

Mobile hotspot project at libraries offers portable Wi-Fi to residents

Devices can be checked out and used for free

By CHARLIE WRIGHT
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A grant-funded pilot initiative that began this month is providing internet access to citizens in Calvert, Charles and St. Mary's counties through hotspot devices.

The dozen library branches in the tri-county area now offer portable Wi-Fi units for a checkout window of two weeks. Calvert Library, Charles County Public Library, St. Mary's County Library and Southern Maryland Regional Library received the grant from the Maryland State Library and the Library Services and Technology Act through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, first reported by the Southern

Maryland Regional Library Association. The program combats connectivity challenges in rural areas as well as income-related difficulties.

"In Charles County, it kinda encapsulates our whole mission and vision statement," said CCPL executive director Janet Salazar. "These mobile hotspots will help us reach out in our community and create those opportunities for [residents] to engage and discover and learn. It will help them connect to those possibilities that we want them to connect to."

Each county library received at least 17 hot spots through the grant, according to a Southern Maryland Regional Library Association press release. Customers must be at least 16 years of age and the loan does not automatically renew, but there is no overdue fee, just a \$100 replacement

fee for lost or damaged materials. All hotspots have Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) filtering equivalent to the computers in the libraries.

Salazar said the Charles County branches have 55 devices between them, after making additional purchases, and will budget for them going forward. Her branches are the only ones to offer the hotspots without data limits, as Charles County was able to go with a Sprint product that includes unlimited data for the devices.

Calvert Library Director Carrie Plymire explained the service has been extremely popular in its first couple weeks in existence, especially after the wind storms earlier in the month. When she spoke to this newspaper on Monday afternoon, 18 of the county's 25 hotspots were in use. Plymire expects the proj-

ect to expand at some point.

"We just know that connectivity is a real problem for a lot of our customers," Plymire said. "Kids can't do their homework, you can apply for a job without the internet. I suspect that the scope of our pilot is not gonna be adequate."

Plymire added that she's had parents complain about spending \$500-600 a month on a data plan just so their children can do schoolwork. This reality, along with the hefty cost of attracting a major internet provider to an area without coverage, shape the issue as financial more than anything else.

"That's not sustainable," said Plymire of the monthly data costs. "If that's the only way some people can access the internet then it absolutely becomes a matter of income. We're really looking at this as a way of promoting equity in the county."

Calvert and St. Mary's went with Verizon for their devices because of coverage concerns, and the company does not offer unlimited data, so

there is a cap on usage for the hotspots in these areas. Officials weren't thrilled with this arrangement, but given the rural location of both counties, Verizon was the only option.

"We are really committed to making internet accessible to as many people as possible," said Sara Stephenson, virtual service coordinator at St. Mary's County Library, in the press release. "Although we're not able to guarantee coverage everywhere, we chose providers that have the greatest level of coverage in each county."

The release stated the project hinges on funding and customer feedback, the latter of which will be obtained through surveys. Viability of the program will be revisited in six months.

"We're gonna see how things shake out," Salazar said. "It will just depend on how popular they are, if they're being used like we think they're gonna be used, and we will re-evaluate probably this time next year."

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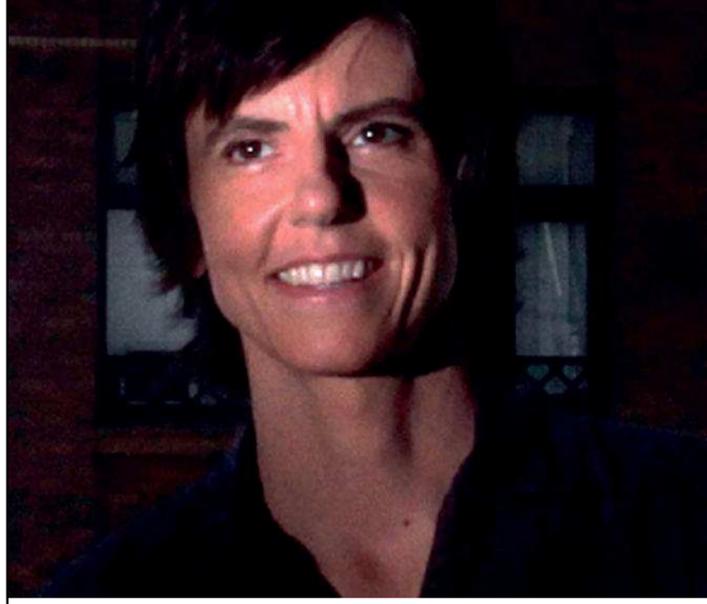
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