

'It makes a humongous difference': Lack of Wi-Fi in city SROs deepens residents' isolation

By Sofie Kodner

[San Francisco Chronicle](#)

Oct. 7, 2021

No one knew that Jack Huck lost weight during the pandemic.

Huck is 72 and lives alone in a room at the Winton Hotel for formerly unhoused and low-income residents in San Francisco. He rode out shelter-in-place isolation with only a cellphone to connect him to the outside world.

It wasn't until May of this year, when Huck finally reunited with his social worker in person, that someone acknowledged his physical decline. At that meeting, Huck's social worker suggested he get set up for Zoom calls.

"I was down and blue, not using a computer," Huck said.

But like most single-room-occupancy hotels in San Francisco, Huck's isn't connected to Wi-Fi. Of the approximately 530 such hotels in the city, one of the country's most technologically advanced, only a handful are Wi-Fi enabled. The hotels are mostly concentrated in the Tenderloin, Chinatown, South of Market and the Mission, neighborhoods with high immigrant and lower-income populations. And according to [a 2016 report](#) by the city's public health department, 1 in 5 SRO residents in those neighborhoods is over age 65.

Lauren Cotter, spokesperson for the nonprofit Community Tech Network, which helps seniors get online, likened the internet access gap to the outlawed practice of denying services to residents of certain neighborhoods based on race.

"Just as there has been redlining, the same is true of internet access," she said.

"Cellular alone is not enough for people to be able to do all of the services necessary for their health."

Huck moved into the Winton when he was in his 40s and has stayed because the building, which is in the Tenderloin, is rent-controlled.

“I’m pretty well locked in,” said Huck, who suffers from arthritis and uses a walker to get around.

He said he reached out to internet providers about hooking his building up to Wi-Fi but was told it’s not worth the cost. The issue wasn’t so important to him until the COVID-19 pandemic, when the internet became essential for so many services.

“The problem with broadband was always envisioned as being an issue for rural America,” said Bill Soward, executive director of ShelterTech, an organization that tries to solve technology challenges faced by people experiencing housing insecurity. “Urban areas have digital divide issues just as much as rural areas, and it requires an evolution in legislation.”

In 2020, ShelterTech outfitted the Mission Hotel, San Francisco’s largest SRO, with free Wi-Fi for all residents. It did so through grants and partnerships, including with the city of San Francisco, to bring fiber-optic lines from the street to the building. Soward estimates at least 20,000 residents across San Francisco and in hundreds of buildings are without Wi-Fi access. It’s a problem in cities nationwide.

The old age of the SRO buildings is, in part, to blame.

“Most of those are over 100 years old,” Soward said. “To wire the traditional way into each of the individual rooms would be very, very expensive.” He said he believes that’s one reason telecom companies are reluctant to bring in fiber, especially when many of the residents can’t afford the high cost of internet packages.

Pratibha Tekkey, director of community organizing for the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which manages 24 SROs in San Francisco including the Winton Hotel, said lack of access is a problem she hears about often.

“Many SRO residents, in my opinion, live in isolation,” Tekkey said. “Because of COVID, we found out that it makes a humongous difference if people have access, to at least give them a connection to the outside world.”

Tekkey said residents faced heightened mental health challenges during the pandemic with nowhere to find help. Now that so many resources and communications have moved online, the problem continues.

“Some of us take it for granted,” Tekkey said of Wi-Fi connection. She said she wasn’t aware of much momentum from the city to fix the issue comprehensively.

Previous attempts by the city to bring Wi-Fi to all residents, like former Supervisor Mark Farrell’s proposal to lay publicly controlled fiber optic broadband infrastructure beneath city streets, never came to fruition.

“I have no idea where it disappeared to,” Tekkey said. The proposal was shelved in 2018.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/It-makes-a-humongous-difference-Lack-of-16513973.php>