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# Wi-fi Philly's laptop leap

## 5 get free computers, giving breath to city's wireless dream

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**NOTE: THIS STORY HAS BEEN CORRECTED.**

Five welfare-to-work women in West Kensington just became the first city residents to earn free laptops and Internet service from Wireless Philadelphia, the mission of which is to connect low-income workers to the Web so they can get better jobs and provide better lives for their families.

The five women represent the tiny start of Wireless Philadelphia's citywide dream.

The nonprofit's high-tech partner, EarthLink, currently has made 25 of the city's 135 square miles wireless - from Spring Garden north to Temple University, West Kensington and Feltonville, along with growing patches in West Philadelphia along Lancaster Avenue and in Southwest Philly along Baltimore Avenue.

Gathered at Impact Services Corp., the welfare-to-work agency on Allegheny Avenue near 19th Street where they earned their wireless bundles by holding a steady job for a year, the five women are the first to receive a high-tech makeover that Wireless Philadelphia hopes to give to 500 low-income workers by year's end, thousands in years to come.

"Access to information is access to opportunity," said CEO Greg H. Goldman while Chief Operations Officer Agnes Ogletree's eyes welled up at finally seeing three years of plans realized.

The Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation picked up the \$600 tab for each of the Wireless Philadelphia bundles - computer, EarthLink service, tech support and training - and plans to pay for 95 more this summer.

Vanessa Brown was in an old-school marriage - her husband worked while she raised their two girls (now 4 and 7) - until doctors discovered a tumor on his spine. The operation left him paralyzed.

"Everything in my household got switched around," Brown said. "He was in the hospital for nine months and then he couldn't work. When I applied for welfare, they treated me like I was nothing."

Through Impact Services, she got a job as a teacher's aide, instructing first- and second-graders at St. Joseph School of Nursing in North Philadelphia. After taking education classes, she was promoted to head teacher.

Brown's inspiration is her husband. "He worked two jobs: Men's Wearhouse and Verizon Wireless. I used to ask him, 'How can you keep coming home late every night and getting up early the next morning to go to work again?' He said, 'Every day, I look at you and the children, and I know what I have to do.'"

Brown's face lit up when she received her computer.

"It's a blessing," she said. "My 7-year-old is computer-ready but we could never afford one. She doesn't know about this yet. I can't wait to see her when she finds out."

Kay Miller, looking at her new laptop as if it had just dropped out of the sky, said, "This is a blessing. I could never afford this."

Last spring, Miller had a baby, was on welfare and working a part-time job, and was feeling the pressure of the fast-approaching welfare-to-work deadline for losing her benefits if she didn't find full-time employment.

"I had low self esteem, thinking I couldn't achieve anything," she said. "I was scared to apply for a job."

Impact Services placed her at Friends Rehabilitation Program on Girard Avenue near 7th Street, where her year of employment and her low income qualified her for the wireless bundle.

As the city goes completely wireless and subscriber numbers grow, EarthLink is contractually obligated to provide 25,000 discounted wireless connections to qualified low-income consumers at \$9.95 per month instead of the usual \$19.95.

Wireless Philadelphia already has 500 qualified low-income working people lined up to receive free computers and support bundles - and hopes to partner with more social-service agencies that will provide funding for thousands more.

Welfare-to-work and low-income readers who feel they qualify for free wireless computer bundles, or who have computers and qualify for discounted EarthLink service, should call Wireless Philadelphia at 877-2GT-WIFI.

Nyeisha Stark moved to North Philadelphia from Camden last year and walked into Impact Services where "they told me that when I went on welfare, I'd be working for \$1.68 a day."

Stark was on welfare for only five days before landing a job as a certified nursing assistant.

Tina D'Arcangelo was about to lose her welfare benefits and was having trouble finding a bartending job when Impact's resident motivator, Deborah Lytle, inspired her.

"Her life story is like my life story," D'Arcangelo said. "I'm a single mom. I have to work just to stay alive."

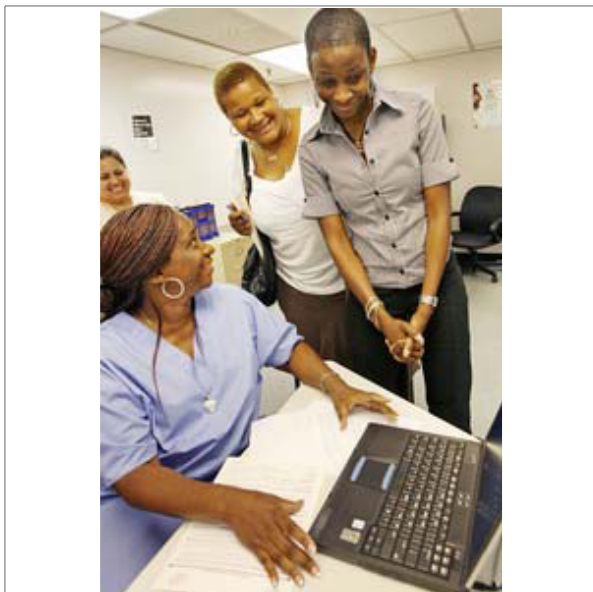
She's bartending now. Soon, she'll be Web surfing.

Ruth Martinez came through the welfare system to Impact Services, where Lytle "saw the spark in me that I didn't see. She liked my tenacity. She liked that I was bilingual and that I use my hands when I talk."

Lytle encouraged Martinez to work at Impact Services, where she is an employment facilitator who will teach computer techniques to welfare-to-work people like herself who earn the wireless computer bundles. \*

### CORRECTION:

Vanessa Brown teaches in the Little Schoolhouse Daycare Center at Saint Joseph School of Nursing, not at Saint Joseph Hospital. Funding for the \$600 wireless laptop-and-support bundles presented to welfare-to-work women who earn them is provided by the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation using Impact Services Corp. as the conduit.



JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News  
Laptop recipients Vanessa Brown (left) and Kay Miller (in white blouse) beam as Dionne Ellison gives laptop instruction Monday.

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