Senior, disabled protesters occupy S.F. AT&T store demanding Wi-Fi access

Andres Picon, San Francisco Chronicle

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In an increasingly online world, Maria Guadalupe Siordia-Ortiz worries about her future. At 67 years old and in the midst of a pandemic that has changed the way the world works, she has quickly learned that if you’re not online, you’re left out.

Since the arrival of COVID-19 last year, Siordia-Ortiz, a San Francisco resident, has seen her friends — many of them older, some of them disabled — lose access to many of the things they now need the most, such as social connections and access to their doctors. Late in life, with limited means, many of them cannot afford reliable high-speed internet access.
On Monday, Siordia-Ortiz, eager to support her struggling friends and hoping to avoid these challenges in her own future, was one of more than 50 older and disabled people who marched to and occupied the San Francisco AT&T store at 1 Powell St. demanding free, accessible and reliable internet access.

For many, the request for reliable broadband has become about more than just “digital gatekeeping” in a digital world, according to Senior and Disability Action, the San Francisco-based advocacy organization that organized the protest. These days, protesters said, when so many things are done online, access to the internet has become a matter of survival.

“We need to be connected. We need to have the opportunity, the chance to be part of this world,” said Siordia-Ortiz, who has been unable to schedule
Senior and Disability Action chose to hold the protest at the AT&T store because AT&T is among the most widely used internet service providers in the Bay Area and across the country. AT&T and other internet service providers have been making large profits during the pandemic while many people, including the elderly and disabled, have faced unprecedented financial hardship, organizers said.

Jessica Lehman, an organizer with Senior and Disability Action, said at the protest that AT&T declined to speak to the protesters. Jim Kimberly, AT&T’s director of corporate communications, countered later that his office had not been contacted about the protest or by its participants.
Access from AT&T and the Emergency Broadband Benefit.

For Cora McCoy, 80, a poor internet connection presents problems for family members, too. Her 13-year-old grandson who lives with her has had trouble connecting to the internet to do homework, and often had connectivity issues when he attended school online last year. Her Wi-Fi signal is not strong enough to reach all the rooms in her home, she said.

“It’s ridiculous; I’m very disturbed,” McCoy said. “It’s time that something be done. ... We’re dealing with companies that could help us if they would.”

Efforts to help the elderly, disabled and poor get online often are not enough or do not attack the most pressing issues, Senior and Disability Action organizers said.

Organizations such as Community Tech Network, which was founded in the Bay Area, provide people with devices and training to improve digital access and literacy. While helpful, those resources cannot be used to their full potential if the people they are meant to serve do not have a reliable high-speed internet connection, protesters said.
Federal programs such as the Emergency Broadband Benefit program, approved by Congress this year, offer eligible households monthly discounts on broadband internet service and a one-time discount for a computer or tablet. But the program is temporary, and participants have complained that the internet plans available are too slow for today’s needs.

Rey LaChaux, digital equity manager in the San Francisco Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development, recently told The Chronicle that the city has considered using $5 million of its American Rescue Plan funding to provide 42 affordable housing sites with Wi-Fi access.
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