

East Boston

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NOAH and Zumix Team Up to Tackle the Rising Tide of the Digital Divide

East Boston's premier music and performing arts nonprofit, Zumix, recently received a grant through the city's Digital Equity Fund and has decided to team up with East Boston's Neighborhood of Affordable Housing (NOAH) to focus on a growing digital divide in the COVID era.

Zumix recently received a \$63,000 to partner with NOAH to connect Boston's youth and adults with media training. Through sequential program offerings, Zumix and NOAH will help local youth and adults alike deepen their computer and digital skills, engage in production opportunities, and explore future careers in the film industry.

"Over the past 16 months, the online experience has shifted from a convenience to a necessity in our everyday lives," said Acting Mayor Kim Janey. "I am proud to support 19 community organizations who are helping make digital access more equitable across our neighborhoods.

Connecting Boston residents with technology tools, access, and training is critical to achieving our city's equitable recovery, reopening and renewal."

Zumix and NOAH each have a long history in Eastie, as well as strong networks, quality programming, organizational savvy and deep expertise. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shaken up the traditional ways of doing business face-to-face, many organizations have been forced to adapt to remote and digital technologies to deliver their services.

For Zumix and NOAH, their existing close relationships with families in Eastie revealed the need for access to digital tools now and into the future — for school, access to adult education, job searches and skill-building for future careers. Whether it's a signature music concert performed at Zumix or classes offered at NOAH remote programming is here to stay.

"During Covid, so much of life happened on the screen," said Zumix's Director of Creative Media and Technology Brittany Thomas. "We saw lots of interest from young people not only to be audiences, but also to be creators of digital video content. This funding will allow us to improve our computer lab for video editing, offer film production training to more East Boston youth, and equip them with skills to livestream events from the ZUMIX Firehouse as paid videographers. This growth is part of our bigger goal to offer young people professional training that could lead them to paid creative work in the future."

Another key element of combating the digital divide is making sure young people have access to top-notch training in the latest tools and technologies.

"We've been offering different versions of self-improvement and training classes for a third of a century," said NOAH's Executive Director Phil Giffie. "Until COVID-19 hit, we never used Zoom, or offered any remote programming.

Now our work is disproportionately remote, and we are fiscally threatened by the need to instantly equip our classrooms with new technology just to keep up with evolving standards."

The technology improvements that Zumix and NOAH will make with this funding are just the tip of the iceberg, indicating a small part of the burgeoning digital need in Boston.

"The past year and a half have been challenging for everyone, yet I am consistently inspired by the creativity of our teaching staff and the enthusiasm of our youth," said Zumix Co-founder and Executive Director Madeleine Steczynski. "It's great to know that East Boston residents will benefit from ZUMIX and NOAH receiving these Digital Equity grants."

Latifa Ziyad, NOAH's planning resilience coordinator, believes the digital divide is one of the biggest issues of the 21st century, exacerbating economic inequalities that already exist.

"How can you have a whole digital revolution when the entire key to it is access?" asked Ziyad. "You need technology to experience it, or you're going to be left out. It's almost like you're not given the keys to the next big move. With the funding awarded by the City of Boston, we'll be able to offer yearlong Internet access and ChromeBooks to some of our residents, class participants and partnering organizations.

We'll also be able to fix and upgrade our classrooms so we can continue to offer specialized programming, which assists with workforce development, citizenship, and homeownership."

The city's Digital Equity Fund supports programming across a variety of Boston neighborhoods and communities. Boston-based nonprofit organizations serving Boston residents and neighborhoods disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic were prioritized in the funding, including Eastie, Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan, Roslindale and Hyde Park. Focus was given to organizations serving older adults, persons with disabilities, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) or English Language Learner (ELL) students, residents of public housing or rental voucher holders, and/or adult residents who have lost employment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We received 100 applications this round—more than three times the applications received in the past, which emphasizes how much work still needs to be done to close the digital divide in Boston," says Sarah Figalora, interim chief of staff in the City of Boston's Department of Innovation and Technology. COVID-19 certainly highlighted how important digital access is.

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Over the last year, getting Boston residents connected to the technology equipment, access, and training they need has been so important in day-to-day life. We are working every day to make Boston a fairer and more innovative city and to get residents connected to the technology they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world.”