

Digital Literacy---Becoming an essential life skill

By Joan Holliday

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Did we ever consider Digital Literacy an essential life skill that we all needed before the pandemic? Most of us had digital devices and some of us used personal computers at home, but in most cases, we used the devices only at a level that fit with our current life at that time---until the pandemic!

The past year and one-half has unveiled how being digitally savvy made everything more manageable during a time of quarantine and shutdown. Those who were digitally literate were able to conduct business from home; attend school; order food and other essential products online; use telehealth for medical appointments; meet socially online; attend church services and participate in many other enrichment meetings online.

Experiencing “isolation” and” being in the dark” are common expressions from persons, who are not digitally literate. This brought to the foreground a digital divide that was even wider than previously thought. The hope is that with a strong community volunteer effort, this can be changed over time.

We may be moving out of a pandemic, but having access and skills to be digitally literate is now understood as essential for bringing the disenfranchised into the circle of community living.

Advocacy work done by volunteers to pursue funding for an assessment of Southern Chester County’s wi-fi connectivity has been successful. Receiving a \$200,000 grant from the Department of Labor, Chester County Intermediate Unit (CCIU) has been designated as the agency that will be conducting the assessment of connectivity in Southern Chester County (SCC.) This will be followed by recommendations and plans to municipalities for where wi-fi coverage needs to be installed.

A great beginning, yet only addresses the first element of the digital divide. Even once we are able to connect our SCC residents to robust wi-fi, an additional divide will remain; one based on digital literacy.

This summer, the Digital Literacy Coalition has been formed with the mission of focusing on the most vulnerable populations due to being low-income, non-English speaking, and born before the digital age. The goal is to provide opportunities to become digitally literate.

Plans are being made to have a non-profit organization, Retired Volunteer Senior Program (RSVP) provide classes which Train the Trainer. Those receiving the training will be employees from agencies who serve this vulnerable population. This will be

followed by the employees setting up one-on-one sessions with their clients and classes that will teach digital literacy 101.

Most of us have learned technology by the seat of our pants. We have skipped over steps that are fundamental---how to protect your digital security; organize your files; purchase insurance; and safe Internet searches to address a few. Along with this, we need to be discussing and emphasizing the importance of keeping the digital device as a tool and not a replacement for social and family interactions and activities.

This will take a whole community commitment. Funding will be needed to reimburse teachers and to purchase computers and insurance for starters. Volunteers will be needed to support the digital literacy classes and one-on-one tutoring. Long-term plans need to be made to assure that this process is ongoing and will continue to offer advanced courses as requested.

The vision is that The Kennett Library will be a central place for having community classes once the new building is completed. The library is the entity that promotes life-long learning and could become the backbone organization that would partner with other community organizations for digital literacy advancement.

So much more to do, but off to a good start. Many community members and agencies have already stepped up to the plate and are willing to work on this beginning grassroots effort that will spark the interest and need for learning how to navigate in the digital world. Jim Mercante and Joan Holliday are taking the lead and are open to any suggestions and offers to volunteer. Our vision for digital literacy: No one left behind!

The Story of Kennett may be purchased on Amazon and at the Mushroom Cap. Contact Joan Holliday at dochollisv@aol.com