BUILDING A DIGITAL EQUITY NETWORK

Digital equity is the assurance that all individuals, including the most disadvantaged populations, have equal access to the information and technology necessary to fully participate in society. This not only includes a digital connection but also education, training, and programs to enable residents to take full advantage of available resources. Research finds that the benefits of digital connectivity are historically not evenly distributed and that those who lack access tend to fall behind in educational achievement, health outcomes, and other indicators.

The County Manager's Proposed FY 2020 Budget recommends establishing a Digital Equity Network that leverages existing County fiber-optic infrastructure to connect facilities and community non-profits serving low-income and other disadvantaged individuals. While the County cannot provide internet services directly to residents, one of the main reasons for digital inequity is a lack of infrastructure that allows residents to gain that access, and the County can play a role there.

The Manager's proposal specifically includes an allocation of $250,000 in one-time funds to construct lateral connections from existing buildings operated by non-profits and housing and health care providers to the County's dark fiber network, ConnectArlington; enhance digital infrastructure within some County-owned buildings that serve disadvantaged residents; and allocate $50,000 in ongoing funds for Affordable Housing Investment Fund (AHIF) Housing Services funds to eligible providers to establish programs and services related to bridging the digital divide for low-income residents (e.g., telehealth devices and digital literacy education).

Enhancing Connections Between County-Owned Facilities

Under the Manager's proposal, the County would focus its immediate efforts on enhancing connections from County-owned facilities, such as the Mary Marshall Assisted Living Residence (MMALR) and the Residential Program Center (RPC), to resources at the Department of Human Services and other County programs:

- **Mary Marshall Assisted Living Residence (MMALR):** This 52-unit assisted living residence for low-income residents 55 years and older with a serious mental illness or disability is looking for better ways to bring important services to residents. For example, telemedicine delivered via a broadband connection could reduce the need for residents to see a general practitioner in person, thereby reducing transportation costs and time-consuming travel as well as provide medical care at a reduced cost. Establishing a secure network connection between MMALR and Arlington County's Department of Human Services could allow streamlined service by enabling transmission of encrypted resident private health information.

- **Residential Program Center (RPC):** This 66-bed County-owned facility provides emergency shelter, jail diversion, detox, and early recovery services to vulnerable

single adults. A secure network connection currently exists between RPC and the County's Department of Human Services. However, with additional hardware and software enhancements, those at the RPC will be able to have video discussions with eligibility or intake workers (e.g., SNAP or Medicaid assistance or access to shelter intake for clients in detox), thereby eliminating unnecessary transportation costs and wait times. These enhancements will also enable shelter residents to participate in skills training offered by the Arlington Employment Center and online REEP English programs.

Helping Non-Profits Access and Leverage the Network

Discussions are underway among County staff and community nonprofits to determine the best way nonprofits can use the County's ConnectArlington infrastructure to connect with each other and take advantage of government resources. Culpepper Garden and new affordable housing developments offer additional opportunities to build laterals and connect to the network:

- **Culpepper Garden:** This independent senior living facility, owned and operated by Arlington Retirement Housing Corporation (ARHC), consists of 267 affordable units for independent seniors and 73 apartments for residents who need 24-hour supportive services. It is the largest low-income retirement property in Arlington and provides a range of services to help residents live independently. A planned renovation funded in part by the County will provide updated building wiring to all units and improvements to lobbies and common areas to support internet connections for residents. Many Culpepper Garden residents currently have unreliable or no access to the internet. Any future connections by Culpepper Gardens to the ConnectArlington network could potentially provide residents access to telemedicine and telehealth services and other educational and health opportunities.

- **Upcoming Affordable Housing Projects Program**: Affordable housing providers, including the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing (APAH), Wesley Housing Development Corporation (WHDC), and AHC, Inc. have expressed interest in connecting to the Digital Equity Network. Several affordable housing projects sponsored by these partners, including Gilliam Place, Trenton Street, and The Berkeley, are slated for completion in the next few years and these partners will continue to work with County staff in exploring ways to implement equitable digital connections and services for future residents.

Leveraging Existing Experience and Examples

The County undertook its first digital equity demonstration project in December 2017, upon approval from the County Board. The project provided broadband infrastructure to Arlington Mill Residences, a family-friendly affordable housing complex on Columbia Pike, and funded broadband access for residents for a period of three years. While the County is still capturing data necessary to gauge success of the project, the efforts and services at Arlington Mill provide a potentially useful template for making similar investments in infrastructure, resources, and training in the future. The pilot has also sparked a community conversation

around digital equity. As staff begins developing a Digital Equity Action Plan and engaging partners in developing and implementing new demonstration projects, the core program elements can be structured to build upon and innovate around the Arlington Mill model.