

# Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook





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# Chapter 1

# About This

# Guidebook

## PURPOSE

Since the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) published the initial Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook in 2018, the digital inclusion landscape has evolved significantly. Our ever-increasing reliance on connectivity, the COVID-19 pandemic, and new funding pools have boosted awareness and progress for digital inclusion work. A growing number of organizations and partnerships are seeking ways to address the digital divide in their communities.

Yet gaps in home broadband access persist. According to research by the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of people in the United States lack in-home broadband.<sup>1</sup> Gaps in digital literacy and device access also endure amid assumptions that digital equity is inevitable in the nation where much of the world's leading communications technologies were created. One strategy to address these gaps and work toward digital equity is to bring together a community's digital inclusion practitioners, community-based organizations, local governments, and other stakeholders to build a community-wide placed-based digital inclusion coalition ("coalition").<sup>2</sup>

Digital inclusion coalitions bring together diverse groups of community stakeholders, working on behalf of populations who have been excluded from advances in modern information and communication technologies. Members of community-wide digital inclusion coalitions address digital inequities through their own programs along with community partnerships. Coalitions facilitate coordination between member organizations, the community, and community stakeholders by acting as a unified entity setting goals, educating, and advocating.

## HOW TO USE THIS GUIDEBOOK

The Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook is for people who are committed to working toward digital equity in our communities by working together, across a variety of organizations and institutions, to advance these goals. It is designed as a resource for practitioners and organizations at all stages of coalition development, from those organizing initial conversations with potential partners to established coalitions looking to refine strategies and ensure sustainability.

Development of this guidebook was informed by input from 35 coalition leaders representing more than 20 leading and emerging digital inclusion coalitions across the US. We summarized their input to present sustainable and effective processes for coalition engagement, development, and operations based on their practical experiences (see Chapter 8: Resources & Methods for details on research methods).

While the guidebook will be beneficial to coalitions at all levels of maturity, each community's needs will determine their coalition's path. Therefore, we invite you to use this guidebook as a reference tool as you explore building and sustaining a coalition. While it is organized to follow the general progression of coalition development, feel free to jump ahead or revisit sections as appropriate for your coalition's needs. Designed with input from coalition leaders, the topics highlighted are lessons learned from the field and should be considered as suggestions instead of rules.

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center. (April 7, 2021). Internet/broadband fact sheet. <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

<sup>2</sup> Coalitions are just one strategy, other strategies to pursue common goals can include nonprofit organizations and businesses, partnerships, collaborations and short-term and long-term alliances. Each is "right" for some purposes and circumstances.

# BIG TAKEAWAYS

## COALITION BUILDING

- Coalitions are built through a continuous process not an event.
- Regular meetings and collective goal setting are critical activities when building a coalition.
- Special consideration should be given to the advantages and disadvantages of participation by local governments and Internet Service Providers (ISP) in the coalition leadership.
- Establishing shared understanding and language about a community's digital inclusion needs are vital steps during the coalition building process.
- Be intentional about embracing an explicitly anti-racist framework.

## COALITION STRUCTURE

- Coalition leaders are local voices that lend trust, credibility, and a community-centric perspective to the coalition's efforts.
- Coalitions themselves often do not conduct their own digital inclusion programming, but members of the coalitions form partnerships, which strengthen their programming.
- A structure to facilitate decision making is a key characteristic of coalitions.
- The coalition's guiding documents should include the coalition's decision-making process, how leaders are selected, and member organizations' rights and responsibilities.

## COALITION WORK

- Coalitions are increasing awareness of digital inclusion, local barriers, and current approaches to the work.
- Digital inclusion coalitions promote professional development, strategically-aligned programming, and advocacy.
- Coalition leaders often do not view their activities as advocacy, but they do educate local policymakers and community leaders.
- Coalitions strive to meet the needs of their members through networking, collaborative goal setting, awareness, and resource development.
- Coalitions seek to explicitly address racial equity and justice.

## ADAPTING AND SUSTAINING COALITIONS

- Coalitions need resources to thrive, particularly paid staff or coordinators.
- Having a cohesive public presence can aid in community recognition and understanding of the coalition and the benefits it can provide.
- Having a backbone structure that provides organizational and funding support can help sustain coalition efforts.
- Moving to virtual meetings helped decrease barriers to participation for some coalitions and decreased participation for others.
- Being responsive to changes in leadership can help sustain coalition efforts.





# Chapter 2

# Definitions



## THIS SECTION DEFINES KEY DIGITAL INCLUSION TERMS AND PROVIDES AN UPDATE FOR OUR DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITIONS.<sup>3</sup>

### COMMUNITY-WIDE

Organized at the level of a city, county, metropolitan area, or similar civic locality (not just a single neighborhood) and drawing participants from a variety of institutions, organizations, and neighborhoods throughout that locality.

### COALITION

- Is a collective organization of **organizations** (e.g., local governments, libraries, educational institutions, housing authorities, community technology training and network providers, other social service and civic organizations, etc.).
- Operating in the public realm, with a reasonable degree of **transparency** about its activities, governance and finances.
- Function within a collaborative **structure** (formal or informal), that may include process for decision making, leadership responsibilities, rights and obligations of members, regular meetings, and open process for joining.

### DIGITAL INCLUSION

The activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies. This includes five elements:

- Affordable, robust broadband internet service;
- Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
- Access to digital literacy training;
- Quality technical support; and
- Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

Digital inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional, and structural barriers to access and use technology.

### DIGITAL EQUITY

A condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> National Digital Inclusion Alliance (2021). Definitions. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>

<sup>4</sup> The source of the definitions is explained in the Benton Foundation article “What Do We Mean When We Say Digital Inclusion and Digital Equity?” Angela Siefer. (2016). <https://www.benton.org/blog/what-do-we-mean-when-we-say-digital-equity-and-digital-inclusion>

## DIGITAL INCLUSION ECOSYSTEM

A combination of programs and policies that meet a geographic community's unique and diverse needs. Coordinating entities (e.g. a coalition) work together in an ecosystem to address all aspects of the digital divide, including affordable broadband, devices, and skills.

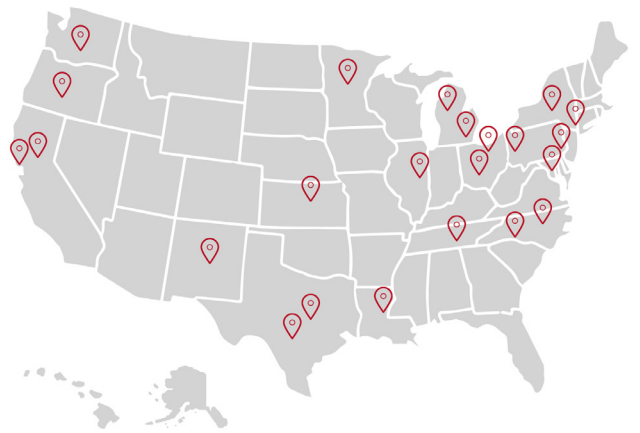
Indicators of a strong digital inclusion ecosystem:


- Existence of programs and policies addressing all aspects of the digital divide
  - Affordable and subsidized broadband service options that meet the community's needs
  - Multilingual digital literacy and digital skill trainings that meet the community's needs
  - Hardware and software technical support
  - Digital navigation services to guide residents to the above services
- Collaboration: Entities providing local digital inclusion services, policymakers, advocates, social service providers, and community leaders co-create solutions in partnership with the community.

## COMMUNITY-WIDE PLACED-BASED DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITION

A collective of organizations shaped by the community to advocate for digital equity, and foster the growth of the community's digital inclusion ecosystem, through a formalized structure that publicly functions to facilitate the collaboration and coordination between community organizations that aim to support digital inclusion services.

Throughout this guidebook we refer to community-wide placed-based digital inclusion coalitions as "coalitions" for brevity.





# Chapter 3 About Digital Inclusion Coalitions

NDIA Recommendation

**THE COALITION BUILDING PROCESS STARTS  
WITH A PARTNERSHIP THAT SHOULD  
INTENTIONALLY SEEK GREATER  
COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION.**

# THE ROLE OF COALITIONS

Digital inclusion efforts take many different forms in communities across the country, including collaborations and partnerships as well as free-standing programs. However, not all of these partnerships are community-wide digital inclusion coalitions as defined in Chapter 2.

The digital inclusion coalition model remains relatively new - the earliest ones are just now approaching 10 years old and most have formed in just the past few years. Yet, while other partnerships and even individual organizations may make some progress, NDIA believes that coalitions are uniquely able to maximize the impact of digital inclusion efforts. This can be attributed to the three effects they create (deliberately or not) for their member organizations, participants, and communities:

- **The advocacy effect.** Coalitions focus local attention on the issue of digital inclusion as a specific area for public policy and community action. Whether or not their organizers intend it, broad-based digital inclusion coalitions have an “advocacy effect” that raises the profile of digital inclusion for their communities’ media, opinion leaders, and the general public.
- **The alignment effect.** Coalitions create a framework to align the perspectives and efforts of the varied community players that may, at the beginning, share a concern about digital inclusion but little else: libraries, local governments, low-income housing providers, workforce and social service agencies, and traditional technology training and access programs. In general, pushing in the same direction is more satisfying and effective than disjointed and potentially duplicative efforts.
- **The network effect.** By bringing a range of parties together in one room, coalitions set the stage for their member organizations to better understand each others’ perspectives, share information and strategic insights and discover opportunities for new relationships – including two- or three-way collaborations and program partnerships.

A digital inclusion coalition that can operate transparently, with a structure that encourages participant engagement and new member organizations, has the potential to keep generating the advocacy, alignment, and networking effects. In fact, the potential is also to grow its member organizations’ influence and impact over time—no matter what specific projects it chooses to undertake.

Not every community needs, or has the opportunity to create, an effective community-wide digital inclusion coalition. But as awareness and funding for digital inclusion increase, and as more organizations become engaged in the work, it will likely make sense for local leaders in many more places to consider building coalitions in the next few years.

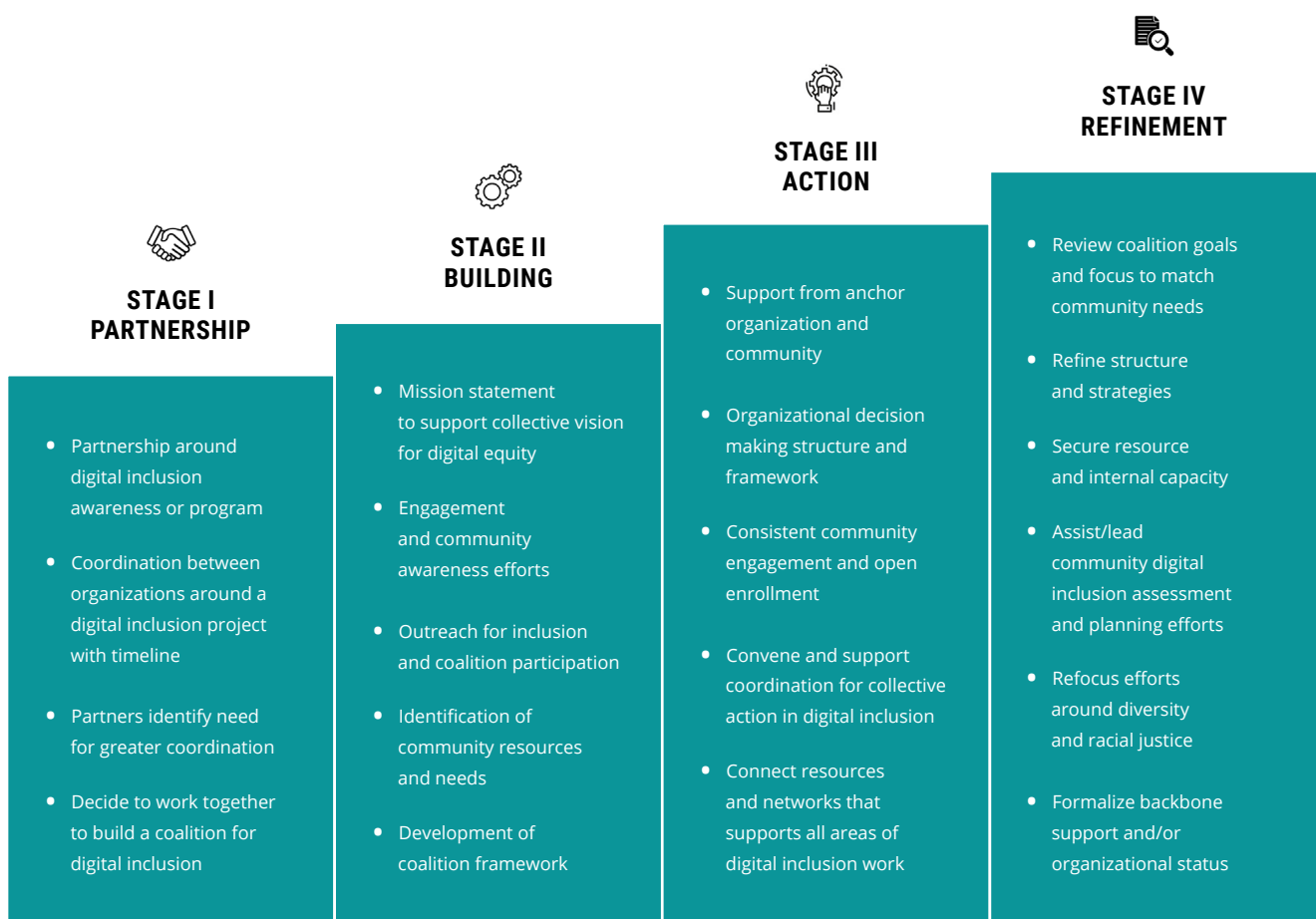


# COALITION DEVELOPMENT

Coalitions are characterized by an ongoing process of development that occurs in stages. This section identifies the key stages of that process, which we observed across coalitions. Each development stage is defined by a number of characteristics outlined by our focus groups. However, not every single characteristic may be applicable to every single coalition – considering what is right for your community is critical to building your coalition.

Coalition building is also not an entirely linear process, and at various points a coalition may find that characteristics from two or more of the stages apply. In fact, only three or four of the characteristics are necessary to determine the stage of development for a particular coalition (see diagram next page).

## COALITION DEVELOPMENT PROCESS



### STAGE I

Individuals and partners coming together to address digital inclusion needs in the community.

### STAGE II

The process of getting people together to build a collective identity and purpose for the coalition.

### STAGE III

The activities, the resources, and infrastructure necessary for the coalition to function.

### STAGE IV

The period where the coalition may evaluate its goals, efforts, and structure to refine or change its approach to better serve community needs.

# RACIAL EQUITY IN DIGITAL INCLUSION

The work of digital inclusion coalitions is deeply connected to racial equity and justice. The Pew Research Center found that in 2021, Black and Hispanic adults in the United States remain less likely than white adults to say they own a traditional computer or have high-speed internet at home. Furthermore, smartphone dependency also plays a greater role for people of color.

Pew found that 25 percent of Hispanics and 17 percent of Black adults are “smartphone-only” compared to 12 percent of white adults. This lack of in-home, wired Internet access leads to certain disadvantages. For example, 63 percent of Black adults – compared with 49 percent of white adults – say not having high-speed internet puts people at a major disadvantage when it comes to connecting with doctors or other medical professionals.

This disproportionate lack of access to high-speed infrastructure and devices is also compounded at the federal level, as government programs emphasize rural populations over urban populations. NDIA found that this policy framework is structurally racist and counterproductive to reducing the nation’s digital divides. NDIA concluded that most Americans who have a chance of benefiting from federal spending on rural broadband deployment subsidies are non-Hispanic white, while Americans who lack home broadband service for reasons other than network availability are disproportionately people of color. Subsequently, digital inclusion coalitions need to critically examine the oppressive structures that create barriers for communities of color, specifically to advocate for racial justice and digital equity.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center. (2021). Home broadband adoption, computer ownership vary by race, ethnicity in the U.S. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/16/home-broadband-adoption-computer-ownership-vary-by-race-ethnicity-in-the-u-s/>

<sup>6</sup> NDIA. (2020). Limiting Broadband Investment to “Rural Only” Discriminates Against Black Americans and other Communities of Color. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-divide-and-systemic-racism/>



# Chapter 4

# Coalition Building

NDIA Recommendation

**COALITION BUILDING TAKES TIME AND COMMITMENT. MOST DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITIONS WE TALKED TO REQUIRED SIX MONTHS TO TWO YEARS TO DEVELOP A SUSTAINABLE MODEL OF ENGAGEMENT. THE CONVENER(S) TASKED WITH EARLY COALITION RESPONSIBILITIES ARE OFTEN DOING SO AS A VOLUNTEER, BUT REALISTICALLY THESE PEOPLE ARE BRINGING MORE THAN JUST PASSION TO WORK. IT IS HELPFUL, THEN, TO INTENTIONALLY SEEK CONVENING SUPPORT FROM PEOPLE IN ORGANIZATIONS WHOSE MISSION AND WORK NATURALLY ALIGN WITH THE COALITION'S PURPOSE.**

# BUILDING A DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITION

All digital inclusion coalitions begin from a unique starting point. How your community's coalition forms depends upon how leaders frame the benefits of digital inclusion to potential partners. Community events may already be in place where digital inclusion advocates can join existing conversations around social, economic, or digital equity. The coalition may form in response to a publicized government or business investment in a disadvantaged area of the community, or it may form proactively to collect data about who is impacted most by digital divides in the community.

No matter the coalition's starting point, this initial stage can take many weeks or months of networking conversations between partners who, as needed, enter and exit the broader discussion of, "What does digital inclusion mean for our community?" and "How does digital inclusion serve the community's interests?" A central group of individuals will emerge that may become the coalition steering or executive committee.

Starting a coalition requires commitment from community leaders who have the necessary time and community standing to generate the conversations that will advance the coalition's development. Understanding the community landscape, the necessary leadership qualities, and where to leverage opportunities for collaborative conversations about digital inclusion will make the partnership-building process more efficient. This chapter offers a few topics to consider as you prepare to talk with community stakeholders.

## REASONS TO FORM A DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITION:

- To present a unified community voice around digital inclusion
- To raise awareness about digital inequities and the impact on your communities
- To support digital inclusion providers through professional development, networking, and information-sharing
- To strengthen the impact of digital inclusion programs through service partnerships
- To raise funding for digital inclusion programs
- To build political support for public investment in digital inclusion programs
- To develop a collective understanding about the need for digital inclusion among providers in specific areas of community development (i.e., health, education, workforce development, civic engagement, racial justice)

Times of crisis often serve as a catalyst for community action and new initiatives, as formerly overlooked inequities move to the forefront and become critical needs. This was clearly illustrated as the COVID-19 pandemic coalesced efforts to form digital inclusion coalitions. Most of the coalitions formed since 2020 formed in part because of needs in their communities that the pandemic illuminated, especially for stakeholders not already working on digital inclusion efforts.



# POTENTIAL COALITION MEMBERS

When considering the types of organizations and groups to invite to help build your coalition, be creative and inclusive in who you reach out to in your community. Many coalition members will be self-evident, but some organizations could initially be less obvious as they may not yet be engaged in digital inclusion efforts but represent a key constituency, or they may even provide digital inclusion services but not consider their work in the context of addressing the digital divide.

## ORGANIZATION TYPES THAT ARE COMMON COALITION MEMBERS

- Libraries
- Technology companies
- Digital inclusion organizations
- Nonprofit organizations
- Neighborhood associations
- Financial institutions (banks)
- Housing organizations
- Civil rights organizations
- Higher education institutions
- K-12 education
- Health organizations
- Media and arts organizations
- Workforce development organizations
- Faith-based organizations
- Internet service providers (ISPs)
- Community economic development organizations
- Local and government institutions
- Foundations
- Community anchor institutions
- Minority Serving Institutions
- Entrepreneurs
- Other community-based coalitions

While the extent of the digital divide and the challenges it creates have gained more traction nationwide, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic, “digital inclusion” is still not yet a universally understood concept.

When recruiting members for the coalition or steering group, be sure to look for organizations who are engaged in this work from associated frameworks, including groups who work in the areas of media justice, racial equity and justice, digital justice, digital civic engagement, STEM inclusion, and municipal broadband. Unintentionally excluding a key constituency group can call into question the inclusiveness and validity of the coalition; and, more importantly, it risks omitting valuable perspectives and contributions from the coalition’s work. Thinking through potential member organizations is also an opportunity to reflect on what inclusivity means and how a coalition can address institutional racism and barriers head-on, early in coalition building. Engaging in exercises that force members to reflect on all areas of the community, such as actor or asset mapping, can be a valuable way to broaden the conversation beyond the initial core members.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Coalition members from public offices and internet service providers have shown to be valuable additions to some digital inclusion coalitions. Nonetheless, the coalitions should evaluate how their inclusion may impact the coalition’s purpose, functional and power dynamics, and implementation strategies.

## REASONS MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN COALITIONS

- To support strategy implementation
- To network with stakeholders
- To collaborate on data collection, messaging, and advocacy
- To learn about what’s happening on the digital inclusion front
- To hold joint events
- To align efforts and consolidate funding
- To amplify their own organization’s impact and reach

# LAUNCHING YOUR COALITION

## ALIGNING PARTNERS

Launching your coalition may be celebrated as a singular event or, as in most cases, it may result from a process of transitioning from informal discussions or partnerships, into a more structured approach to collaboration. Regardless of how they arrive at an inflection point, all coalitions begin with partner organizations acknowledging the need to address digital inequities in their community, and agreeing that they can accomplish more through collective action than by working independently. A key characteristic of digital inclusion coalitions is that they offer a formal decision-making process to address the needs of the digital inclusion ecosystem of the community it serves.

## CONVENING THE COALITION

A common strategy is to hold an event or summit to celebrate the development of the digital inclusion coalition. This first public event or summit often centers on affirming a common understanding of digital inclusion while gathering and educating potential members, supporters, and advocates. By discussing barriers and solutions, attendees of the summit establish that shared understanding. Creating shared language and understanding allows the coalition to clearly define its purpose.



## ESTABLISHING ROLES

Digital inclusion coalitions have several commonly held roles, although not every coalition uses the same titles or language to describe them. The following roles are important to provide structure and direction at the outset of a coalition. We have attempted to be inclusive; however, these roles can be defined in ways that make the most sense for your coalition and community. Additionally, not all coalitions will include all of these roles, and one person may fill multiple roles. This is particularly the case for smaller and emerging coalitions. For more details on coalition structure and roles, see Chapter 5.

- **First Organizer or Convener:** this person (or persons) serves as the driving force for shaping the early coalition network and initial recruitment of members. Oftentimes, this person provides the initial magnetism that encourages people and organizations to connect and form the partnerships that lead to coalition building.
- **Leadership Roles.** These are the roles, and some of the corresponding responsibilities, that are typically defined in the coalition's guiding documents, as well as the process for selecting leadership for these roles. A key role of leadership is to synthesize the shared language of the coalition, its member organizations, and the community into a powerful unifying narrative. Coalition leadership are also responsible for structuring a healthy coalition. These roles are sometimes collectively referred to as the steering committee for the coalition:
  - **Chairperson:** Leads the steering committee through the strategic development phase during the coalition building phase. The Chairperson also provides a "bird's-eye-view" of the coalition to help facilitate the inner workings of the coalition, address gaps in resources, and encourage effective communication between the different aspects of the coalition's structure.
  - **Facilitator:** Directs coalition meetings to ensure that agenda items are addressed, member perspectives are captured, and that feedback mechanisms are in place.
  - **Coordinator:** Provides organizational support by administering the day-to-day activities of the coalition, such as securing the meeting logistics, sharing information with members, and responding to information inquiries.
  - **Committee Chairs:** Lead a smaller group of coalition members, or a sub-committee, through discussions or activities pertaining to a subset of the mission
  - **Coalition Members.** One of the responsibilities of member organizations is to participate in coalition activities and contribute to the creation of shared language and understanding to shape coalition goals. Member organizations and participants also promote the coalition by sharing their experiences participating in the coalition activities and help to recruit new member organizations.
  - **Representatives or Liaisons:** Represent their organization by participating in coalition activities, providing feedback on coalition outcomes, and advocating for their organization's needs and interests to the coalition. In turn, they also represent the coalition to their organization.
  - **Supporters or Participants:** Represent the larger pool of members who self-organize to participate in the coalition. These individuals generally participate in providing direct digital inclusion services to the community and can share valuable hands-on experience to the coalition.
- Networking is a primary activity of digital inclusion coalitions that spans leadership and member organizations. Yet usually individuals within member organizations shine as "matchmakers" for the coalition by connecting new members and forging mutually beneficial relationships among member organizations. It can be useful to formalize a specific role that is responsible for brokering introductions between member organizations and helps to strengthen the relationships within the coalition network.

## DEFINING PURPOSE

One of the most important early tasks for the steering committee is to synthesize the shared language for the coalition, its member organizations, and the community into a powerful unifying narrative. It should communicate a purpose for the coalition that gives inspiration and clarity to members and garners support from the community and other partners. Note, these coalition-framing decisions should be representative of the community and inclusive of key stakeholders. As your coalition grows, it will be necessary to revisit these early decisions to determine if they are still representative of the community's digital inclusion ecosystem. The successful implementation of future coalition activities and sustained member participation will depend heavily upon how unified members feel about the strategic direction of the coalition.

## PARTICIPATION AND EQUITY

Racial equity is also an important goal for digital inclusion coalitions, and may seem inherent since digital inclusion work helps to address digital inequalities. However, an explicit commitment to racial equity provides a clear message to members, the community, and most importantly to people of color that the coalition recognizes and will actively work to eliminate the historical and systemic barriers and structures of oppression that persist on the basis of race. Centering a commitment to racial equity and justice is key early in the development of a digital inclusion coalition.

The process of centering racial equity within coalition work is much like the process of building a coalition: creating shared understanding, ensuring community voices and marginalized voices are heard and informing the process, identifying strategies, implementing a plan, and revisiting the plan and process as necessary to accommodate changes in the community ecosystem.

Leadership is key for prioritizing conversations about anti-racism, racial equity, and digital inclusion. Identifying root causes for inherently racist structures can be a difficult conversation for a coalition and member organizations, yet it is so important and worthwhile. Prioritizing racial equity does not have to wait. This is a key conversation to have at the outset of building a coalition and at every subsequent stage.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

One coalition is trying to take a more proactive and affirmative approach to racial equity in its work is the Digital Inclusion Network of Portland/Multnomah County (DIN) in Oregon<sup>7</sup>. DIN realized that their approach to digital inclusion coalition work needed to change to embrace racial equity within the coalition and the larger community. In order to reach the most underserved groups in their communities, DIN is explicitly addressing institutional racism and structural barriers to participation from people of color to be intentional about the relationship between racial equity and digital inclusion.

DIN recommends centering racial equity at the forefront of coalition work by (1) creating shared language and understanding about racial equity, anti-racism, and digital inequalities; (2) asking the community how to address systemic barriers within the coalition and the broader community; and (3) implementing anti-racist strategies within the coalition and connecting those strategies to the community and member organizations.

One strategy that DIN adopted to address racial equity was to rotate the coalition leadership among member organizations. Not every member organization has the capacity to lead a coalition for an indeterminate period of time; however, DIN has found that rotating leadership responsibilities among their member organizations has allowed the original leadership of the coalition to step aside and create space and opportunity for those who experience digital inequalities. By varying the responsibilities of the coalition, they are learning to think in new ways, are uncovering barriers, and are more in touch with the people the coalition wants to serve.

<sup>7</sup> Digital Inclusion Network (DIN). (2021).

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/oct/73860>

# CHALLENGES TO GETTING STARTED

Coalitions identified four challenges they faced when building their coalitions, including:

- Establishing shared language and understanding regarding the goals of the coalition, the structure, and the future direction of the coalition
- Balancing the coalition's interests and member organizations' interests; making sure that members understand that the purpose of the coalition is not to represent a single member but to represent the community's needs
- Recruiting new members: potential members did not know about the coalition because the coalition needed to build a public presence and trust with the community
- Lack of meeting attendance: members may not be participating for a number of reasons, some of which may include:
  - Too many existing commitments
  - Don't see a connection to their work
  - Inflexible meeting structure
  - They don't agree with the direction of the coalition

In addition to highlighting challenges, coalitions also shared some tips that either helped to get their coalitions off the ground or they wished they had done sooner. These coalitions:

- Opted for paid staff to focus on the coalition's goals
- Set a routine for regular consistent meetings
- Asked for help from already established coalitions (and NDIA)
- Agreed on a structure for the coalition in a guiding document
- Hosted a social activity

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

**Don't do it alone.** Coalitions, by their nature, are collaborative and thrive when as many representatives from the community as possible participate, and the process of establishing a coalition should reflect this. Creating a coalition to address the needs of digital inclusion organizations in a community is a lot of work. Not only does sharing the workload make coalitions more sustainable, but the process of building the coalition needs community input and involvement so it can also be a source for inclusion and can lead to true community ownership. It is helpful to begin by creating partnerships to discuss if and how forming a coalition can empower and respond to community's needs. This crucial first step encourages participation, inclusion, and social justice from the outset.





# Chapter 5

# Coalition

# Structure

## NDIA Recommendation

**REGULAR AND CONSISTENT MEETINGS ARE KEY FOR BUILDING MOMENTUM, SOLIDIFYING, AND SUSTAINING A DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITION. MANY COALITIONS NOTED THAT PARTICIPATION TENDS TO WAX AND WANE OVER TIME; HOWEVER, HAVING A MEETING STRUCTURE IN PLACE (VIRTUALLY, IN PERSON, OR HYBRID) THAT IS CONSISTENT CAN OFFSET THE IMPACT OF TEMPORARY LAPSES IN GENERAL PARTICIPATION.**

# STRUCTURE

One of the defining characteristics of a coalition, compared to a group of like-minded individuals passionate about digital inclusion, is that coalitions have a systematic and structured approach to decision making, leadership, membership, and meetings. These decisions are typically outlined in a guiding document where coalition members establish a shared understanding of what the coalition is, how it makes decisions, and what its objectives and goals are. For example, a guiding document for a coalition can be as formal as a charter describing the structural elements of a coalition or as informal as meeting minutes summarizing the decisions made about the coalition's structure during meetings.

A coalition brings together a diverse group of stakeholders to achieve collective action. But getting everyone a seat at the table is just the first step to building a structure for your coalition. This section addresses some of the key characteristics of coalition structure.

# STRUCTURAL LAYERS

Coalitions are multi-faceted entities, comprising different layers of engagement and support. Across the board, all of the coalitions we spoke with have some combination of, or all of, the layers shown in the diagram.

The **Community** layer represents the foundational layer of a coalition, as it is the individuals of the community that the coalition is responsive to. The next layer is the **Backbone**, which supports the administrative functions of the coalition by providing organizational support and/or acting as a financial agent for the coalition (see the following section on Backbone Support). **Coalition Members** make up the next layer. These are the organizations, community members, and stakeholders that collaborate, share resources, and share knowledge. The **Working Groups** bring together small groups of members to collaborate on specific goals, tasks, and projects of the coalition. Lastly, the **Steering Group** provides leadership for the coalition and are elected, or appointed, to represent the coalition and the community.

## DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITION STRUCTURE LAYERS



## LEADERSHIP

Most coalitions have a leadership body that consists of a group of leaders that represent the various sectors of the community and coalition membership. The first leadership body of a coalition tends to be composed of the people who decided to build the coalition, followed by elected and/or appointed members.

Many coalitions found that establishing the specific responsibilities and roles that leadership provides can be useful for thinking through the leadership structure. Coalitions also suggested having a transparent selection process for leadership as it helped sustain coalitions, especially during periods of transition.

A **formal decision making process** is a defining characteristic of a coalition. That is not to say that a coalition must be a formalized entity (e.g. incorporated); however, establishing a clear process for making decisions can make doing the work of the coalition more effective. To have a formal decision making process for your coalition it can be helpful to address questions such as: How are decisions made? How are new issues raised? How are conflicts navigated between and among individuals, member organizations, and leadership? What role do member organizations have in making decisions? What role does the community have in making decisions?

## WORKING GROUPS

Working groups are generally the layer of the coalition structure focused on specific projects, areas, or goals for the coalition. Though some coalitions use different language, such as “subcommittees” or “task forces,” the idea is that groups within the coalition are tasked with overseeing the development and implementation of digital inclusion strategies that fall within a more specific scope. The number of working groups varies across coalitions, but ideally they should address all aspects of digital inclusion in some capacity.

## GENERAL MEMBERSHIP

Establishing the rights and obligations of general members in the guiding document can help the coalition define the benefits the coalition can offer to member organizations and to the community. Defining the obligations of member organizations is important. What kind of time commitments can member organizations expect? What does full participation look like? For some coalitions, every member organization was part of at least one steering committee or subcommittee. For others, member organizations had an individual serve in a leadership capacity. Another approach is to provide different levels of membership, where some member organizations (e.g. ISPs) can join for the benefits of shared education, networking, and advocacy but do not necessarily participate in decision making processes for the coalition.

It is also important to have a clear process for members to join. Some coalitions seek out new members and invite them to join and others have a mechanism (like a form on their website) that allows new organizations to indicate interest in joining the coalition. Depending on the level of interest and desired expansion of the coalition, either of these approaches can work or they can be used in combination.

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

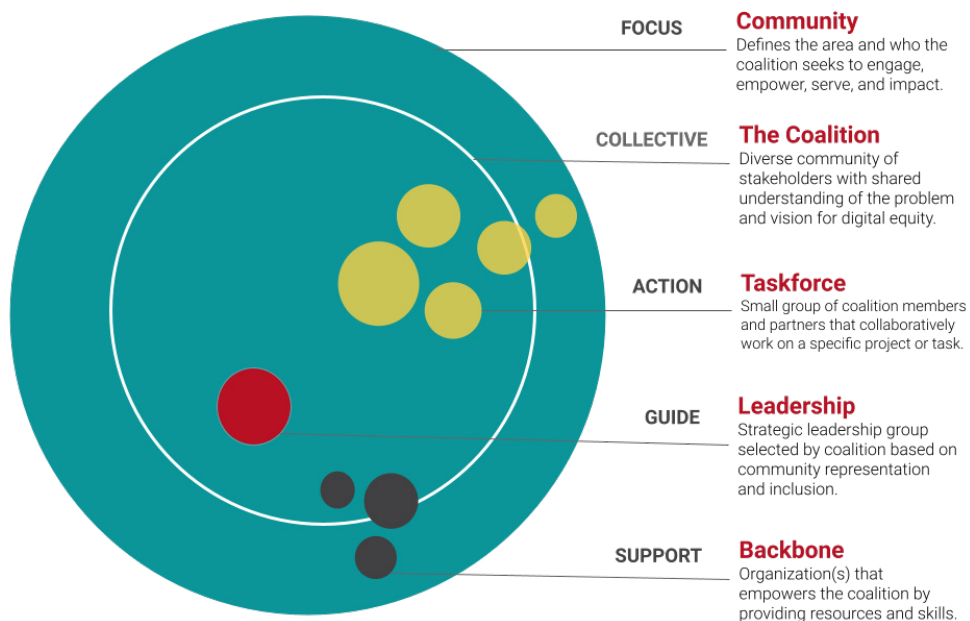
In the process of building the coalition, most coalitions recommended balancing growing membership with advancing programmatic digital inclusion work. Your coalition will evolve and change over time, and subsequently, the identity of the coalition and the needs of the community will likely need to be re-evaluated over the lifetime of the coalition.



# COALITION FRAMEWORK

The coalition framework outlines how the coalition structure, members, and community relate and interact within their digital inclusion ecosystem.

## COALITION FRAMEWORK STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION



The community is the landscape within which the coalition defines the populations served by potential member organizations. The coalition works within the landscape to provide a collective organizing force for its member organizations. The working groups work within the coalition to take action on the specific goals of the coalition. Leadership works within the coalition to provide guidance on unifying the goals and language of the coalition and on strategic planning. Lastly, the backbone organization(s) provides support to the coalition and may be a group of individuals representing multiple member organizations, or just one member organization, or may be a third-party to the coalition (see section below on backbone support).

Lastly, your coalition's structure does not have to be set in stone - you can adopt structural elements from this guide that work for your community and omit those that do not. More importantly, digital inclusion coalitions need to be responsive to their communities and to any changes in the broader digital inclusion ecosystem. Building and sustaining coalitions is inherently iterative, so continuing to evaluate

## BACKBONE SUPPORT

A backbone structure refers to how organizing functions and funds are managed for the coalition. In general, digital inclusion coalitions take one of two approaches:

- Establish a formalized, incorporated entity, usually a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with paid staff to independently manage the organizational and fiscal needs of the coalition.
- Have these needs met by member organization(s), individuals within the coalition, or an outside entity serving as a fiscal agent and providing organizational and administrative support.

Having a formalized entity as the coalition's backbone generally means that organizational needs such as scheduling meetings, creating a website, handling correspondence, and fiscal management are able to be addressed "in house." Creating a formalized entity for the coalition is often time consuming and requires significant commitment from members and leadership.

The second type of backbone structure is to assign organizational needs to one or more member organizations and to select a fiscal agent. In one coalition, the local government member hosted all meetings and was responsible for scheduling and distributing agendas. In another instance, a coalition had a committee made up of individuals from several member organizations that shared similar responsibilities.

A hybrid approach is also an option and may work well for emerging coalitions. As with many early-stage nonprofit organizations with limited staff capacity, a coalition may choose to incorporate as an independent entity, but then contract (or seek in-kind support) for certain backbone support functions from a member organization or other community partner, often a community foundation or larger established nonprofit. Examples of commonly contracted support services include accounting, human resources, and information technology.

Managing funding for coalition operations and associated activities can raise questions and challenges (both logistical and programmatic) for coalitions, especially in the early stages of development. The ability of a coalition to receive and distribute funds to support the business of the coalition is generally the first financial consideration coalitions face. This includes purchasing materials, contracting for services (e.g., website design, communications, event space), and managing payroll if the coalition is an independent entity. Depending on which backbone structure is the best fit and depending on a coalition's capacity, some coalitions may opt to manage operational finances internally, while others may have a member or external organization act as a fiscal agent.

Beyond operational finances, some coalitions also choose to accept and disperse funding to support programmatic digital inclusion work in the community – generally through their member organizations. Coalitions that decide to take on this role will need to identify a fiscal agent to act on behalf of the coalition to accept and disperse funds. For some coalitions, a member organization was selected to act as fiscal agent. Another option is to work with an outside organization (for example, Comcast and United Way were two organizations mentioned) to disperse funds.

For coalitions that help member organizations secure funding or disperse funding as part of the coalition's activities, **it is important to have a clear, transparent grant process to make sure it is inclusive and equitable to all members.** If your coalition chooses to be a source of funding for your member organizations, outline how funds are handled in your guiding documents.

**OVERALL, COALITIONS RECOMMENDED HAVING A BACKBONE ORGANIZATION. THOSE THAT HAVE A FORMAL BACKBONE ENTITY IN PLACE FOR THE COALITION STATED THAT THE BENEFITS CAN INCLUDE:**

- Leadership
- Engagement
- Organizing Force
- Legitimacy\*

\*This is not to indicate that coalitions with a formalized backbone structure have more legitimacy than those that do not. However, having a formal entity for the coalition can be a stronger indicator of legitimacy to other organizations, particularly to city, county, and state offices. This external recognition of legitimacy can be helpful when trying to get buy-in from local governments and larger organizations.

# ORGANIZATIONAL INVESTMENT AND VOLUNTEER COMMITMENTS

Navigating volunteer and time commitments for a coalition can be tricky. Some coalitions noted that representatives of member organizations working to establish the coalition spent up to 50 percent of work time on coalition efforts over one to two years. The time commitment to build a coalition can be significant.

## ORGANIZATIONAL INVESTMENT

Coalition member organizations were generally supportive of personnel establishing the coalition. However, having dedicated staff to the coalition is important for sustainability. Most coalitions stated that having paid staff can be invaluable because it incentivizes prioritizing the work of the coalition. For some coalitions, that may be someone who's only responsibility is the coalition. For others, one or more member organizations committed a portion of a staff member's time as an in-kind investment in ongoing support for the coalition. The important distinction is that whether staff are solely or partially focused on the coalition, the coalition work falls within their job responsibilities (whether written or unwritten) – this establishes accountability and the coalition as a priority. Relying on only volunteers sometimes means that coalition efforts take a backseat to paid work, which may delay coalition efforts.

## SOME NUANCES NOTED BETWEEN THE BENEFITS OF PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEER COALITIONS INCLUDED:

- Volunteers may not have the appropriate skills to perform certain tasks in the name of the coalition; therefore, a committed staff is critical in order to hold accountability and quality.
- One advantage of volunteers is that people in the community feel like they own coalition initiatives.
- One disadvantage of paid staff is that they might mask the efforts of the volunteers and the community.
- Having a mix of volunteers and paid staff can prevent leadership from being overextended.
- Member organizations who offered paid work release time for volunteers to support the coalition found the system was a significant factor in the coalition's success.

# CREATING COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Part of building a coalition is also determining how your coalition will present itself to the community. Creating a public presence that communicates a shared mission for the coalition can solidify the community's understanding of the coalition. Below are some simple strategies that may help your coalition develop a clear identity in the community.

## CLEAR IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

Consider adopting a logo or image to help provide a consistent public reference for the coalition. This can help make the coalition's activities more visible and recognizable in the community. A unified public image helps differentiate between when members are representing the coalition versus representing their own organizations.

## CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

Consider creating a coalition email address to be used for all of the coalition's digital communications. This will help to differentiate and lend legitimacy to coalition communications. Consider sharing the account for leadership and individual members that communicate on behalf of the coalition.

## ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Consider creating an accessible folder where members and the leadership team can easily access coalition information, agendas, minutes, and resources.



# Chapter 6

# Coalition

# Work

NDIA Recommendation

**IN GENERAL, THE COALITIONS WE SPOKE WITH RECOMMENDED THAT COALITIONS DO NOT PROVIDE DIRECT SERVICES. DIRECT SERVICES REFER TO ACTIVITIES THAT ADDRESS THE DIGITAL INCLUSION NEEDS OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS, SUCH AS PROVIDING DIGITAL LITERACY TRAINING, REFURBISHING DEVICES FOR THE COMMUNITY, ETC.**

When community needs warranting **direct** digital inclusion programs are identified, rather than the coalition implementing programs, it is most effective to work through member organizations to help create and deliver programs. In most coalitions, there are member organizations that are experienced direct service providers, with established channels to connect with target populations, and potentially even similar existing programs that can be adapted to meet specific digital inclusion needs.

When the coalition engages in direct service it can lead to direct competition with member organizations for funding, resources, and services. This can result in redundancies and may negatively impact the coalition's relationship with member organizations and the community.

Your community-wide digital inclusion coalition will enable its members, working together, to accomplish goals they can't accomplish separately. For coalition work, it can be overwhelming to start and to decide which issues to tackle first. Coalitions acknowledged that it was helpful for them to remember that they **do not have to accomplish everything** because they are becoming **part of the puzzle for their community**.

This chapter outlines the work that coalitions engage in and examines the key areas of that work. The objectives, activities, and strategies of the coalitions whose leaders we interviewed fall into five broad categories. As with any organization, your community-wide digital inclusion coalition needs a strategic plan to accomplish its goals, therefore, this chapter also examines strategic planning and the strategy implementation cycle.

## WHAT DIGITAL INCLUSION COALITIONS DO

- Strategic planning
- Advocacy and education regarding the community's digital divide, why it matters and how to overcome it
- Support and coordination for member organizations' programs and resources
- Networking and professional development for local digital inclusion practitioners
- Assessment of the community's digital inclusion needs and resources (i.e., resource mapping)
- Prioritization of and support for the development of a community digital equity and inclusion plan

Gathering with likeminded people who care about digital inclusion can be valuable, especially for "seeing and being seen," experiencing solidarity with neighbors, and finding opportunities for new collaborations. However, busy people from a variety of institutions and organizations are not likely to invest scarce time and resources without the expectation of significant concrete returns – for themselves and their organizations, for the community at large or both.

Coalition work needs to go further than networking. Coalitions do that by coordinating a range of community-wide efforts and strategies to address digital inclusion: trying to understand and assess the unique needs of their communities; educating member organizations, local governments, and their communities about digital inclusion; advocating for policies that are based on and addresses community needs; and creating digital inclusion and digital equity plans. We found that most coalitions do not provide direct services, such as providing computer classes, internet connectivity, and so on (see section on direct service at the end of this chapter). Instead, **coalitions tend to provide the unique service of supporting the development of their community's digital inclusion ecosystem through empowerment, alignment, coordination, and amplification of member organizations' digital inclusion efforts.**

# COALITION PLANNING AND ACTION

## STRATEGIC PLANNING

Strategic planning is the process of defining the coalition's strategy and direction, and then mobilizing resources to execute those actions.

Generally, community leaders and activists are familiar with some form of the strategic planning framework that's often called "VMOSA" (Vision, Mission, Objectives, Strategies and Action Plans).<sup>8</sup> When we use the terms, "mission," "objectives," etc., we're referring to their meanings in the VMOSA framework.

Generally, the "mission" describes the coalition's broad, long-term goals; the "objectives" describe specific short-term goals (one or two years) that the coalition has identified as important steps toward accomplishing its mission; a "strategy" describes the systematic path by which the coalition hopes to accomplish an objective; and an "action plan" lays out all the specific activities, roles, timelines, etc., for implementing a strategy.

While the visions and missions of community-wide digital inclusion coalitions are generally similar, their objectives, strategies and action plans vary a great deal from community to community. Yet one aspect common across coalitions was the importance of strategic planning. Some coalitions admitted that they wished they had embraced strategic planning sooner, so that they could have moved more thoughtfully on from getting everybody in the room to doing the collaborative work of the coalition for their community. Other coalitions appreciated the guidance they received early on in their coalition building process to use strategic planning to establish a vision, a mission, objectives, strategies, and actions to guide their efforts to coordinate their members' digital inclusion services and programs more effectively.

## STRATEGIC ACTION

Coalitions benefit from engaging in a strategic thinking process before embarking on any project or action. This strategic process before implementation can help the coalition and community partners prioritize activities your coalition chooses to take. Some coalitions found it helpful to assess potential coalition efforts in terms of one or more of the aspects listed below.

### THE POTENTIAL ACTIVITY, PROJECT, OR ACTION:

- Supports the **vision and mission** your members have agreed on.
- Addresses **real community needs and opportunities**.
- Is **pragmatic and specific enough to succeed**, within the limits of influence and resources your coalition members can bring to bear.
- Is **ambitious enough to make a difference**, justifying the time and effort invested by coalition members.
- **Unites rather than divides** its community and member organizations. ("A coalition that seeks more resources or influence for some of its members, but not for others, won't remain a coalition for long!")

In practice, the activities of your coalition will vary depending on the organizations involved in your coalition, the digital "facts on the ground" in your community, the local resource situation, politics, personalities, etc. Which is why it can be so important to do a community assessment.

<sup>8</sup> Two good VMOSA primers for community groups can be found at <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/vmosa/main> and <http://www.atlas101.ca/pm/concepts/vmosa-vision-mission-objectives-strategies-and-action-plans/>

# ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

Advocacy is a key element of digital inclusion coalitions. To start with, there's the "advocacy effect" that happens automatically when someone creates a public entity with "digital inclusion" or "technology literacy" in its name, invites others to participate, and holds public events. If nothing else, those actions say to community decision-makers and the public: "This is a real need, you should take it seriously, and you should support our efforts." That message is louder when the coalition's members include recognized community leaders (especially elected officials), community anchor institutions like libraries, and other public institutions like housing authorities.

But most digital inclusion coalitions do more than "advocate by example." Digital inclusion coalitions tend to do advocacy by releasing digital inclusion plans, making recommendations for public and private action, hosting digital inclusion events, educating local government officials, and demonstrating the need to make digital inclusion a public policy priority. The coalitions we interviewed make themselves available to the media as advocates for their members' programs, their own initiatives, and digital inclusion in general. Most also use social media for these purposes and participate to some extent in events like Digital Inclusion Week.

When we asked the first time in 2018, none of the leaders we interviewed identified "advocacy" as a strategic priority for their coalitions. When we asked again in 2021, there was less hesitancy to use the word advocacy; however, many coalitions emphasized their role in educating the public and local government officials about digital inclusion rather than describing that work as "advocacy."\*

## TIP

Create a consistent public message by developing coalition talking points for members' use with the media, on social media, and/or in interactions with public officials.

In reality, whether we prefer to call the activities in question "advocacy" or "public education," the missions and objectives of all digital inclusion coalitions, spoken or unspoken, are likely to include:

- Persuading community leaders and the public to take the need for digital inclusion more seriously
- Increasing the community influence of member organizations
- Making a case for more support and funding for member programs
- Creating legitimacy and support for member organizations' interventions and other public or community initiatives, e.g., affordable broadband options for low-income neighborhoods.

It might be challenging for your coalition to discuss its advocacy objectives and strategies frankly, especially if public officials and institutions are among your members, but it is important to find a way to have this discussion.

\*At its basic level, "advocacy" is defined as public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy. However, at times advocacy in the general sense can cross over into political advocacy in the form of lobbying elected officials to enact a policy change. This type of advocacy, lobbying, is accompanied by certain legal restrictions for 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations and public agencies. Coalitions need to be informed about how these restrictions factor into their strategies for engagement, but should not be dissuaded from interacting with elected officials. We recommend resources provided by the National Council of Nonprofits<sup>9</sup> or the National Conference of State Legislatures<sup>10</sup> for introductory information before consulting with the coalition's board (or convening organization) if this is an intended course of advocacy.

<sup>9</sup> See the National Council of Nonprofits' page on advocacy: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/everyday-advocacy>

<sup>10</sup> See the National Conference of State Legislatures' resources for trainings and webinars: <https://www.ncsl.org/meetings-training/2016-webinars-calendar.aspx>



# MEMBER ORGANIZATION SUPPORT AND COORDINATION

Most coalitions stated that in order to provide sufficient support to their member organizations, it was important for the coalition to (1) have a broad and diverse scope of member organizations, (2) use the coalition to amplify member organizations, and (3) use the coalition network to disperse resources to member organizations.

- Having a broad membership base allows coalitions to address and coordinate all areas of digital inclusion for their communities. Having broad membership requires looking beyond the “usual suspects.” Digital inclusion coalition members should come from more than just technology-oriented organizations. In addition to having a broad membership base in terms of the type of work that the organizations do, effective coalitions have diverse membership in terms of individuals. **The more a coalition reflects the community it seeks to serve, the more effective it will be in understanding and addressing the community's needs.** Additionally, coalitions whose members represent a diversity of perspectives and experiences are also better able to foster support for and coordination between their member organizations. Beyond making sure that non-white and other marginalized groups have a seat at the table, successful coalitions reflect on whether their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion are meaningful and anti-racist. One way to achieve this is by working with representatives from marginalized groups to define what meaningful impact and engagement would look like to people who are part of those groups.

- Amplifying member organizations and their roles within the coalition can be a great way to provide support. Building healthy relationships and social ties between organization members fosters trust that can be invaluable for strategizing and achieving the coalition's goals. Some coalitions amplify their members by allocating meeting time routinely to each member organization to share their organization's goals and services. Others amplify members through newsletters and specific workshops and events. You can elevate your coalition members in many different ways; however, coalitions have found that these **relationships need to be actively cultivated to promote trust, facilitate collaboration, and encourage participation from those who experience digital inequities.**

- Coalitions not only gather resources, they also disperse resources back to their members. Coalitions create impact by pooling their members' skills, expertise, experiences, services, and other resources; and by sharing those resources with members and the community. **Coalitions therefore need systems in place for identifying the resources, assets and capacities that reside within them, tapping these existing capabilities, and filling any gaps that may exist.** Consider how a coalition can promote mutually beneficial and supportive relationships that are not extractive but instead elevate member organizations and the community.

## NETWORKING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Offering professional development and networking opportunities for your community and members is a common strategy for coalitions to support their member organizations. Professional development – creating a stronger collaborative network, shared program resources, improved programming, and enhanced professional skills for digital inclusion organizations and their staff – is a key strategic focus for some coalitions.

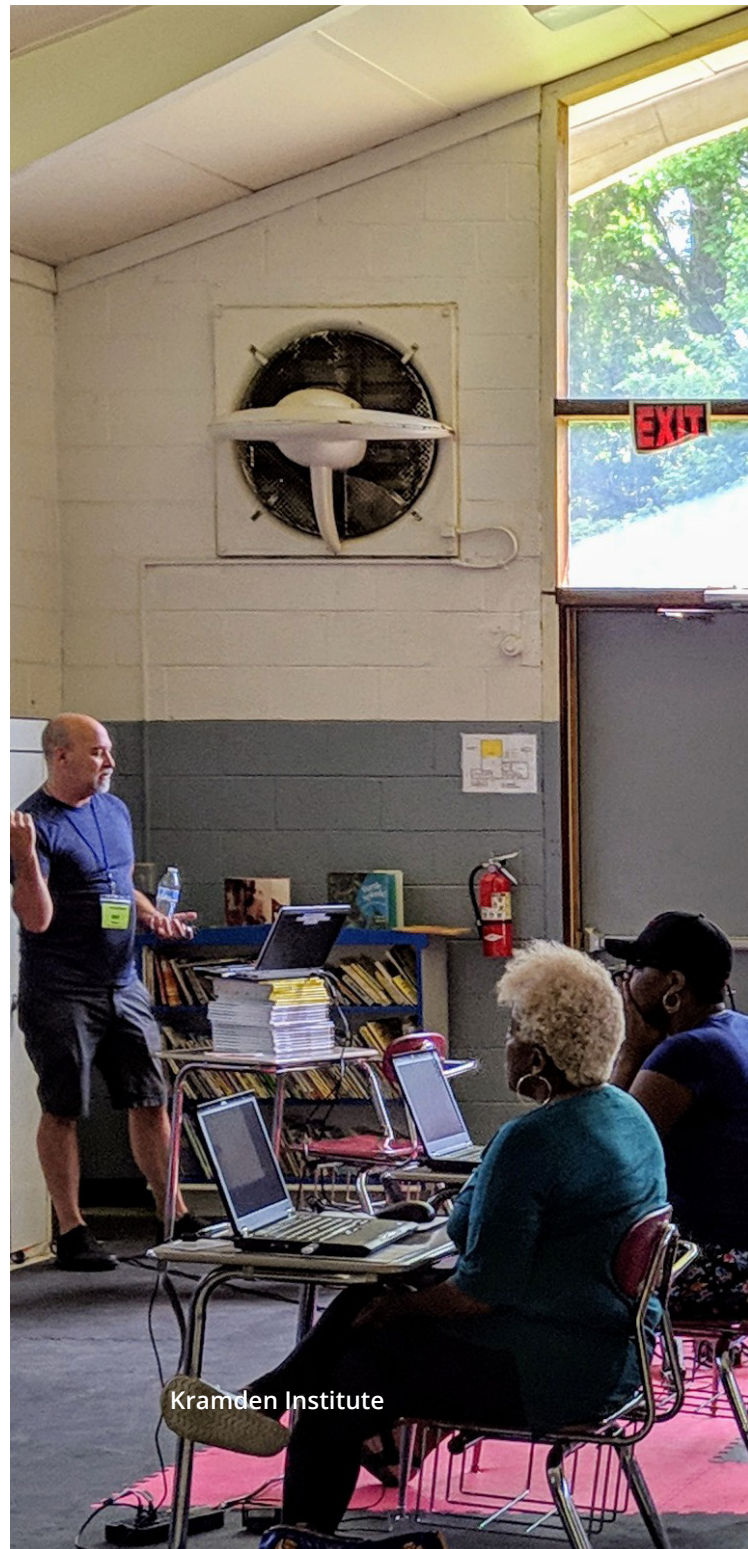
Several of the coalitions we interviewed provide professional support for local practitioners through annual gatherings, workshops, networking events, email forums, newsletters, and sharing teaching materials. These coalitions make explicit commitments to practical collaborations and helping digital inclusion practitioners gain the skills they need to serve their communities. Supporting collaborations between and among member organizations advances the broader goals of the coalition, and it demonstrates the value of participating in the coalition to others in the community.

Networking and professional development activities enable coalitions to infuse best practices and new knowledge into the community. Sometimes this may involve reaching outside the community such as, sponsoring speakers or linking coalition members to peers in other communities or to national networks like NDIA.

It's important to remember that your members are your best resource. Regardless of how they first became engaged, local practitioners and champions often possess unique skill sets for digital inclusion work and can be some of the best professional development resources. Coalitions may find it useful to survey their members to understand what knowledge gaps exist based on local and national trends and to inquire about their competency as potential trainers.

It's important to make a distinction here: most of the coalitions we interviewed do not create or operate programs themselves (see section on direct service at the end of this chapter). What they do instead – by introducing previously unconnected players, providing networking breaks and social time at meetings, and framing conversations about their participants' efforts and about unmet community needs and opportunities – is encourage the formation of new partnerships and collaborative programs by subgroups of coalition members.

Examples include a library working with a healthcare provider to train library patrons to use a patient portal; a device-refurbishing company offering heavily discounted computers to workforce program trainees; and a radio station teaming up with a youth-focused STEM organization to promote an upcoming summer camp. These types of initiatives aren't owned by the coalitions that helped bring them into existence, but their successes can fairly be counted as the coalitions' successes as well.



## COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT AND RESOURCE MAPPING

Among the most common obstacles facing local digital inclusion advocates is the absence of good shared data about the extent and nature of local needs (e.g. households without broadband, impact on particular neighborhoods and demographics, implications for employment/education/healthcare, etc.), and about the financial, organizational, and human resources that could be engaged to meet those needs. Collecting data about their communities helps coalitions identify their communities' needs and assets so that they can more effectively coordinate their member organizations' services, programs, and interventions.

Some digital inclusion coalitions, notably those involving city governments and universities as partners, have taken the lead (or provided impetus for others) to fill in gaps in the data. A community assessment may compile data on broadband availability and adoption, public computer access, geographic barriers, internet usage practices and attitudes, and demographic data. They may also survey community members, to better understand the barriers people face to digital equity and inclusion.

Rather than focusing strictly on the needs, or deficits, that exist within the community, it is also a good idea to gather data on the community's assets, or resources, that may be leveraged by the coalition. Whereas focusing solely on needs can make challenges seem intractable and solutions difficult to identify, resource mapping can uncover good starting places and new partners. Examples of resources to be mapped can include existing technology infrastructure, community organizations with strong ties to target populations, and initiatives already underway that can be leveraged and scaled. The community assessment helps inform the coalition's initiatives and timeline to address needs and achieve goals. Coalitions that undertake these kinds of fact-finding and resource-mapping strategies are far better positioned to address strategies for public education and advocacy that will best support the community's digital inclusion ecosystem.



# DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN

An emerging role for digital inclusion coalitions is the development of digital equity plans for their communities. A digital equity plan is an approach for communities and coalitions to align and create strategies to provide digital inclusion services to address the digital divide in their community.

The process and scope for creating a digital equity plan will vary from community to community; however, most plans provide for policy changes, recommended areas for investment, assessments of and solutions for systemic barriers, and a road map for alignment and coordination to address all aspects of the digital divide. More directly, digital equity plans intentionally seek to address barriers to availability, adoption, training, devices, and affordability, particularly for marginalized and un- and under-served populations.

## COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL EQUITY PLANS

### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

- Organize, engage, and build collective power to;
  - Determine goals
  - Create process
  - Prioritize scope
  - Develop strategies
  - Provide Oversight

### ASSESSMENTS

- Gap Assessment - Community Digital Divide
  - Broadband availability and adoption gaps
  - Community skills and device access gaps
  - Map the demographic of underserved communities
- Asset Mapping - Community Digital Inclusion Resources
  - Assess community infrastructure and services available
  - Map services available to underserved communities to:
    - Build digital skills
    - Access affordable devices and tech support
    - Connect with reliable broadband

### GOALS AND FOCUS

- Develop goals
- Outline strategies to achieve goals
- Provide a timeframe to work and evaluate

### COMMUNICATION

- Engage community and government around the plan
- Seek formal and informal adoption

### LEVERAGE PLAN

- Secure Investments
- Coordinate Work
- Track Progress
- Advocate
- Accountability

## LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Creating a digital equity plan centers the needs of the community. One community in particular, the city of Long Beach, California, published their Digital Equity Roadmap that detailed their approach to digital equity.<sup>11</sup> Using a collective impact approach and an equity lens, Long Beach's plan for digital equity focused on addressing issues of capacity, connectivity, and technology.

### THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT MODEL HAS FIVE CONDITIONS:

- **Common Agenda:** all participants have a shared vision for change and understanding of the problem
- **Shared Measurement:** collect data, analyze the results, and shared accountability to ensure efforts remain aligned
- **Mutually Reinforcing Activities:** differentiated activities that are coordinated through a joint plan of action
- **Continuous Communication:** consistent and open communication with a focus on building trust
- **Backbone Support:** separate organization(s) with staff and the resources and skills to convene and coordinate participating organizations

These five conditions were used in conjunction with an equity lens. Long Beach defined their equity lens as an approach that is thoughtful and inclusive in all decisions. These two dimensions informed their stakeholder and community engagement processes to create their plan.

Long Beach's stakeholder engagement process convened a 50-person multidisciplinary committee that reflected the entire spectrum of digital inclusion. This committee provided strategic guidance to advance Long Beach's digital equity plan. The stakeholder committee developed a common agenda, engaged in asset mapping, developed a shared measurement system, refined draft strategies, and reviewed community input.

The community engagement process collaborated with trusted community partners to engage individuals impacted by the digital divide. This process explicitly acknowledged that marginalized communities are typically left out of decision making processes because of systemic racism and oppression. Therefore, Long Beach intentionally uplifted individuals of the community as experts in digital inclusion to share their lived experiences and vision for digital inclusion. Specifically, Long Beach engaged the community through pop-up events, workshops, interviews, and a community survey.

<sup>11</sup> Long Beach. (2021). Digital Inclusion Roadmap. <https://www.longbeach.gov/ti/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-roadmap/>



# Chapter 7

# Adapting &

# Sustaining

# Coalitions

## NDIA Recommendation

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THE NEED AND THE APPROPRIATE MOMENT FOR REALIGNMENT AND EVALUATION OF THE COALITION'S GOALS, STRATEGIES, AND STRUCTURE. YOUR COMMUNITY'S NEEDS, PRESSURES, AND OPPORTUNITIES MAY CHANGE OVER TIME, THUS IT IS IMPORTANT TO REFLECT ON HOW THE COALITION SHOULD ADAPT TO BEST RESPOND TO THE CURRENT REALITY.**

## KEEPING THE COALITION ACTIVE

One of the key struggles that developed coalitions face is keeping the coalition and its members actively engaged in the community's digital inclusion ecosystem.

### COALITIONS IDENTIFIED THREE KEY FACTORS TO KEEP MEMBERSHIP ACTIVE:

- Consistency: have regular, recurrent meetings on the same day and time at regular intervals
- Have a meeting agenda: let members know what the meetings are about beforehand and let members have a say in which topics are included
- Spotlight your members: whether during the regular meetings or in a newsletter, give members space to talk about their individual organizations' efforts

To maintain momentum in the long-term, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. In general, however, most coalitions found success **by being responsive to their communities' needs**. The coalitions we spoke with regularly asked their members and community how their needs were being met and what needs the coalition could address. Don't be afraid to revisit your coalition's guiding documents and strategic plan to make sure that the coalition's work remains responsive to the needs of your community. Adapting your coalition to meet those needs can, in turn, help sustain the coalition's efforts.

In addition to keeping the membership active, it is important to build **community awareness** of your coalition, its work, and the work of its member organizations. One coalition representative recommends attending member organizations' meetings to improve each others' understanding of how they fit into the larger digital inclusion ecosystem and the role of the coalition. Another coalition suggested that attending non-member organizations and community-wide meetings can also be great opportunities to spread awareness of the coalition. Raising awareness and understanding of the coalition's work can help embed the coalition in the community and strengthen its sustainability.

## LEADERSHIP CHANGES

Leadership changes can significantly impact the ability of a coalition to maintain its strategic direction and continue serving its members and community. Oftentimes leadership is made up of the individuals that started the coalition; however, changes in jobs, moving, burn-out, and other life events can result in unplanned changes. Volunteer-only coalitions are more susceptible to these changes than coalitions with paid staff. How your coalition deals with planned and unplanned changes in leadership can affect its long-term sustainability.

The coalitions that formed prior to 2018 identified three strategies that helped them mitigate changes in leadership to ensure that the coalition continues to thrive.

- Having a shared leadership strategy can offset the turmoil caused by changes. A shared leadership strategy empowers multiple individuals from member organizations to provide leadership in their area of expertise. Subcommittees and working groups that tackle specific issues can disperse leadership responsibilities across a larger number of individuals, protecting the coalition from being negatively affected by the loss of one leader.
- Having a broad and diverse membership base can also help sustain your coalition. The coalitions suggested that a mix of organizations with historical knowledge of the community and the coalition and new organizations that can offer fresh perspectives can result in a well-rounded coalition that is more adaptable to changes in leadership. Having the coalition dependent on just one member organization, or one individual, as the driving force can mean that the coalition may face significant challenges to its sustainability if that organization or individual leaves.
- Formalizing the coalition can also mitigate the consequences of turnover in leadership. There are multiple ways to formalize the coalition (see Chapter 4's section on backbone support). Having paid staff that provide organizational support can help sustain the coalition through changes in leadership.

## PANDEMIC PRESSURES

The COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive force for digital inclusion coalitions. However, the pandemic also revealed structural barriers to digital inclusion that illustrated the need for a coalition in many communities. The closing of institutions like libraries and schools, the shift to remote work for many employees, and the forced reliance on e-commerce were just some of the factors that revealed the widespread need to coordinate digital inclusion efforts. In this way, the pandemic helped coalesce efforts to form coalitions.

Yet one of the side effects of forming and sustaining a coalition during a pandemic that required social distancing was that coalition activities occurred virtually. The move to online meetings has had divergent results for coalitions. For example:

- One coalition has had increased participation because their previous in-person location was revealed to be a significant barrier to participation (the building was downtown and proved to be quite difficult for many member organizations to get to).
- Another coalition thought that the impetus to switch to video meetings was an unexpected benefit as it helped cut costs on rooms, made it easier to meet, and the coalition was able to increase their workshop offerings and had more participation overall.
- On the other hand, one coalition felt that they lost momentum with the adoption of video meetings in lieu of in-person and was not sure how to achieve previous levels of participation on virtual platforms.

Based on the comments from coalitions, it seems that the move to virtual meetings negatively impacted the coalitions that were (1) in a period of transition between building the coalition and sustaining its efforts OR (2) were in a general period of upheaval in conjunction with the pandemic (e.g. experiencing leadership changes, changes in coalition identity, etc.). Coalitions that felt the move to virtual meetings had a positive impact on their activities stated that they would continue to meet virtually after the pandemic.

In addition to changing coalition participation patterns, the pandemic also affected member recruitment. A few coalitions felt that the pandemic had mixed effects on participation, as they have experienced high turnover but also had more new members join. The pandemic was not something that digital inclusion coalitions could have prepared for, but part of being a coalition is responding and adapting to changes that affect your community. Perhaps the most salient lesson-learned from the pandemic is that remaining adaptable to meet the evolving needs



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# PRIVATE AND POLITICAL PRESSURES

Coalitions noted that external private and political pressures introduced unexpected challenges. Generally, the coalitions wished they had some form of guidance for these challenges before they existed. External pressures came in the form of (1) ISP involvement, (2) involvement of local government, (3) funding, and (4) “solving the digital divide.” Subsequently, some words of advice from coalitions included:

- **ISPs:** Be mindful of how your coalition involves ISPs. That is not to say do not involve them at all, as ISPs are vital partners in digital inclusion efforts and can help think about important aspects of local infrastructure. However, be careful of which meetings ISPs are invited to - they do not have to be invited to every meeting (especially if ISP involvement is outlined in your guiding document). Lastly, make sure to balance ISP participation, so that they remain a piece of the coalition’s efforts but don’t take over the coalition.
- **Local Government:** Coalitions recommend also being mindful about the role of local government in your coalition. Some coalitions formed strong, fruitful partnerships with local mayoral, city, and county offices. However, like ISPs, they do not necessarily have to be invited to every meeting. Think through what is best for your community and coalition. Funding: As discussed in Chapter 5, the decision whether or not to accept and disperse funding, and adopting a documented and transparent process for making funding decisions, can be a challenge for coalitions. Additionally, coalitions emphasized the need to be mindful about who your funders are and whether obligations tied to funding are in line with your coalition’s goals. Acknowledging and mitigating power imbalances between funders and other coalition members, some of whom may be funding recipients, is crucial to maintaining buy-in and equity within the coalition. This may require some form of separation or delineation of roles for members who are funders or funding recipients.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance. (2017). <https://www.charlottedigitalinclusionalliance.org/>

<sup>13</sup> CLT The Mayor’s Racial Equity Initiative. (2021). <https://equityclt.org/>

- **“Solving the Digital Divide”:** Lastly, the coalitions formed before 2018 found themselves faced with the criticism of having still not “solved” the digital divide. Coalitions have an important and unique role to play in their communities’ digital inclusion efforts; however, direct service is often the purview of member organizations. Therefore, they suggested having clear, measurable goals to define coalition success that will enable you to demonstrate the value of the coalition to the community, local government, and member organizations.

## ADAPTING AND REFINING

The needs of your community and member organizations will likely change over time. In response, your coalition will need to adapt to those changing needs. Oftentimes, this process of adaptation and refinement is the result of identifying those new needs through additional community assessments, strategic planning, and realigning the coalition’s goals in response. Subsequently, the coalition may need to refine its structure and strategies, secure new resources, and develop its internal capacity.

Many coalitions at this stage of development have refocused their efforts to incorporate explicit equity and racial justice frameworks. Similarly, these coalitions have also reorganized their structure by formalizing the coalition backbone and becoming a 501(c)(3).

One coalition in particular, the Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance (CDIA), refined and adapted its strategies for addressing the needs of its community by helping create the Center for Digital Equity (CDE).<sup>12</sup> The CDE is CDIA’s transition to a fully funded center intended to bring digital equity to Mecklenburg County and the city of Charlotte, North Carolina. The CDE formed, in part, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a need for greater coordination with the corporate sector and the mayor’s office.<sup>13</sup> With full-time staff, the CDE will streamline assets, funds, and talent to navigate the complexities of digital inclusion work that spans corporations, digital inclusion practitioners, and the community.

This approach is just one example of how coalitions might evolve. What is key for coalitions considering how to adapt to changing community needs is to (1) build and earn trust between stakeholders, (2) listen to your community with empathy to understand the challenges they face, and (3) work with the community to design solutions together.

# Chapter 8

# Resources

# & Methods

## 01 | NDIA RESOURCES

Digital Inclusion Trailblazers

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-inclusion-trailblazers/>

Digital Navigator Model

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-model/>

NDIA Open Community Calls

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2020/06/13/ndia-offers-open-community-calls/>

Digital Inclusion 101 Webinar (Recurring)

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2020/12/04/ndia-hosts-digital-inclusion-101-webinar/>

## 02 | BROADBAND ADOPTION

Benton Foundation–Digital Inclusion and  
Meaningful Broadband Adoption Initiatives (2016)

<https://www.benton.org/publications/digital-inclusion-and-meaningful-broadband-adoption-initiatives>

Benton Foundation–Digital Inclusion Outcomes-Based Evaluation (2017)

<https://www.benton.org/publications/digital-inclusion-outcomes-based-evaluation>

Benton Foundation - Broadband for America Now (2020)

<https://www.benton.org/publications/broadband-america-now>

U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and  
Information Administration–NTIA Broadband Adoption Toolkit (2013)

[https://www2.ntia.doc.gov/files/toolkit\\_042913.pdf](https://www2.ntia.doc.gov/files/toolkit_042913.pdf)

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development–ConnectHome Playbook

[https://connecthomeusa.org/s/ConnectHomeUSA-Playbook-2019-1-8\\_Final.pdf](https://connecthomeusa.org/s/ConnectHomeUSA-Playbook-2019-1-8_Final.pdf)

### 03 | LOCAL RESEARCH

Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance–Playbook (2017)

<https://www.charlottedigitalinclusionalliance.org/playbook.html>

Kansas City Coalition for Digital Inclusion–Digital Inclusion Summit Report (2015)

[https://kclinc.org/s/DigitalInclusionReport\\_Jan2015.pdf](https://kclinc.org/s/DigitalInclusionReport_Jan2015.pdf)

National Digital Inclusion Alliance–Informing Strategic Investment in Digital Equity (2017)

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/cuyahoga-2017/>

Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)–Trailblazing Digital Inclusion Communities (2013)

<https://webjunction.org/content/dam/WebJunction/Documents/webJunction/Trail%20Blazing%20Digital%20Inclusion%20Communities%20Report.pdf>

City of Portland Office of Management & Finance Revenue Division – Digital Equity Action Plan (2016)

<https://www.portlandoregon.gov/revenue/article/647688>

City of Seattle–Digital Equity Initiative Action Plan (2016)

[https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Tech/DigitalEquity\\_PhaseII.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/Tech/DigitalEquity_PhaseII.pdf)

WinstonNet, Inc.–WinstonNet’s accomplishments (2018)

<http://www.winstonnet.org/about-us/accomplishments>

### 04 | U.S. DATA SOURCES ON DIGITAL DIVIDES

Federal Communications Commission Form 477 data:

Census Tract Data on Internet Access Services

<https://www.fcc.gov/general/form-477-census-tract-data-internet-access-services>

Fixed Broadband Deployment Data (by county and Census block)

<https://www.fcc.gov/general/broadband-deployment-data-fcc-form-477>

Pew Research Center Internet & Technology–Broadband research

<http://www.pewinternet.org/>

Purdue University’s Center for Regional Development–Digital Divide Index

<https://pcrd.purdue.edu/2019-digital-divide-index-ddi/>

U.S. Census Bureau–Current Population Survey: Computer and Internet Use

<https://www.census.gov/topics/population/computer-internet.html>

U.S. Census Bureau–American Community Survey

<https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/>

U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration–Data Central

<https://www.ntia.doc.gov/category/data-central>

U.S. Department of Commerce National Telecommunications and Information Administration–National Broadband Availability Map

<https://www.ntia.doc.gov/category/national-broadband-availability-map>

## METHODS - BUILDING THE GUIDEBOOK

In late 2017, we gathered feedback from six digital inclusion leaders across five states about how community-wide placed-based digital inclusion coalitions are formed. These coalitions served as an NDIA Working Group, discussing and guiding the development of the first version of the Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook. Since then, the number of digital inclusion coalitions has increased across the United States, leading to the need for an update to the original guidebook with new perspectives and an understanding of how they are sustaining their efforts.

In the summer of 2021, we held three focus groups. Focus group one consisted of eight coalitions formed after April 2020. Focus group two was attended by five coalitions organized after March 2018. Focus group three was attended by 10 coalitions, the majority of which were among the original group of coalitions interviewed for the first iteration of this guidebook and had organized prior to March 2018. Following these focus groups, we held additional working group sessions to allow coalition representatives to provide insights to further develop and refine this updated guidebook.

Information compiled in this guidebook represents the feedback and recommendations from 24 coalitions at various stages of development. Community-wide digital inclusion coalitions vary greatly in scope, composition, and purpose. These 23 coalitions across 12 states participated in interviews, focus groups, and working group sessions to inform and guide the development of this updated Guidebook.

