



It's been just under a year since the COVID-19 pandemic derailed our development work on the SecondNets Kit Project, but it's turned out to be more of a silver lining than a setback.

With the abrupt closing of schools, libraries, and businesses, the digital divide was suddenly realized by millions of homebound students and families who had no options - other than to continue work and attend virtual classes online. Medical offices closed, and patients could only schedule appointments through TeleHealth platforms. Family members could no longer visit loved ones in care facilities; everything required connectivity. While community facilities were closed, Internet connections sat unutilized, trapped inside the buildings. If only the connections could be extended outside, people could work safely from their vehicles in parking lots, at picnic tables, and in green spaces.

It didn't take long before hundreds of libraries across the country came together with Gigabit Libraries Network and ITDRC to seek solutions to connect their communities. While most were willing to provide connectivity and host the free access points, some expressed security concerns, and others perceived outdoor signals may violate E-rate regulations. In response, ITDRC launched *projectConnect*, a nationwide initiative to connect rural and underserved communities by extending WiFi access from anchor institutions.

As of this update, ITDRC has installed over 700 "HomeworkHotspots" across 23 states, with hundreds more in the pipeline. Citizens fortunate enough to live close to a hotspot have adapted to the new normal, while many others have been left behind. We were able to receive the first version prototype SecondNets kit for portable use in disaster response or simply to support community events. We're now making adjustments to the design and expect a v. 2 to be available in June of this year.

The digital divide has been fully exposed this past year, and communities have responded the best ways they could. Legislators have taken a number of steps to address the broadband gap, but there is still much work to be done. While it's unrealistic for taxpayers to provide every family and child with a broadband connection, "Neighborhood Library Access Stations" as public library kiosks would help relieve the stress. It's not a perfect solution, but perhaps a more cost effective "lifeline" for those less fortunate. We're looking forward to continuing our work on the Community SecondNets project, and believe the lessons learned from this pandemic are vital to the overall success of the project.