

Member news & Notes

More than Just a Computer BY RENATA B. KOWALCZYK, CEO, WILMINGTON ALLIANCE

» We live in unprecedented times as unemployment rates skyrocket and income inequality expands. As of May 2020, the State reported the unemployment rate at 15.8 percent, while Wilmington's rate rose to 19.9 percent. The COVID-19 crisis has added layers of complexity to an already inequitable workforce ecosystem.

One gap that creates inequities in job readiness is lack of access to technology. Some programs have not skipped a beat in their workforce training because they have the ability to power up their laptops and sail smoothly through sessions of virtual learning. However, many of our job seekers are not so lucky.

"We had to transition to virtual training, which meant some of our students were using their phones to participate in Zoom for our classes," shared Rysheema Dixon, executive director of DE Pathways to Apprenticeship, LEEP Inc. "Due to the 3-hour length of our classes, keeping their phones charged sufficiently and staying engaged were challenges."

Accessing technology other than a smartphone can be a challenge for many job seekers. This is a barrier to accessing skills and opportunities needed for success in employment similar to other pandemic-induced barriers such as child care, food scarcity, and gaps in health care.

Keeping adults and out-of-school youth on a path towards meaningful employment and a sustainable career is

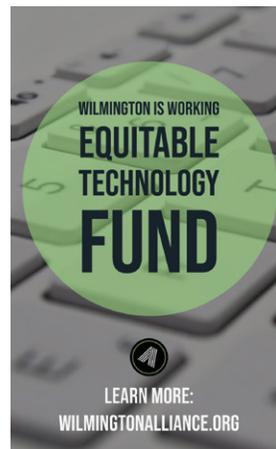
essential to families' and communities' wellbeing. That is why we created the Technology Fund.

The Wilmington is Working Equitable Technology Fund is designed to assist Wilmington-serving 501c(3) workforce development programs by providing hardware devices and virtual access technologies to their learners. Barclays

is the anchor funder and NERDiT NOW is the technology partner.

Fifteen programs, serving Wilmington and beyond, gathered for the first Tech Fund Information Session – citing the need to not only keep their training programs running but also their learners connected to job opportunities and wraparound services.

The Challenge Program is an example of a training program experiencing the impact of the digital divide: "Our trainees have shown they are capable and eager to do remote learning. But as the pandemic drags on, our trainees are struggling with remote programming because their only technology is a cellphone. We've been creative with engagement, but we just don't have the proper tools. Laptops help revive our trainees and allow us the freedom to do so much more with distance learning. Specifically, the laptops will allow us to offer two crucial programs that were



sorely disrupted by the pandemic: counseling services and GED prep."

Wilmington Alliance has been integral in solving for systems of inequities through reevaluation and redevelopment in a top-down, bottom-up approach. It is currently in the midst of a Wilmington Workforce Analysis, a philanthropically funded environmental assessment

of the assets and structure of the training and employment pipelines in Wilmington. Through the support from the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, the Alliance is evaluating national best practices that can be applied in the City. The strategy is to meet current workforce needs, like access to technology, while also planning for the future of a more equitable workforce ecosystem.

Markevis Gideon, founder of NERDiT NOW, sees the tech gap every day. "Here at NERDiT NOW, we believe that we are providing more than just a computer – our goal is to provide opportunities. Technology is an essential tool and will help keep our workforce development programs on track to create a positive impact within our community."

The Wilmington is Working Tech Fund aims to do just that. Visit www.wilmingtonalliance.org/technology-fund to apply to this rolling fund.



WILMINGTON ALLIANCE, in **partnership** with **BARCLAYS**,
is committed to the equitable advancement of all
our citizens and our communities in Wilmington.

Through collaborative and innovative
Workforce Development initiatives, we seek to meet
current workforce needs— such as addressing the digital divide—
by **providing access to the latest technology!**

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT **WILMINGTON ALLIANCE** AND
THE WILMINGTON IS WORKING EQUITABLE TECHNOLOGY FUND, VISIT:
WilmingtonAlliance.org

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
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