be next. Powernet officials say they'll look at the feasibility for any interested neighborhood.

Meanwhile on Tuesday a symbolic ribbon cutting ceremony on the stage at Oyler school opened up a whole new world for Lower Price Hill.

So how do you wire a whole neighborhood?

PowerNet did it by setting up five Wi-Fi "hot spots" throughout the community. They're different than normal hot spots that come to mind – think Starbucks or Panera, where the signal stops at the walls of the business.

Here, each hot spot signal stretches for blocks – far enough to reach the next hot spot. The patchwork of connectivity blankets the entire neighborhood.

Powernet is headquartered in Symmes Township but provides voice, data and other communication services to businesses and residences nationwide. Officials had been looking for an opportunity like this for a while, said CEO Ali Stevens. Lower Price Hill was geographically perfect because Powernet already had equipment on the Queen City Tower, which overlooks the neighborhood.

The need in the community – Stevens referred to statistics on poverty, homelessness and unemployment – also made it a good fit. Only 20 to 40 percent of Lower Price Hill residents have Internet availability at home.

So Powernet worked with Oyler School, a Cincinnati Public School that has received national attention for its "community learning center" model. It also worked with the city

and the neighborhood to find the five hot spot locations and set up equipment on their roofs.

Powernet officials declined to say how much it cost for the project.

Community leaders said the possibilities are tremendous.

"It's the world wide web," said Dwight Young, pausing on the word "world."

"You can use it to do homework or to look for jobs. You can open so many doors."

Young is founder and director of Bloc Ministries, an outreach ministry that aims to lift the community by providing jobs, improving safety and erasing blight.

It turned abandoned buildings into a neighborhood pizza place, a coffee shop and a cafe that feeds the homeless. Soon it will open a print shop. Each site employs local residents who need help getting on their feet.

Three of the sites are now Powernet hot spots, including Bloc Pizza, just down the street from Oyler.

Young sees the neighborhood slowly changing, building by building, street by street. Tuesday's announcement is one more boost.

"People have ownership," he said. "We're not saving people, we're giving them opportunity."

Of the five Oyler high school students interviewed by the Enquirer Tuesday, only one had access to the Internet at home. The others, including Kayla, scrounge for service. Many students have mobile phones, but data plans are often spotty. One month they'll have service, the next they won't.

Longtime residents Crystal Marsh, Helen Vance, Vickie Burton and Pete Moore were walking down State Street. None have Internet access at home.

They have data plans on their phones, but Vance said her connection is often slow. Marsh said her daughter sits on some steps near Bloc Pizza to get a signal.

The project doesn't mean everyone will buy a new computer. But March, Vance and their friends can do a lot with smartphones. They might use the universal Wi-Fi to look up things on Google or get on Facebook; it will be extremely helpful to their kids in school, they said.

Marsh is hoping for another side effect: reduced crime. A man was shot dead on a street a few blocks away. They heard gunfire again last night, she said.

"Maybe people will be using Facebook now and not bullets," she said.

Not everyone in the community was so enamored by Tuesday's news.

"I don't need any of that stuff," said a woman walking with a little boy down State Street.

But at least the opportunity is there. That's what's important, said Young, the Bloc Ministries founder. The donation shows people care about this community. That sense of hope, he said, can be more powerful than any Internet signal.