



Employer Laptop Challenge launched to help meet communities' urgent technology needs

by: Jeremy Hegle

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What began as a project to narrow the digital divide has grown into a nationwide campaign to get computers into the hands of those who need them.

By February 2020, the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City had donated 100 Bank laptops to community organizations across the Bank's seven-state District as part of an initiative to expand broadband access. Originally the Bank wanted to create case studies to show the variety of ways computer donations could help meet community needs. The Bank's Community Development team would then promote the case studies to other employers as a low-cost way employers can support their community.

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic, however, resulted in an accelerated timeline and expansion of the mission. On April 13 the Kansas City Fed launched the Employer Laptop Challenge to encourage other employers to donate, as well. As of late July, just three months into the campaign, more than 1,500 devices have been donated as part of the Employer Laptop Challenge

Before the pandemic, the Community Development team chose organizations throughout the Tenth Federal Reserve District that, together, would show the range of needs donated computers could fulfill. Even then it was estimated that about a third of low-income households lacked a home computer. Now more than ever a computer at home is a lifeline to services, education and work.

Perkins Library Director Alison Bloyd describes how the organization quickly pivoted to help meet the needs of their community.

The organizations selected and their original plans for donated laptops:

- Center for Employment Opportunities, Oklahoma City, to help ex-offenders with job searches, applications and skills training.
- Connecting for Good, Kansas City, to continue gently refurbishing used computers and donating them to nonprofits serving lower-income residents, or selling equipment to low-income residents for \$10 to \$150.
- Center for Work Education and Employment, Denver, to help single parents transition from public assistance to good jobs.

- Denver Housing Authority, to provide computer and internet training to senior residents.
- Perkins Public Library, Perkins, Oklahoma, to launch a youth coding club for students.
- reStart Inc., Olathe, Kansas, to enable clients in its youth transitional living program to pursue education, skills development and jobs.
- ConnectLNK, Lincoln, Nebraska to provide broadband access and skills training to neighborhood residents.

However, just as the groups were receiving the donated laptops, the onset of the global pandemic disrupted plans. Some, like reStart, could move forward as intended. But in other cases, the recipient organizations had to pivot to respond to an even more critical needs. The Perkins Public Library is one example.

The library closed to the public just two days before the youth coding club was scheduled to start. Then the library began receiving urgent requests for public computer and Wi-Fi access. “The calls we got were heartbreaking,” said Alison Bloyd, library director. “Our patrons were needing them to apply for benefits, to track their stimulus payments, to do teledoctor conferences.” The library began lending the laptops. “We were able to actually check out laptops for people to use in their vehicles on our Wi-Fi,” Bloyd said. “If they don’t have internet at home or Wi-Fi at home, they just use it in the parking lot and return it before they leave.”

Just days after the campaign’s launch in April, employers across the country had contacted the Kansas City Fed. A few, such as the Platte Valley Bank in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, and SnapIT Solutions in Overland Park, Kansas, had devices ready to donate. Other employers requested guidance on how to make the donation process work. Some employers said they planned to donate used computers when their employees returned to on-site operations in the summer.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Go to [KansasCityFed.org/ten](https://www.kansascityfed.org/ten) for video of Connecting for Good and Perkins Public Library officials discussing the importance of donated laptops. To learn more about the program or get involved, visit

kansascityfed.org/community/digital-divide

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Jeremy Hegle is assistant vice president and Community Affairs Officer (CAO). In this role, Hegle leads the Tenth District's [Community Development department](#) with responsibility for leading and executing the Bank's districtwide community and economic development initiatives, which address challenging issues affecting lower-income individuals, underserved communities and small businesses' access to credit. He also represents the Kansas City Fed on the Federal Reserve System's CAO subcommittee and will manage the Bank's [Community Development Advisory Council](#). Prior to being named CAO in 2023, Hegle led the Bank's digital equity efforts. In 2019 Hegle co-authored [Disconnected: Seven lessons on fixing the digital divide](#), a layperson's overview of the digital divide. He led efforts to narrow the digital divide using three strategies: Expanding access to affordable home broadband. [Collaborating with state broadband directors](#), federal agencies, and local government on broadband deployment strategies and increased access through [affordable internet programs](#). Increasing the supply of low-cost computers by encouraging employers to [donate their used computers](#) to nonprofit refurbishers, schools and community organizations. [Informing banks](#), foundations, government and policymakers of the complex factors that cause the digital divide, the latest research on the topic, and creative solutions to fix it. Hegle joined the Kansas City Fed in 2015. Previously, he served in the Army National Guard and later helped launch KCSOURCELINK, a small-business support organization that links thousands of entrepreneurs with resources to start, grow and accelerate their businesses. Hegle has a bachelor's in business administration and an M.B.A. from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

About the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City is one of 12 regional Reserve Banks that, along with the Board of Governors in Washington, D.C., make up our nation's central bank. We work in the public's interest by supporting economic and financial stability. The Kansas City Fed's territory includes Colorado, Kansas, western Missouri, Nebraska, northern New Mexico, Oklahoma and Wyoming. Our headquarters is in Kansas City, with branch offices in Denver, Omaha and Oklahoma City. The Kansas City Fed Community Development Department promotes economic development and public understanding that leads to progress for lower-income individuals and communities. Our focus areas include community development investments, digital inclusion, small business / entrepreneurship, and workforce development.