

EQUAL ACCESS SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PARTNERSHIP SEEKS TO BRIDGE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Local internet provider Cruzio and Community Foundation Santa Cruz County lead local action to increase opportunity and access to education

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This week marks the official launch of the [Equal Access Santa Cruz County](#) fund, spearheaded by Cruzio Internet with a simple goal: bridge the digital divide and bring true high-speed broadband to every family in Santa Cruz County, regardless of income level.

The state of California estimates that 21% of students (1.2 million) are unconnected to the internet and 71% of those students are Black and Latinx. Santa Cruz County, an area where many people are prosperous, has seen persistent gaps in educational opportunity. According to the Central Coast Broadband Consortium, Santa Cruz is graded a C- on its California Broadband Infrastructure [Report Card](#) and almost 16,000 households don't have access to adequate internet. Even where broadband is available, low income

families in our area are struggling. Their priorities are food and rent, and they require the internet services they need to be free or very low cost.

The urgency of the situation only increased as COVID-19 forced students and families to conduct their schooling from home. This requires a reliable connection which many low-income students don't have access to. Cruzio and their partners at the County Office of Education (COE) and Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) could see that during these challenging times, students who already face obstacles to their education, are going to be further left behind.

Together, they quickly developed a plan to expand coverage and provide free and subsidized high-speed internet to dozens of low-income families and students. The program provides families with free internet service including state-of-the-art home wifi for three months and then a heavily-discounted rate thereafter.

"Digital equity and connectivity represent an important front in our efforts to give disenfranchised communities the access and opportunity they deserve," said **Dr. Faris Sabbah, Santa Cruz County Superintendent of Schools**. "Internet connectivity is not only crucial to help students thrive with distance learning, it also serves as a lifeline to families to learn about and connect with the vital resources and services that are available to them now in our community."

When Cruzio announced the program to supply subsidized internet to low-income students, they received 200 calls within just a couple of days. Over 30% of Cruzio's total broadband installations in the following two months were subsidized. Knowing the need was infinitely greater, Cruzio teamed up with Community Foundation Santa Cruz County to establish Equal Access Santa Cruz County to generate funding and get fast, dependable, and affordable internet to families in need. The Community Foundation has long been committed to projects that help our community now and in the future and saw unequal access to the internet as a pressing problem.

"Since the first day of school closures back in March, our community has become acutely aware of how stark the digital divide is and how harshly it impacts kids, "explains **Susan True, Community Foundation Santa Cruz County's CEO**. "But, we've also seen how much this community wants to bridge the divide and give all children the opportunity to succeed. Equal Access gives the community a way to help and make a big difference right

away. Big thanks to the Rotarians, educators, families, donors, entrepreneurs, and the whole Cruzio team for creating local and swift solutions to get children connected.”

As with any big project like this, it takes broad partnerships to get the job done. Many Santa Cruz County residents and especially the local technology community recognize the importance of educational opportunity and equity for low income families in our county. Passionate partners like the Monterey Bay Economic Partnership, the Central Coast Broadband Consortium and the City of Watsonville have contributed and inspired Cruzio to expand the Equal Access Santa Cruz program to seek out new projects and opportunities that serve these goals.

The first big broadband infrastructure project is already under way. In August the PVUSD board approved an Equal Access Santa Cruz County project utilizing four of their properties to house new internet access points that will each serve hundreds of subscribers.

“PVUSD is committed to closing the digital divide and ensuring that our students have access to reliable internet services,” said **Dr. Michelle Rodriguez, Superintendent for PVUSD**. “As we engage in a Distance Learning instructional mode, connectivity is more important than ever for student participation and learning. Our partnership with Cruzio is part of their Equal Access Santa Cruz County initiative and meant to ensure that students and families who are not able to receive internet connectivity due to cost are able to access it at a reasonable rate.”

At the same time, Cruzio, PVUSD and COE have been working with an amazing group of community members on the next exciting project. The Watsonville Rotary club is partnering with EASC to construct high-speed wireless internet connectivity to the Buena Vista Labor Camp, an underserved area with a statistically high volume of low income student families.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed inequities in our society that must be addressed. Requirements of distance learning make Internet access an essential service that all households need so that children have an equal playing field when it comes to their education," said **Kristin Fabos, Watsonville Rotary President**. "The Watsonville Rotary is honored to be a partner in the Equal Access Santa Cruz County initiative,

helping to raise needed funds to bring high speed internet to approximately 160 families at the Buena Vista Camp."

Through partnerships such as these, and with the continued support of the community, Cruzio hopes to make serious inroads into the ongoing problems of digital equity.

"We're literally looking at the future of Santa Cruz County in the effort to educate local students," says **Cruzio's President, Peggy Dolgenos**. "Doing schoolwork on the internet is an increasingly important part of education, and in the pandemic it's become vital. It's an honor to work with the Community Foundation to extend true broadband equally throughout the county."

Community members can learn more and make a donation to the fund at EqualAccessSantaCruz.com.

About Cruzio

Equal Access Santa Cruz is powered by Cruzio Internet. Founded in 1989, Cruzio is one of the largest independent internet service providers in California. We provide cutting-edge technology services for more than 9,000 households and businesses in Santa Cruz County.

100% locally owned and staffed, Cruzio has on-site technical support, local roving IT, and a welcoming storefront in downtown Santa Cruz where members can drop by any time to pay a bill or get advice from our technical staff. Cruzio is known for its friendly, hands-on customer service that caters to its diverse client population, from residents and local nonprofits to small and large businesses throughout Santa Cruz County.

About Community Foundation Santa Cruz County

Since 1982, Community Foundation Santa Cruz County has brought together people, ideas, and resources to inspire philanthropy and accomplish great things. The Community Foundation helps donors and their advisors invest wisely in causes they care about, to provide grants and resources to community organizations, and to offer leadership around key local issues. The Foundation manages more than \$135 million in charitable assets and provides customized and tax-smart giving solutions that resulted in more than \$12.5

million in grants in 2019. Thanks to generous donors, over \$110 million in local grants and scholarships have been awarded locally since 1982. The Community Foundation seeks to make Santa Cruz County thrive for all who call it home, now and in the future. Learn more at www.cfsc.org.