

PRESS RELEASE

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LEAD: Local nonprofit receives \$1.3 million to address Internet Digital Divide in Southwestern Pennsylvania

Meta Mesh Wireless Communities' (MMWC) Board of Directors is pleased to announce that MMWC has received significant financial commitments from three Pittsburgh-based foundations to implement its unique business plan for establishing the region's premiere nonprofit Wireless Internet Service Provider (WISP). The awards total **\$1.301** million. The Hillman Foundation contributed **\$1.1** million; the RK Mellon Foundation \$250,000; and the Hopper Foundation \$51,000. This joint funding commitment is an example of the strong support that exists for addressing the long standing Digital Divide that exists in this region.

The MMWC WISP is called **Every1online**. It serves communities and neighborhoods throughout the region who do not have access to affordable and reliable Internet service. MMWC provides wireless Internet access to institutional sponsors such as school districts, non profit organizations, governmental agencies, and health service organizations who provide significant services to their constituents via the Internet. These sponsors identify specific households within their service area to receive Internet service free of charge. MMWC connects each of these households via the **Every1online** service. An example of this would be a school district that has a percentage of their students who cannot take advantage of remote learning classes, online course offerings offered by the district, and other services such as scheduling, homework services, etc.

Samantha Garfinkel the Executive Director of MMWC, provides the following statement detailing MMWC's unique service model.

“Internet access is no longer an option. It is an essential part of building a strong quality of life. For many communities excessive costs and lack of accessibility to the Internet prevent many families from accessing essential services. Our plan recognizes the inequity of this reality and we provide a solution that produces benefits for everyone involved. School districts, for example, recognize that remote learning is no longer a temporary response to COVID, it is an essential part of how public education is being delivered to students. That strategy falls apart if a significant percentage of students do not have Internet access at home. Our plan helps the school district reach all of their students while empowering each of those previously unconnected households with access underwritten by the school district.”

MMWC has created strategic partnerships with key organizations as it has grown from a conceptual idea to a viable social enterprise entity. Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and several pilot locations have contributed to its viability. Board of Directors Chairperson, Heidi Norman (*Acting Director of the City of Pittsburgh's Innovation & Performance Leadership*) provided the following assessment of MMWC's potential impact on the region's Digital Divide challenge:

"There is no question that the lack of affordable Internet access puts many of our local communities at a significant disadvantage. Meta Mesh is a unique and innovative application of technology that produces measurable results more quickly than any currently available option. The support of local foundations to the MMWC business plan is an investment in the future that will produce measurable results. I applaud their foresight and willingness to invest in the future. We will do everything we can to make their investment a reality."

MMWC Board of Directors members: Stan Waddell - CIO of Carnegie Mellon; Mark Henderson CIO of University of Pittsburgh; and Dr. Sasha Meinrath, Palmer Chair in Telecommunications at Penn State University shared a joint statement regarding MMWC.

"We are excited about the ability of a local nonprofit to create a last mile solution to the Digital Divide challenge. We are committed to providing our personal support and the support of our institutions to provide affordable and reliable Internet service to communities that need it the most. The financial support provided by the foundation community is a reflection of Pittsburgh's commitment to innovation. "

For more information on how your community can engage MMWC's services, contact Samantha Garfinkel.

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