



# FOSTER YOUTH

# AND THE

# DIGITAL DIVIDE



**With schools planning on remote and hybrid models in the fall, foster youth will absolutely need technology and connectivity. There is a solution.**

**A** 2016 University of Southern California study found that 95% of rural foster youth and 79% of urban foster youth lacked access to a computer and the internet where they live. This digital divide partially explains why foster youth lag significantly behind their peers on educational outcomes including high school graduation rates, postsecondary education enrollment, and degree attainment—placing them at a lifelong disadvantage.

School closures due to the current pandemic have further highlighted the digital divide for all California students, and are expected to exacerbate disparities in educational outcomes. In a distance learning

environment, K-12 and postsecondary students without reliable technology access struggle to keep up with their peers, and students who rely on school-based social and emotional services—including foster youth—will have reduced access to these vital supports. At the same time, foster youth need technology access to stay connected with peers, family, social workers, attorneys, and counselors.

In response to the crisis, iFoster coordinated an unprecedented collaboration with philanthropy, state and local child welfare agencies, manufacturers, distributors, and education partners to deliver chromebooks and hotspot-enabled smartphones 12,685 foster youth across 53 California counties between March 16 and August 31, 2020. Most importantly, this strategy is scalable and replicable across the country.

## **686 Collaborating Organizations in Spring 2020:**

- California State Agencies including California Department of Social Services, California Department of Education and CA Community College Chancellor's Office
- Child Welfare Agencies, Juvenile Justice Agencies, Offices of Education, and campus foster youth support programs in counties throughout California
- Community-based service providers including: transitional housing and independent living programs
- Attorneys, CASAs, foster parents, foster youth and advocates

## **Solving the Digital Divide for Foster Youth Takes:**

- 1. Access to technology**
- 2. Outreach to eligible recipients**
- 3. Efficient distribution**
- 4. Funding from philanthropy and/or government**

# 1. Access to Technology & Unlimited Data

Most foster youth need a tablet or laptop and a hotspot-enabled smartphone with unlimited data:

- **K-8:** Tablets and smartphones with unlimited mobile data
- **High School, Vocational Ed, and College:** Laptops and smartphones with unlimited mobile data

*streaming classes • virtual visitation • telehealth • online counseling • social worker and attorney visits • staying connected with friends and family • finding resources*

# 2. Outreach to Eligible Recipients

Need and eligibility should be established by the people who know foster youth the best.

iFoster defined clear eligibility criteria and tech access program design, and created a bilingual tool kit including applications, agency request forms, program FAQs, and flyers, and distributed them through:

- County child welfare agencies
- Foster youth liaisons at K-12 schools
- Campus-based college support programs
- Foster Care Ombudswoman's office
- Community-based service providers, foster parent associations, youth organizations, and advocates

iFoster also created guides for youth to set up, take care of, and optimize the performance of their smartphones and laptops; guides for caregivers of minors regarding prudent parenting, setting parental controls, and suggested family media agreements.

# 3. Centralized & Efficient Distribution

iFoster staff and peer navigator interns:

- Managed inbound requests and questions about the program via phone calls, emails, texts (in both English and Spanish)
- Validated eligibility and shipping address
- Ordered and shipped within 1 business day of validation
- Verified delivery receipt and device set-up
- Provided technical assistance
- Connected recipients to other resources as needed

iFoster employs current and former foster youth to serve as peer navigators connecting youth to tech and other resources.

iFoster also partnered with a third party logistics company, Rakuten Super Logistics, to efficiently and cost effectively provide shipping and handling services, allowing for better shipping rates and 1 day delivery, even at peak demand.

## 4. Funding

During the pandemic crisis, the first and fastest funding came from philanthropy. But to achieve scale, sustainable funding must come from the public sector.

- Communications devices and telecom service plans, as well as computing devices, can be currently funded using federal foster care funding sources, including:
  - Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program funds
  - Title IV-B child welfare block grant funds
  - Value added services offered by Medicaid managed care plans serving foster youth
  - State child welfare and education discretionary funds
  - Other state and locally directed emergency response funds (i.e. CARES Act)
- In the longer-term, communications devices and telecom services plans can be funded using state and federal LifeLine funds—a massively under-utilized resource. Prior to the pandemic, the California Public Utilities Commission in partnership with iFoster and Boost Mobile created a pilot program for current and former foster youth that can be replicated nationwide.

For more information, contact: [reid@ifoster.org](mailto:reid@ifoster.org) • 530-550-9672

### A Strong Foundation

\$22 million pilot California LifeLine program for foster youth ages 13–26 launched at the end of 2019

- **iFoster Role**
  - Design the program
  - Partner with public agencies, school systems, advocates, and nonprofit organizations to conduct outreach and collect applications
  - Verify eligibility
  - Distribute devices
  - Activate phones
- **California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) Role**
  - Provide funding through the federal and state LifeLine program
- **Telecom Carrier Partner Role**
  - Provide carrier network and service—unlimited voice, text, data, and hotspot capability
  - Subsidize service plans

Launched in California (replicated in New York with funding from NYC Administration for Children's Services)

