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A Community #ForAllAges

August 2022



## Access to Digital Healthcare is Essential

Even before the COVID 19 pandemic, many older adults with limited social connections were experiencing isolation. Add to this the need to quarantine and the reality that older adults fall behind the rest of the population in utilizing technology. Owning a device and accessing the internet is no longer a luxury. It is a necessity and a lifeline. The ability to connect has been critical over the past two years, especially for accessing needed services, including grocery delivery, telehealth, benefit access, communicating with family, and scheduling vaccines and testing. Many older adults struggled to keep up, relying on family members to help, often from far away, creating another layer of concern and stress on both parties.



## Broadband Equity Funding Opportunities

The Florida Office of Broadband Department of Economic Opportunity has several funding opportunities to address our community's broadband equity barriers. One requirement is each county must form a Local Technology Planning Team (LTPT). The LTPT is tasked to identify underserved or unserved areas that have broadband equity barriers: affordability, location, device needs, language barrier, and mistrust are some examples.

One common task each LTPT around must perform is to conduct a survey that focuses on citizens and a survey

So how do we help bridge the gap? In June 2020, The Patterson Foundation created [Digital Access for All](#) (DA4A) in response to the need for connectivity. Access was important for people of all ages, but many individuals and families with limited income and those with limited skills had difficulty embracing the new digital normal.

Through DA4A, the [Digital Navigator Program](#) emerged. This program trains local organizations to connect families and individuals with opportunities to obtain digital connectivity, devices, skills, and support. The Digital Navigator helps those who need low-cost home internet service, an affordable computing device, and foundational digital literacy training. Assistance may be provided in person, via phone, email, or text.

Recently, [DA4A hosted an event at Casa Santa Marta](#). Digital navigators assisted 25–30 older adults in accessing benefits through the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), which helps qualified customers save up to \$30 per month or even get free internet or wireless services, assisted with devices, and provided training and support to use devices effectively while solving technical issues.

Overall, it was a resounding success with the potential to replicate at other locations.

Recently, the [DA4A team has begun a large-scale project](#) to research and address the issue of access disparities in the telehealth and teletherapy realms. This project aims to identify and connect trusted technology-based medical resources and education services to individuals and families at free or low-cost rates. Please consider advancing the initiative and this exploration by clicking the link to complete the survey below.

[Please Take the Survey](#)

that focuses on businesses. Another task is creating a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Challenges matrix as it applies to broadband equity in our county. Broadband and access to technology is a core need of any community and business. Broadband is the conduit that delivers education, communication, healthcare (telehealth), business opportunities, and social interaction to our communities within Sarasota County. It keeps our community engaged and vital!

Sarasota County's LTPT has created two surveys, one for businesses and one for citizens. This data, along with targeted focus groups, will be combined to create a plan for submission to the Department of Economic Opportunity Office of Broadband. Once acquired, these funds will be used to help improve equity barriers to service throughout Sarasota County.



## **Pen Pals in Paradise!**

By Susan Berger, Sarasota County's  
Aging System Policy Coordinator

## City of Sarasota Wins the Award of Excellence!

Congratulations to the City of Sarasota for winning the Award of Excellence: Innovation in a Parking, Transportation, and Mobility Program for The Bay Runner Trolley and Micromobility Program.

The City of Sarasota's Bay Runner Trolley and Micromobility Program, featuring experiential rides while reducing traffic congestion, have been recognized by the International Parking & Mobility Institute (IPMI) with an Award of Excellence for innovation.

The Bay Runner launched in early March with the slogan "Live more, drive less," and the e-scooter/bicycle rental sharing program rolled out just two weeks later with much anticipation. Both initiatives were welcomed enthusiastically, with riders opting to leave their car behind and enjoy a fun experience while traveling to the beach, shopping, dining, or work. "The motto of 'Live more, drive less' is perfectly put into practice with this experiential journey," commented an award juror. "Transporting employees, residents, and tourists between the beach and downtown in a stress-free, fun manner will have huge and lasting benefits to riders and the city alike."

The Bay Runner is a free open-air trolley with daily service from 8 a.m. to midnight running between downtown Sarasota through St. Armands Circle to Lido Beach and back every 20-30 minutes. The e-scooter/bicycle rental program, operated by Veo through a mobile app, is reporting record demand in Sarasota.

Within the first two months, 41,000 people rode the Bay Runner, and 37,600 individuals rented a scooter or bicycle for a short distance trip, helping to reduce traffic.

The Bay Runner was realized through a partnership between the city,



Social media has a way of bringing out the best and the worst in people, but recently I found a slam dunk positive story posted on Facebook that I had to investigate. On May 19, 2022, Bay Village hosted a "Pen Pal Picnic" with students from Wilkinson Elementary School. The pictures featured residents and students enjoying food, fun, and conversation.

I reached out to Bay Village of Sarasota, and they put me in touch with Terry Kall, immediate past Chairman of the Bay Village/Wilkinson Elementary School Partnership. In turn, Terry put me in touch with Susan Nations, Principal of Wilkinson Elementary School. Through a series of phone calls and video chats with both Terry and Susan, I got the scoop on this fantastic story.

The story started in 2019 when Bay Village residents were looking for a school where they could connect and make a difference. They reached out to Principal Susan Nations at Wilkinson Elementary School. They initially started with face-to-face interaction with projects that included a cold weather clothing donation, a book drive, choral programs, and opportunities to help the students learn about table manners and conversation. All this came to a screeching halt when COVID hit.

Terry Kall, Committee Chair, and Susan Nations, Principal at Wilkinson Elementary, both noted that that neither wanted to put an end to the relationship, and so the Pen Pal

Downtown Improvement District (DID), St. Armands Business Improvement District (BID), and the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). In addition to City economic development funds and a \$1.5 million FDOT grant, the DID and BID each allocated \$50,000 toward the initial three-year trolley program. The service is operated by CPR Medical Transportation, which also operates the Siesta Key Breeze.

"Transportation options are central to improving traffic conditions in our community, and the immediate and continued success of the Bay Runner shows that people are clearly craving quicker, easier and cost-effective ways to move around downtown and out to the island," said Commissioner Hagen Brody, who championed the trolley concept. "Thanks to the City Commission and our partners for supporting the Bay Runner and seeing the need for broader micro and multimodal transportation. It's making a difference every day in our community."

Veo offers e-scooters and bicycles for rent in designated parking corrals on rights-of-way throughout the city limits. The daily micromobility demand in Sarasota has surpassed Veo's expectations, with 1,000 rides just on Memorial Day.

"These innovative and effective mobility options are among the reasons why Sarasota is the top city to live within Florida and one of the best cities in the entire United States," noted Mayor Erik Arroyo. "This is how our residents and visitors want to get around our great city. We have an impressive, professional team that worked hard to transform mobility ideas into reality, and we're excited their efforts have been recognized by their peers internationally with this award."

Information about the Bay Runner, including a route map, mobile app, accessibility, and parking options, can be found at [SarasotaBayRunner.com](https://www.sarasotabayrunner.com).

program was born.

In 2020, with 27 pen pals, two classrooms, two teachers, and one outreach staff member, the pen pal program began. By 2021 it grew to 46 pen pals. The pen pals exchanged 16 letters throughout the program; they wrote eight and received eight. Many of the children had never written or received a letter. The program was met with enthusiasm by everyone, and many said that it was amazing that something so simple was so powerful.

During the two-year letter-writing campaign, some pen pals could not continue due to illness, and other residents stepped up and filled in by taking multiple students so the momentum would not be lost.

Finally, in May 2022, after two long years apart, the students and Bay Village pen pals met in person and, from all accounts, had a fantastic day!

The program is on summer break but will begin again in September with hopes of expanding to more classrooms and additional students. We know that community attitudes play an important role in age-friendly communities. Intergenerational relationships are critical to fostering understanding and go a long way in challenging negative attitudes about aging and helping to combat ageism. Partnerships like the one between Bay Village and Wilkinson Elementary School are vital to bridging the generations.



The Bay Runner mobile app allows for real-time trolley tracking and can be downloaded through the App Store and Google Play.



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To share news or information, contact the editor at [ssternberg@thepattersonfoundation.org](mailto:ssternberg@thepattersonfoundation.org).



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