Gang-ridden Gelvandale gets free Wi-Fi going

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THE signal is strong and free in Gelvandale. The northern suburb of Nelson Mandela Bay, Eastern Cape, which is frequently in the news for gang violence, is the first area in SA to benefit from free community Wi-Fi as part of the government's broadband access campaign, SA Connect.

Deputy Minister of Telecommunications and Postal Services Hlengiwe Mkhize launched the free Wi-Fi initiative last month at the CCT FamHealth Computer Labs Centre in Gelvandale. Community members were introduced to unlimited data and a strong signal.

SA Connect plans to deliver free broadband access to 90% of the country's population by 2020, and 100% by 2030, one area at a time. In his 2015 budget speech, former finance minister Nhlanhla Nene allocated R1.1bn to the expansion of broadband connectivity at state institutions and schools.

Given the magnitude of the project, the government needs local partners to help kickstart it, which is what got Gelvandale going. Driving the initiative is Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's (NMMU's) Centre for Community Technologies (CCT), headed by Darelle van Greunen.

The centre is teaming up with FamHealth Medipark, a family health-care practice in Gelvandale that medical doctor and community health-care activist Jeff Govender has run for more than 30 years.

The partnership between the

At the launch of SA Connect in Gelvandale, Deputy Telecoms Minister Hlengiwe Mkhize, left, watches trainee Timothy Cuyler. Picture: SUPPLIED

CCT and FamHealth includes the CCT FamHealth Computer Labs Centre, the Youth Leadership Academy, Skills Development Centre and eSkills training for community health-care workers.

Any member of the community can use the free Wi-Fi at the Computer Labs Centre. They can either work on the 25 computers and 10 tablets the centre provides, or use their own laptops and cellphones. While data is

unrestricted, certain content, such as films and pornography, cannot be downloaded.

The free Wi-Fi initiative and the safe environment at the centre are a positive boost for the 300,000-strong Gelvandale community.

Escalating gang wars have meant that it has become a suburb where children can no longer safely play in the streets, and where people are reluctant to visit each other for fear of being caught up in

the violence. Gelvandale has an intractable and high incidence of alcohol and drug abuse, gangsterism and other social ills that date back to apartheid.

"If we hope to break this cycle, we need to educate and empower people, as well as help them to gain skills and find jobs.

"The free Wi-Fi initiative is part of this, because it gives people access to information for better decision-making, opportunities and choices," Govender says.

Van Greunen adds that they want to contribute to a connected community in which people are able to communicate with each other online and learn from home, or from their schools and libraries.

"Right now, the free Wi-Fi is restricted to the Computer Labs Centre, but we are working on partnerships with industry and the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro to connect the primary and high schools and libraries in Gelvandale, as well as other suburbs in the northern areas, and all the townships in the metro," she says.

Each of the schools and libraries will become a free Wi-Fi hotspot, with the government funding internet access through partner service providers. Some of the hotspots will provide unlimited access; some will be capped at 100MB per person per day.

"Our vision for the metro is to install the kind of technology infrastructure, including repeaters and masts, that will enable the free Wi-Fi to 'hop' between hotspots so that, in time, citizens can walk in the streets and pick up Wi-Fi," Van

Greunen says. "We are already busy with this and, once we have achieved it — it will take a few months — we will start extending the free Wi-Fi initiative to schools in deep rural Eastern Cape areas."

NMMU has agreed to provide life-long learning and educational programmes — such as science and maths education or health education — at specific free Wi-Fi sites, such as libraries.

"The aim is not to only provide access to the internet, it is to use it as a tool for education and health," Van Greunen says.

Last July, NMMU launched an accredited short learning programme called eSkills for home-based care workers, who gain computer literacy skills that enable them to use health-care apps.

With one of the apps, they can take a photo of a patient's problem area and send it to Govender's practice, where his team diagnoses and advises online.

This is an invaluable resource in the rural areas, where many of the people do not have access to clinics nor hospitals.

To help extend computer skills to first language isiXhosa speakers, one of Van Greunen's postgraduate students is currently working on an isiXhosa translation of a Microsoft Office tutorial.

"Our approach is that people must have access to information," she says. "The United Nations regards access to the internet as a basic human right, and we support this, which is why we are taking the information highway to the people," she says.