

VOLUNTEERING

RSVP teams up with Chesco groups to boost digital literacy

RSVP

RSVP has joined forces with several Chester County nonprofits to bring online literacy and access to some of the county's most digitally isolated residents. The new Digital Equity Coalition intends to offer instruction in online activities such as using email, Zoom and a browser.

By early next year the coalition plans to reach out to the families serving the agricultural industry in the Kennett Square area. Many of them are Spanish-speaking and unable to communicate online with schools, telemedicine providers and other key services. If that pilot effort succeeds, the program could be expanded to others who are cut off from help with digital literacy.

RSVP this month has begun to "train the trainers," a group of 20 staff members and volunteers from three Chester County community organizations that serve the agricultural workers.

"We're seeking to help a close-knit, largely Spanish-speaking community," said Scherri Roberts, senior projects manager for RSVP, a nonprofit volunteer community service organization. "We all agree it will be most effective if trusted community service providers, people they already know, deliver the technology training."

The organizations providing trainers include the Maternal and Child Health Consortium's Family Center, Mighty Writers and the Kennett Area Senior Center.

The need

"When the pandemic shutdowns began, the need became so evident," said Michele Moll, RSVP's executive director. "In March 2002 we began to see seniors shut in with no way to get groceries. They didn't have computers or didn't know how to order online. RSVP began to work with county aging departments to provide volunteers willing to drop off groceries. That's when we began our Senior Tech Training program to help seniors navigate

the internet."

As the pandemic continued, the need clearly extended beyond seniors, Moll said.

"Some students learning at home were provided with Chromebooks, but their parents didn't have the technology skills to help them," Moll said. "Schools had difficulty communicating with families. And some families had no internet access."

Joan Holliday and retired businessman Jim Mercante saw this need, too.

As members of the Southern Chester County Opportunity Network, "We wanted to start a group that would improve digital equity," said Holliday, a retired public health nurse and founder of Study Buddies, a program to help at-risk children excel in school.

Holliday and Mercante worked with the Chester County Intermediate Unit to obtain a federal grant to study internet availability, which can be spotty in the southern part of the county. That needs assessment gets underway this month.

"We will also learn about available funding for municipalities to get better connectivity," she said.

Holliday and Mercante then turned to digital literacy.

"The schools have been wonderful helping families to use the computer," Holliday said. "But a lot of follow-up is needed for families to use Zoom, email and other programs. The schools can't be stretched that thin."

Southern Chester County has some fabulous agencies working with the vulnerable population. We had a Zoom meeting of people who wanted to join the literacy coalition" including RSVP, which Holiday had worked with on a kindergarten readiness program.

"We wanted to include a nonprofit that could seek funding for a new digital training program, and RSVP is wonderful at bringing in resources," she said.

Train the trainers

RSVP obtained a \$15,000 matching grant and turned to



Joan Holliday



Michele Moll



Scherri Roberts



Michelle Hang

Oasis, a nonprofit that provides technical training to reduce isolation among older adults across the nation. The objective: to train 20 staff members and volunteers provided by the participating agencies. They, in turn, will provide training to agricultural workers and other vulnerable families who lack digital access.

"We have used Oasis materials in our Senior Tech Training program," explained Michelle Hang, RSVP's senior technology coordinator. "Now we're customizing them for this new initiative. We worked backwards, first asking the agencies what they want the user to be able to do. That helped us to select five

modules: email, web browsers, apps, Zoom and internet safety and security."

A veteran teacher and business school trainer, Hang said she and Oasis are producing training materials in English and Spanish in PDF format to make them easily accessible.

"The trainers are going to have their own take on what we're trying to do," she said, "so we expect to make revisions as we go along."

"Our goal is to make sure this group of individuals and their children will not get left behind. We hope they will become confident and knowledgeable in using tools that make their lives better."

Several Southern Chester

County school districts reach parents exclusively via email and internet postings.

"If parents can't communicate with the teacher, how can they help their children get the best possible education?" Hang asked.

Looking ahead

Moll said RSVP expects to apply methods developed for its Southern Chester County and Senior Tech Training programs to other digital equity initiatives.

"We've talked to the Norristown School District about helping their parents to learn email so they can communicate with the teacher," she said. "We're gaining knowledge about what works, and that will help us to raise funds to help Norristown and other low-income areas. Providing internet access and training is desperately needed. That's why all our new partners are so committed. They know how important it is."

Holliday envisions local libraries as a potential hub for literacy training.

"They could be the backbone, with permanent digital navigators on their staffs," she said.

Most libraries already have computers for public use, but they conceivably could also lend devices.

She calls the Digital Equity Coalition an ongoing process.

"Digital literacy is going to be needed for the future, period," she said. "Hopefully it will become a federal initiative like ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and other forms of literacy. New skills bring income into our communities/

"Once we help people gain these skills, they can pass them along to their friends and family. That's the dream. Everyone's helping everyone else."

Nonprofit RSVP connects volunteers to dozens of community service opportunities. Its programs improve the lives of vulnerable populations in the community by focusing on education and wellness. For more information, visit rsvpmc.org, email volunteer123@rsvpmc.org or call 610-834-1040, ext. 123.