DIGITAL DIVIDE AN ISSUE FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIANS
Community Resource Centres are part of the answer

With so many Government services now online, many Western Australians are struggling with accessing what they need, according to both Linkwest CEO Jane Chilcott, and a report released today by the Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre: “Falling through the Net: The Digital Divide in Western Australia.”* 

Ms Chilcott said the report recognised Western Australians who face challenges in connecting to the digital world - whether it be by virtue of cost or location, or who feel excluded from digital services through special needs, confidence or capability.

Linkwest is the Peak Body for Community Resource Centres (CRCs) and Neighbourhood Centres (NCs) in WA and the CRC network is an important part of the solution to digital stress.

“Our 105 state-wide CRCs are a central point for businesses, local residents and visitors and provide access to government and community services and information, including online Government services such as Centrelink, ATO and the new My Health Record.”

Ms Chilcott said CRC staff report that each time a new service goes online or changes are made to Federal Government online services there is a large spike in the number of people coming into the centres and requesting help.

“Some of these people do get very distressed, which is understandable if they cannot access Centrelink, as the don’t get paid. Often the nearest Centrelink office can be 4 hours drive away and there is no public transport available in some regions.

“Likewise, many users just don’t know how to navigate these online systems – they might not understand how to use technology or are afraid to use it.

“This is where the CRCs are there to help. However, with the enormous increase is the need for help at our centres, our staff are being put under enormous pressure,” she said.

Ms Chilcott said the CRCs are also used by businesses and regional university students, as often they are the only reliable source of internet in the area.

“We live in a digital world now, and in many of our remote and regional areas this is an issue.”

Ms Chilcott said that the CRC network was an important part of the solution to digital stress for individuals and businesses, especially in regional WA.

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BACKGROUND: Community Resource Centres

Located in 105 regional and remote communities throughout Western Australia, Community Resource Centres (CRCs) are friendly, locally owned and operated service and information centres. The centres are not-for-profit organisations that are independently managed and governed by their local community.

CRCs undertake community, business and economic development activities, and are a central point for locals, visitors and businesses, providing access to government and community services and information. As more and more government services go online, this access point is an increasingly critical function of the CRCs, particularly for those without access to computers and / or reliable Internet services, or poor digital literacy.

Sample of services which are accessed online:

- School Bus services
- Department of Transport services
- Crimestoppers
- Accessing a Firearm
- Applying for driving tests
- Medicare
- MyGov
- MyAgedCare
- MyHealthRecords

The CRCs also provide high quality video-conferencing services, enabling communities to directly access services that are otherwise unavailable in the regions. These include parenting programs, women’s health services, interviews and support for job seekers, and even court appearances.

In a 2017 survey of CRCs who deliver services such as Centrelink support, Linkwest found that on average CRCs operating as agencies service 30 clients per week, CRCs operating as access points serve 16 clients per week and CRCS spend approximately 4 hours per week to provide one-to-one support to an average of 9 clients.

BACKGROUND: Linkwest

Nedlands-based Linkwest is a small not-for-profit organisation that is largely funded by the State Government’s Department of Communities and the Department for Primary Industry and Regional Development. Linkwest is the peak body for community resource centres and neighbourhood centres in Western Australia. It offers targeted and relevant training, resources, advocacy and support to those working in small community-managed not-for-profit organisations.

Linkwest, with a staff of seven, offers crucial support to more than 150 member organisations, including over 100 regional and remote Centres.

More than 27,000 Western Australians currently use these centres each week. The centres provide a friendly, welcoming place where local people can meet to learn, gain new skills, make friends and feel part of their community. They also provide a safe, affordable space for playgroups, community and support groups to gather.

Former Premier of Western Australia, Professor Carmen Lawrence, is Linkwest’s official patron. She has been a patron for the past eight years. Cate Rocchi, Linkwest Chairperson, was the winner of the 2018 Diversity Awards for an Individual Board Director championing diversity in the boardroom.

The history behind the organisation goes back to 1978 – for many years it was known as Learning Centre Link, until it was renamed Linkwest in 2011.

SOCIAL AND WEBSITE:

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