IT'S TIME FOR ACTION

Community Agencies For Digital Inclusion

Rolling lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic forced all of us to go online for medical advice and treatment, mental health services, education, work and job-seeking, and of course to maintain crucial social connections. But what about those who couldn't get online?

TOO MANY ARE MISSING OUT

Those without reliable access to the internet have been severely impacted. The digital divide means many people are unable to participate fully in society, with serious impacts on individual and public health, safety and well-being. Public housing residents were particularly hard-hit, with a perfect storm of factors during the hard lockdown leading to a breakdown of the usual support mechanisms in their communities. We cannot let this happen again.

We are advocating that public housing tenants have high speed, reliable, affordable internet access and the infrastructure needed to provide that.
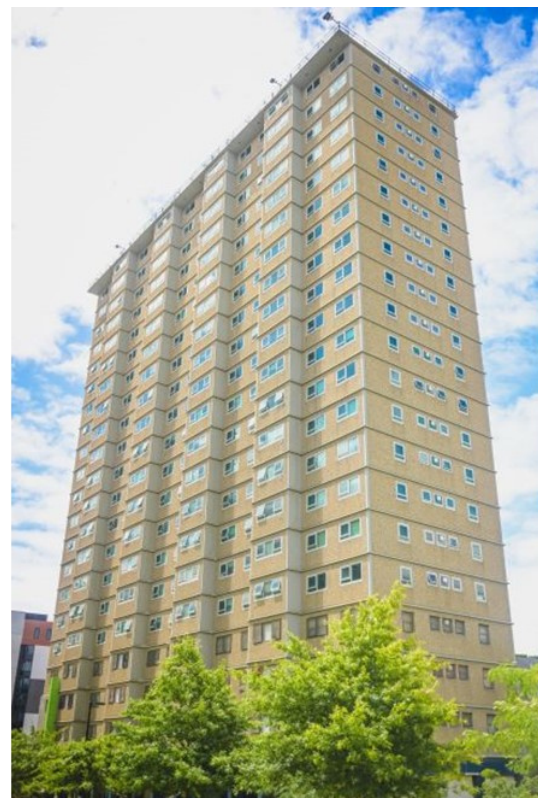
We want to bridge the divide.

WHO ARE WE?

We are Community Agencies for Digital Inclusion, or CADI, a network of neighbourhood houses and non-profit organisations across Melbourne working closely with and within communities providing essential services including adult education courses, community-building projects, youth and mentoring programs, childcare and more.

During the lockdowns of 2020-21, too many people in public housing had little or no access to digital devices, limited data and low computer literacy. The digital divide has always been an issue, but recent events exacerbated it. There were times when we could not reach our users at all. We worked extremely hard with minimal resources to respond and help community members remain connected. It was clear to us all that a more sustainable, fair and systemic approach is needed from now on.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

Let's work together to ensure public housing residents have access to the internet - undeniably an essential service

Our network came together online after the hard lockdown of 2020, seeking ways to coordinate actions, share knowledge and resources, and to lobby for improved accessibility and connectivity for the communities we serve, into the future. Digital inclusion is complex, requiring interlinked actions to ensure people trust in service providers, have access to devices that work as well as the opportunity to build their digital literacy. For now we are focusing on internet access and affordability in public housing, but this is just the start.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE DIGITALLY EXCLUDED?

Fadumo lives in a 3 bedroom public housing apartment in Kensington with her husband and 6 children. The children range from Grade 1 to Year 9. When lockdown hit, the only device with internet access in their household was a mobile phone. All six children were expected to connect to their schools for remote learning. Fadumo needed to attend regular telehealth appointments with the Royal Women's Hospital. Kensington Neighbourhood House was able to lend the family two laptops and an iPad for the duration of the lockdown. This enabled the family to keep up with school work - although sharing of devices meant that the younger children often missed out and remaining engaged with schooling was very difficult.

Duc is in his sixties and lives with his wife in North Melbourne Public Housing. He has no access to the internet. His apartment is only connected to a landline and he has neither a computer nor a mobile phone with a data plan. Duc experienced intense social and digital disconnection during the hard lockdowns of public housing residents in North Melbourne and Flemington. His main source of information was SBS language radio and neighbours. Duc was unable to benefit from networks set up and led by other public housing residents or services like North Melbourne Language and Learning. These communication channels were a prime source of mutual support for residents, but Duc was left in isolation.

CADI MEMBERS: Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House | Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre | Farnham Street Neighbourhood Learning Centre | Kensington Neighbourhood House | Neighbourhood Houses Victoria | North East Neighbourhood House Network | North Melbourne Language & Learning | The Centre | The Venny | Wingate Avenue Community Centre

OUR ALLIES: ACCAN | ACEVic | ALA (Adult Learning Australia) | City of Melbourne | City of Moonee Valley | City of Yarra | InfoXchange | NBN Co | The University of Melbourne | Unison

Digital inclusion is vital for the social recovery of Victoria following COVID-19 restrictions. Empowering public housing tenants to access affordable data and devices is an important consideration to improve community wellbeing. The pandemic and hard lockdowns highlighted the need for fairness in accessing essential digital services. We do not want those affected to be forgotten.