

Wi-Fi? Why not? Homeless are avid users of free web kiosks

August 23 2016, by Karen Matthews

An effort to replace obsolete pay phones with Wi-Fi kiosks that offer free web surfing and phone calls has been a hit with panhandlers and the homeless, the least wired people in the city.

The city doesn't track who's using the new LinkNYC terminals, but anecdotal evidence suggests many users are living on the streets. On several recent weekdays, people wearing plastic garbage bags or hauling dented shopping carts were hunkered down at terminals.

"It's free. That's the best part about it," said a tall man drinking a beer out of a paper bag as he watched an R. Kelly video at a terminal in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood.

The man, who would give only his street name, Beef Stew, said that besides listening to music he uses the sidewalk kiosks to charge his phone.

Matthew Kane was sitting in front of a LinkNYC kiosk last week charging his phone and holding a cardboard sign that said, "She Had a Better Lawyer." The sign was effective: One man gave Kane a \$20 bill and another gave him a slice of pizza during the space of a five-minute conversation.

Kane, who said he was staying with acquaintances "here and there," guessed about half of the people he sees using the kiosks are homeless.

"It keeps people connected to the rest of reality," he said.

The Wi-Fi program is a public-private initiative run by CityBridge, a consortium of tech companies.

The first units were installed in January. There are now about 350, mainly in Manhattan, with plans for 7,500 or more throughout the city.

Two sides of the narrow kiosks are digital billboards that display paid advertisements. Revenue from the ads pays for the program. A tablet-size screen in front provides fast web access. As with computers in libraries and schools, filters block access to pornography.

There are free domestic calls provided by Vonage, a headphone jack and a USB port for cellphone charging.

People who have their own smartphones and laptops can use the free Wi-Fi broadcast from each kiosk by registering an email address.

The 9 1/2-foot-tall kiosks are intended to be accessed standing up, but users have placed discarded chairs and crates in front of some of them to sit on and use them more comfortably, prompting complaints from nearby merchants.

"You have people sitting on castaway street furniture or milk crates, and some of them seem to be there long amounts of time," said Dan Pisark, vice president for retail services at the 34th Street Partnership, a business group.

CityBridge and city officials who oversee the program say they aim to provide internet access to people who don't have it, though not to the homeless specifically.

"When we set out to bring Wi-Fi to sidewalks at no cost to taxpayers, we aimed not just to replace outdated pay phones with something more useful but to provide free services to all residents, including the one in five New Yorkers who don't have broadband access at home," said Natalie Grybauskas, a spokeswoman for Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio.

Some 350,000 people have signed up for and have used the Wi-Fi alone, and tablets have been used 60,000 times per week, according to a spokeswoman for the program.

At least a few down-and-out users of the terminals said they were using them to try to find work.

Michael Klein, who said he has been staying with different people since his father kicked him out for substance abuse, said he has used LinkNYC to look up information on Google, to make phone calls and to post "a half-assed resume" on Craigslist.

"I panhandle, and I'm looking for a job," he said. "But when you're dressed like this you can't go in for an interview."

The kiosks have a feature that aims to deter people who set up camp and use them for extended periods. About every three minutes, the attached tablet asks if you want to continue your session, which annoyed user Rene Angelique.

Angelique, who's from Egypt but came to New York two weeks ago via Boston, has been sleeping on park benches or at a LinkNYC kiosk in Manhattan.

"They're a great help to me because I lost my phone and my passport and a lot of my resources," he said. "So to me, it's essentially a free laptop on

the street."

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Citation: Wi-Fi? Why not? Homeless are avid users of free web kiosks (2016, August 23)
retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-08-wi-fi-homeless-avid-users-nyc.html>

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