NDIA
NATIONAL DIGITAL INCLUSION ALLIANCE

THE DIGITAL INCLUSION PROGRAM MANUAL:

FROM THE COMMUNITY DOERS WHO DEFINE THE FIELD FOR THOSE WHO WILL DO THE WORK

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This manual is based upon NDIA's Digital Inclusion Start-Up Manual for Community Based Organizations written in 2017 by Angela Siefer and Bill Callahan with guidance from NDIA affiliates. The Start-Up Manual was revised in 2020 by Paolo Balboa with guidance from NDIA affiliates. This manual is not a replacement for the original Digital Inclusion Start-Up Manual, but instead, an evolution and acknowledgment of the new work of digital inclusion, based on the best practices and knowledge from our past.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Reflections with NDIA Executive Director, Angela Siefer

Dear Digital Inclusion Leader,

Step back in time with me to 1997. I'm a Sociology graduate student at the University of Toledo. I'm helping pull together a community-based effort to address access to computers (that's how we talked about it then). I'm setting up computer labs, coordinating coalition meetings, facilitating participatory conversations about the coalition's mission, and then suddenly the U.S. Department of Commerce releases a notice for funding for the Telecommunications Information Infrastructure Assistance Program (TIIAP). We scrambled to get a proposal together. It was not pretty. It was not participatory. (I have my internship report documenting this fact.) We were not successful. We returned to our collaborative process, without federal funding.

Back then, we did not have guides and manuals, nor a national community to turn to for advice. Some of the coalition members' only access to the internet was through the one connected computer in their building's public computer lab.

This manual is to help you avoid my pain from 27 years ago. And strengthen your chances of building a digital inclusion program that meets the needs of your community while also attracting funding.

When I first began this work, we were also not considering sustainability of our efforts because that was a complete pipe dream. But today - oh golly - today sustainability is a dream that could become reality.

The COVID-19 pandemic created an incredible awareness of digital inequities. That awareness led to development of new digital inclusion coalitions and programs, along with financial support for existing digital inclusion coalitions and programs. That awareness made its way to Congress, resulting in historic funding for digital equity.

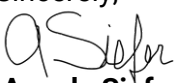
The opportunity in front of us right now is to use the historic investments in digital equity funding to build robust digital inclusion ecosystems and work toward sustainability.

This manual will help you get started. We must build robust digital inclusion ecosystems rooted in collaboration, partnership, and data-driven decision making. Digital inclusion programs historically lacked the funding to adequately support staff, collect data, measure outcomes, and publicize success stories. This is our opportunity to do those things. Measurement and storytelling are essential to sustainability.

This is our moment. Now is when we build impactful programs that will serve our communities for generations.

As you tackle the challenges of starting up a digital inclusion program, know that the NDIA community is here to support you. Addressing the digital divide requires all hands on deck. We're thrilled to have you with us.

Sincerely,



Angela Siefer | NDIA Executive Director

About the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)

The **National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)** advances digital equity by supporting community programs and equipping policymakers to act. NDIA is a unified voice for home broadband access, public broadband access, personal devices and local technology training and support programs. We work collaboratively with more than 1,800 affiliates in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands - as well as a over 30 Tribal Entities on Tribal Lands to craft, identify, and disseminate financial and operational resources for digital inclusion programs while serving as a bridge to policymakers and the general public. We see a future where everyone has the opportunity to use technology to live, learn, work, and thrive.

NDIA combines grassroots community engagement with technical knowledge, research, and coalition building to advocate for people working in their communities for digital equity. NDIA's work has resulted in the promotion and expansion of digital equity in communities throughout the US.

About this Manual

This manual is intended to provide guidance as you plan and begin your digital inclusion programming and services. These efforts might include increasing access and use of technology through digital skills training, affordable home broadband, affordable devices and tech support, and take place within a community-based organization, a library, a housing authority, a local government or other community locations.

This manual is focused on the development and sustainability of a long-term program, but its recommendations and guidance may also be used for digital inclusion projects, pilots, and events.

Read the manual in full when you are designing a new digital inclusion program, writing a grant proposal for a digital inclusion project, or looking for an overview of current best practices in digital inclusion. Reference individual chapters when you are refreshing material in your digital skills programs, building stronger evaluation plans, or trying to figure out what's next for your digital inclusion work.

This manual is not intended to be prescriptive, nor does it contain all the secrets of a successful digital inclusion program. Instead, it is a compendium of the wisdom, advice, and best practices of digital inclusion programs from across the country. We're excited to continue to learn from our community and share lessons with you. As the digital inclusion community grows and the types of digital inclusion programming expand, we hope to feature your wisdom and programs in future editions of this manual.

Four Major (and a few minor) Questions to Consider as You Read

1. Why do you want to start a digital inclusion program?

Why you? Why now? Why your organization? Why is this your calling? Is there someone else you could support in leading this work?

2. Whose program will it be?

Is this YOUR program or your community's? Will it live and die with you? Who will claim ownership of the work and the impact?

3. What issues of digital exclusion are you planning to solve? And for whom?

Why are you specifically positioned to create this solution? What about your program will be unique and effective?

4. What is your vision for community impact?

Who will be impacted? How will their lives and experiences change as a result of your work? How do you intend this impact to be sustainable?

For Everyone, from Experience

This manual was designed and created by the NDIA community, combining the efforts of the NDIA team, documented and observed best practices, and guidance from a core working group of digital inclusion practitioners representing a variety of communities and types of programs from across the country.

We wrote this guide to share our experiences, mistakes, and missteps. We hope that this manual will provide a path for you to avoid our pitfalls and even possibly enjoy success on your first try!

We suggest:

- **Don't** move too fast. **Do** take time to build relationships with your community and plan solutions.
- **Don't** use jargon or acronyms. **Do** use plain language and languages your community speaks.
- **Don't** forget your staff. **Do** train the trainer and keep searching for new development resources.
- **Don't** forget your community members have needs outside of digital inclusion. **Do** consider your community member as a "whole person" when engaging with them in digital inclusion programs.

Developing a Digital Equity Theory of Change with Tech Goes Home [1] (2023) is essential reading for everyone involved in digital inclusion, in any phase of their work. It was developed by Tech Goes Home, Sangha Kang-Le and Malana Krongelb, and Dr. Colin Rhinesmith, Digital Equity Research Center.

This report highlights the importance of community-led design work, participatory action research, and the importance of staff voices when considering evaluations, development, and change.

It shares key findings and major insights into the development and evaluation of digital inclusion programs, including advice for program leadership, partner organizations, and federal and state policymakers.

World Education, a Division of Jobs For the Future, developed and published **Advocating for Digital Equity: A Facilitator Guide for Catalyzing Immigrant and Refugee Community Members.** This guide expands upon three central topics, *Learning About Digital Equity, Collecting Data on Digital Equity, and Using Storytelling for Advocacy*, expanding upon many topics in this manual, and sharing specific details relevant to the experience of immigrant and refugee communities in America.

(1) Colin Rhinesmith, Malana Krongelb, and Sangha Kang-Le. 2023. "Developing a digital equity theory of change with Tech Goes Home." Tech Goes Home. https://www.techgoeshome.org/_files/ugd/f50bc7_b528e07f233e45bbaedfc227fe7b9053.pdf.

Digital Inclusion 101

NDIA worked in collaboration with our community to build vocabulary on the digital inclusion terms that we use. “Digital inclusion” and “digital equity” were codified into law with the Digital Equity Act, passed in 2021. These, and other key definitions are available for reference and citation on NDIA’s website at digitalinclusion.org/definitions.

Digital equity and digital inclusion are two terms that are often used interchangeably, however, they are two distinct and different concepts. Digital equity is the goal, and digital inclusion is the work and activities needed to meet the goal. We explain more below.

NDIA offers quarterly live webinar sessions called **Digital Inclusion 101** to help community members learn and maintain their digital inclusion knowledge. If you’re new to the digital inclusion field, or want to catch up on new ideas, vocabulary, or digital equity champions, tune in! Learn more on our Digital Inclusion 101 webpage.

Digital inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

This includes 5 elements:

1.) affordable, robust broadband **internet** service;

2.) internet-enabled **devices** that meet the needs of the user;

3.) access to **digital skills** training;

4.) quality **technical support**;

5.) 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 is 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.

Digital opportunity or digital equity?

Some communities choose to use different language for their activities and advocacy for connectivity, devices, and skills. “Digital opportunity” is a term often used to celebrate and explore the ways in which positive change to the digital landscape will bring prosperity, education, jobs, businesses, and essential services to a community. However you and your community define your work is entirely up to you, and no matter what you call it, you’re welcome in the greater digital inclusion world.

Sometimes words like “equity” and “inclusion” have been aligned with political ideologies. NDIA believes that digital equity is a human right that does not align with any one political or social ideology, but instead is a universal goal. We have seen this demonstrated in the bipartisan support for digital equity legislation at the local, state, and federal levels.

What is a digital inclusion program?

We use a variety of terms to describe common digital inclusion activities and sometimes similar words to refer to different types of work and the various roles played in that work. For clarity, we have included our operational definitions below.

- A **digital inclusion program** is a planned and executed series of activities that address the need for one or more of the following:
  - affordable and low-cost internet access,
  - appropriate device access,
  - digital skills instruction,
  - or technical support.

  Digital inclusion programs can be located within organizations that may not explicitly have a digital inclusion mission or vision.

- **Digital inclusion events** are one-off or regularly occurring stand-alone actions that draw attention and provide immediate digital inclusion services, such as sign-ups for free or low-cost internet, device distribution, or a single training session.

- **Digital inclusion projects** are smaller, more agile activities that fall between programs and events. These activities may be fast-paced, short-term initiatives that respond to an identified need or current event or they may be components of larger digital inclusion programs. During the initial season of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, we saw a flurry of digital inclusion projects created to address the work and learn-from-home digital divide.

- **Digital inclusion pilot programs** are digital inclusion initiatives that aim to test the viability of a specific program, within a limited timeframe and budget. Evaluation is a key element of pilots, and is used at the conclusion of the pilot timeframe to determine if the program should continue.

- **Digital inclusion organizations** have a mission focused on one or more of the areas of digital inclusion, including but not limited to affordable and low-cost broadband access and adoption, affordable and appropriate device distribution, digital skills instruction, technical support, or policy and advocacy work.

Digital inclusion events may encompass a wide range of digital inclusion activities in a bite-sized format. They are a great way of promoting awareness, advocacy and digital inclusion work, and providing a direct service. Check out NDIA's **Digital Inclusion Week 2024 Events Toolkit** to learn more!

- **A Digital inclusion ecosystem** is a combination of programs and policies that meet a geographic community's unique and diverse needs. Coordinating entities 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
  - Affordable and subsidized device ownership programs 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.

These definitions may apply to a wide range of projects, events, initiatives, and organizations that do not identify as working within the digital inclusion field. **However, we recognize that it is the work, not the name, that makes a digital inclusion program a digital inclusion program**. NDIA welcomes and celebrates digital inclusion work, regardless of what it is called.

Barriers to Digital Equity

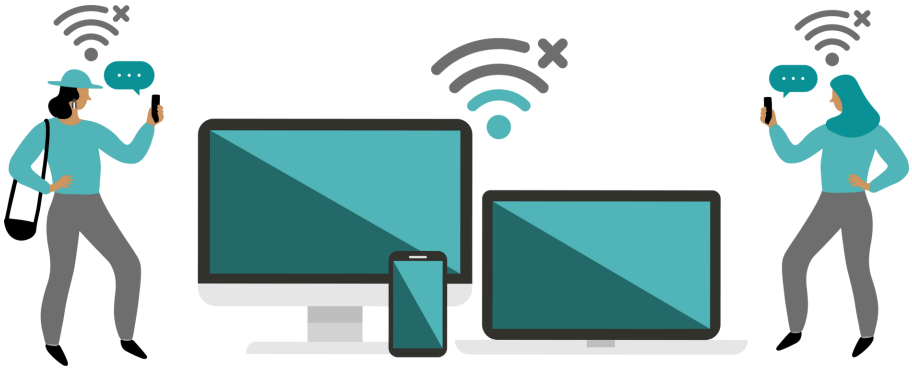
Digital inclusion efforts are needed to address all the barriers to digital equity. Barriers to digital equity are multifaceted and interconnected. Broadband for community members may be unavailable, unreliable, or unaffordable. Access to devices is limited by rapidly evolving and expensive technology, and limited technical support in many areas. And quite universally, limited digital skills, concerns of privacy and safety, and a lack of accessible technology onboarding prevent many community members who have access to devices and broadband services from using them fully. Beyond the basic barriers to digital equity, there are also systemic barriers.

Digital redlining is a practice of discrimination by internet service providers through any of the following:

- deployment
- maintenance
- upgrade of infrastructure
- delivery of services.[2]

Digital redlining has disparate impacts on people in certain areas of cities or regions, most frequently on the basis of income, race, and ethnicity.

In late 2023, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to adopt rules regarding protections from digital discrimination for communities, and to develop pathways and methods for fielding complaints and holding corporations accountable. **Discrimination of access** is defined by the FCC as, "policies or practices, not justified by genuine issues of technical or economic feasibility, that differentially impact consumers' access to broadband internet access service based on their income level, race, ethnicity, color, religion or national origin, or are intended to have such differential impact."[3] You can learn more about digital discrimination in NDIA's blog post.



(2) "Definitions."National Digital Inclusion Alliance. Accessed July 10, 2024. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/.
(3) Prevention and Elimination of Digital Discrimination, 89 FR 4128, 4128 (03/22/2024)\

Defining the Internet

While digital inclusion is focused on the people-to-people aspect of technology usage and access, it does help to have some grounding and understanding of what the internet is. There are many different words used to describe the internet and connectivity, and it can sometimes feel overwhelming. The great news is that many of our colleagues in the field were once in your shoes, and have developed information for us. Having an understanding of what broadband actually is, and an idea of what a "good" internet speed is according to the FCC, supports our day-to-day digital inclusion work.

In March of 2024, the FCC updated their decision on what internet speeds are required for the internet to be considered broadband: 100 megabits per second (mbps) download and 20 mbps upload.[4] Previously, the last definition of broadband was decided in 2015, with a speed of 25mbps download and 3 mbps upload, which is a noticeable difference from the contemporary ruling. "Broadband" is the common term for the transmission of wide bandwidth data over a high-speed internet connection.

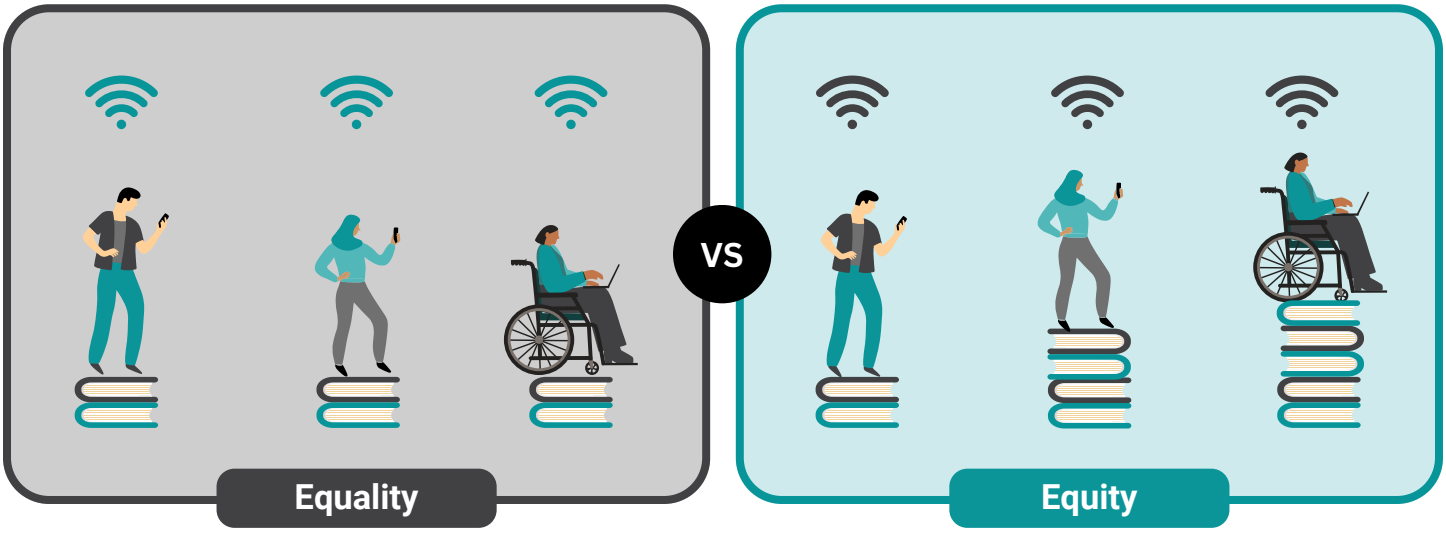
A series of fact sheets exploring and explaining topics such as **What is Broadband?** and **Expanding Device Access for Broadband** may help to demystify some of the more technical aspects of the work that supports digital equity.[5] These were developed by the **Institute for Local Self-Reliance,** with support from AARP, and NDIA. **Everything You Wanted to Know About Broadband (But Were Afraid to Ask),** by **the Benton Foundation,** explains broadband as a concept, along with some of the particulars of rural broadband. [6]

(4) Inquiry Concerning the Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capability to All Americans in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion, GN Docket No. 22-270, 2024 Section 706 Report (March 14, 2024)

(5) "Exploring Digital Equity Fact Sheets." 2022. Institute for Local Self-Reliance. AARP, ISLR. April 26, 2022. https://ilsr.org/exploring-digital-equity-fact-sheets/.

(6) Christopher Ali, 2020. "Everything You Wanted to Know About Broadband (but Were Afraid to Ask)." Benton Foundation. August 31, 2020. https://www.benton.org/blog/everything-you-wanted-know-about-broadband-were-afraid-ask.

Digital Equity as Community Equity and Power



Why are we working for digital equity? Because digital *equality* will not serve our communities. You could provide the same digital inclusion programming to every community, and the impact would not be the same because, as the illustration above shows – not everyone starts at the same place. You need to meet people where they are and get them the resources they specifically need. When you deploy community digital inclusion programs, you aim to have an equitable impact in your community, meeting the needs of the individual.

Much of digital inclusion work has stemmed from grassroots community organizing for equity on a larger and more comprehensive scale. While digital equity is an important building block for racial,[7] disability,[8] and health equity,[9] as well as Indigenous digital sovereignty,[10] it would not exist without the previous and concurrent work done by so many fighting for equity in their own communities. For example, the **Detroit Community Tech Project,** based their work on the principles of the **Detroit Digital Justice Coalition,** a place-based coalition working for human rights, environmental justice, community digital stewardship, and data justice.

(7) Kevin Taglang, 2023. "Race, Ethnicity, and Digital Equity." Benton Foundation. September 7, 2023. https://www.benton.org/blog/race-ethnicity-and-digital-equity.

(8) "Digital Inclusion for People with Disabilities | Disability Digital Divide." Community Tech Network. July 14, 2023, https://communitytechnetwork.org/blog/digital-inclusion-for-people-with-disabilities-bridging-the-accessibility-gap/.

(9) Cynthia J Sieck, Amy Sheon, Jessica S. Ancker, Jill Castek, Bill Callahan, and Angela Siefer. 2021. "Digital Inclusion as a Social Determinant of Health." NPJ Digital Medicine 4 (1). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41746-021-00413-8.

(10) Davida Delmar, 2023. "Indigenous Digital Sovereignty: From the Digital Divide to Digital Equity." NDIA Blog. July 19, 2023. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2023/07/19/indigenous-digital-sovereignty/.

Grassroots organizing for change is not just limited to local change and building local power. Often the work we do in our communities has a lasting national impact. Consider the work of Students Organizing a Multicultural and Open Society (SOMOS), a student organization founded at Baltimore City College (a public high school) in 2014 to advocate for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students and address systemic injustice in schools. They ended up going right to the source by calling out the issues with Comcast internet service in Baltimore City, including low speeds and subpar service to those using the discounted service, Internet Essentials. The pressure the students of SOMOS applied led directly to Comcast doubling internet speeds for the Internet Essentials program. [11]

Digital equity is also driven by a sense of agency and community power, as well as by grassroots organizing and equity movements. We have seen this demonstrated by the work of **Digital Equity Los Angeles** and their work with the **California Community Foundation Digital Equity Initiative** to address digital redlining impacting Black and Brown communities in Los Angeles County. Coalition members engaged in power mapping [12] to identify stakeholders. They worked to co-design digital equity plans in partnership with local organizations, and directly addressed the issues of slower, inequitable internet services.[13]

Elements of community empowerment can also be found within disability digital inclusion programs leveraging technology in an equitable and accessible way to create and maintain digital and in-person accessibility for disabled community members. TDI for Access, an advocacy organization by and for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, began engaging in additional digital inclusion advocacy work because their community members' accessible telecom devices were not able to access home internet, restricting them from their rights of communication.

Native nations can implement digital inclusion policies as an act of self-determination, to bolster their ability to govern, preserve culture, and control their own economies, with modern technology and digital tools. **Indigenous Digital Sovereignty**,[14] a concept defined by **Dr. Traci Morris Ph.D.,** of the American Indian Policy Institute, helps to further understand that Native nations are capable of building, regulating, and maintaining their own networks and data.

(11) Phil Davis, 2021. "Comcast, Under Pressure from Politicians and Advocates, Raises Speeds of Internet Essentials Service." Baltimore Sun. February 2, 2021. https://www.baltimoresun.com/2021/02/02/comcast-under-pressure-from-politicians-and-advocates-raises-speeds-of-internet-essentials-service/.

(12) "Power Mapping and Analysis." 2019. The Commons. February 20, 2019. https://commonslibrary.org/guide-power-mapping-and-analysis/.

(13) "Digital Equity Slower And More Expensive Sounding The Alarm: Disparities In Advertised Pricing For Fast, Reliable Broadband Digital Equity." 2022. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6165cb6ecbf6d70401a212f6/t/6345ca9c147af0682276fb3d/1665518251184/Broadband+Pricing+Disparities+Report+-+Oct+2022.pdf.

(14) Traci Morris, 2023. "Indigenous Digital Sovereignty Defined | American Indian Policy Institute." July 14, 2023. https://aipi.asu.edu/blog/2023/07/indigenous-digital-sovereignty-defined.

INDIGENOUS DIGITAL INCLUSION WORKING GROUP

Using the existing principles of digital equity to include diverse experiences, can be critical to framing the work that you do.

NDIA's Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group, coordinated in partnership with AMERIND Critical Infrastructure, developed their own vision and mission for the group in an effort to define their goals. They used the definitions of digital equity and digital inclusion as a framework to craft the vision and mission, to help relate these terms into an Indigenous context.

Vision of Indigenous Digital Equity:

Indigenous communities have affordable, robust broadband services, access to appropriate devices, trusted training, and support to meet their educational, health, economic, cultural, and social needs while advancing the uses and impacts of technology in society in this digital age.

Mission (Indigenous Digital Inclusion):

To bridge the digital divide for Indigenous communities through connecting nations and organizations to address challenges, barriers, and best practices, with the overall goal of improving policy and internal governance capacities, and strengthen the political, economic, and community development foundation. Native nations will leverage the closure of the digital divide to strengthen self-determination and assert digital sovereignty.[15]

Approaching Digital Equity with an Asset Framing Mindset

When developing and implementing a digital inclusion program, we recommend a process that focuses on and uplifts the goals, aspirations, and existing resources in communities, an approach known as "asset framing". Asset framing serves as an important counterbalance to more common deficit-based approaches to needs assessment and program development, which tend to (often unintentionally) reduce individuals and communities to sets of deficiencies and challenges in need of fixing. Asset framing helps us as digital inclusion practitioners engage more deeply with communities, develop more holistic programs, and focus on addressing the underlying systemic causes of digital inequity rather than simply treating the symptoms.

(15) Derived from NDIA's Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group 2024

Whereas a traditional needs assessment might characterize a household as unserved by broadband internet and lacking a device or digital skills, an asset framing approach is more concerned with how and why members of that household may want to use the internet, what access to technology and support would allow them to achieve, and what resources exist in the community to help them reach their goals. Asset framing helps us focus our work on people, and it properly positions barriers to digital equity, both acute and structural, as conditions experienced by community members, not characteristics that define them.

Asset framing is closely connected to the concepts of asset-based community development. To learn more about this work, and why this framing is essential to empowering community members, and for developing an equitable society, check out the Asset-Based Community Development Institute (ABCD) at DePaul University.

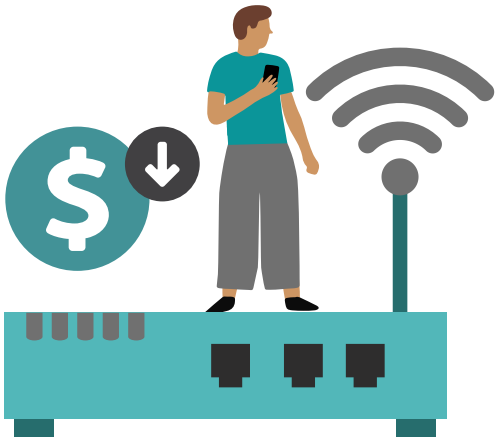
Beyond reinforcing the humanity of digital inclusion work, an asset-based approach presents several strategic advantages to help your programs succeed. As an inherently participatory process, an asset-based approach is better at fostering collaborative solutions, buy-in, and ownership among community partners than top-down and externally generated strategies (even those considered to be best practices). Asset-based approaches seek to leverage and build-up existing resources and capacity in the community, which can lead to more sustainable programs than those that must be created. A focus on existing community assets will help you gain a better understanding of the local digital inclusion ecosystem and identify new partners and resources - the Asset Mapping section further in this manual will explore this in more detail.

Understanding Areas of Focus for a Digital Inclusion Program

The need for digital inclusion programming is great. However, your organization likely has limited capacity, expertise, and financial resources. In light of this, consider what area of digital inclusion support your organization can do best, and where you can build partnerships to fill out the holistic needs of your community. Digital inclusion programs focus on one or more of the following services: low-cost and affordable internet connectivity, appropriate and affordable devices, digital skills training, and/or technical support.

Below are brief overviews on each of the digital inclusion focus areas to guide your understanding as you read the manual. In the chapter, **Building Your Digital Inclusion Program,** you can find more information, including detailed examples and program models.

Low-Cost and Affordable Internet Connectivity



Digital inclusion programs focused on access to low-cost and affordable internet connectivity all share the common goal of ensuring community members have consistent, private, daily, high-speed internet access. These programs may be as technical as community-owned internet service providers directly providing internet connectivity or providing access to internet in community spaces or buildings, or as less technical as providing guidance, education, and support to community members regarding available low-cost internet plans.

HONOR ROLL OF LOW-COST INTERNET PLANS

This support may include locating and explaining available low-cost internet plans and assisting community members to sign up for broadband subsidies. One tool central to these programs is the Honor Roll of Low-Cost Internet Plans, a resource that identifies and details discount broadband offerings from internet service providers. Additionally, the FCC recently developed a broadband consumer labels requiring internet service providers share clear and honest information on cost, speeds, introductory offers, and more.[16]

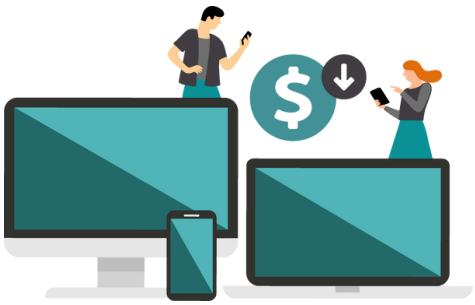
(16) Valeria C. Jauregui, 2023. "Broadband Consumer Labels Are Here!" National Digital Inclusion Alliance. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2023/11/07/broadband-consumer-labels-are-here/.

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was a federal broadband subsidy program that offered discounts on home internet to millions of American households. Digital inclusion programs across the country were instrumental in ensuring community members were aware of, and able to access this benefit. Other more local benefits, such as the **Maryland Broadband Benefit** and the **ACP Bridge program of Albemarle County, VA**, offered additional subsidies to their residents along with the federal program.

While ACP and the accompanying local subsidy programs have concluded due to an exhaustion of funding, digital inclusion program staff and recipients, coordinated by NDIA and other coalitions and conveners, will keep fighting for the program to be refunded.

Learn more about the history of the Affordable Connectivity Program, any forthcoming federal broadband subsidies, and available resources to transition community members to other low-cost internet offers on NDIA's Affordable Connectivity Program Transition webpage.

Appropriate and Affordable Devices



This area of digital inclusion focuses on pairing community members with quality devices that best serve their needs. Ideally, digital inclusion programs provide assistance to community members by providing free or low-cost devices, maintenance, and technical support.

Ownership-based models include "learn to earn" programs, incentivizing digital skills acquisition with a device following completion of an educational program, such as digital skills training classes. Another model is to loan a device, which may be available for use in a specific location, such as a computer lab or laptop cart in a community space.

Digital inclusion programs focusing on devices include computer refurbishment and recycling programs. Computer refurbishing programs strengthen local and regional digital inclusion ecosystems. They can be a source of quality low-cost computers for the community and a valuable partner to other digital inclusion programs. They are also a physical location for the community to learn about device hardware and for potential champions to be motivated to support digital equity. For more on sustainable device ecosystems, see what **Digitunity** has to share.[17]

(17) Lindsay Ouellette, 2022 . "Digitunity Releases Methodology for Sustainable Device Ecosystems." Digitunity, November 28, 2022. https://digitunity.org/community-forums/sustainable-device-ecosystems/.

Digital Skills Training

The ongoing acquisition of digital skills empower all people to use their devices and connectivity effectively. Digital skills are an ever-expanding area of knowledge for everyone, as changes and advancements in technology continue to create new opportunities and new challenges.

When considering the digital skills content of a program, do not assume the proficiency level of your community based on demographics. Be prepared to provide considerable beginner instruction or support for advanced tasks to all audiences regardless of demographics.

Digital skills programs may include classes for community members, one-on-one support such as digital navigation, a community support helpline, drop in technology support, and more.

As described in the **American Library Association (ALA)** digital literacy definition, a person with **digital skills**:

- Possesses the variety of skills – technical and cognitive – required to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information in a wide variety of formats;
- Can use diverse technologies appropriately and effectively to retrieve information, interpret results, and judge the quality of that information;
- Understands the relationship between technology, life-long learning, personal privacy, and stewardship of information;
- Uses these skills and the appropriate technology to communicate and collaborate with peers, colleagues, family, and on occasion, the general public; and
- Uses these skills to actively participate in civic society and contribute to a vibrant, informed, and engaged community. [18]

UNESCO defines **digital skills** as "a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information. They enable people to create and share digital content, communicate and collaborate, and solve problems for effective and creative self-fulfillment in life, learning, work, and social activities at large." [19]

(18) American Library Association Office of Information Technology Policy (OITP) and Digital Literacy Task Force. 2011. "What Is Digital Literacy?" http://hdl.handle.net/11213/16260.

(19) "Digital skills critical for jobs and social inclusion." 2018. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/digital-skills-critical-jobs-and-social-inclusion.

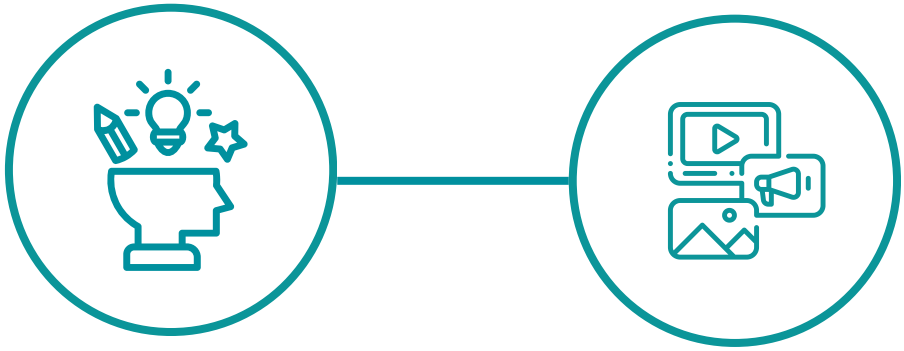
Technical Support

Technical support is what enables community members to connect to the internet, use devices, and continue learning new and expansive digital skills. This may include basic troubleshooting support for problems, community helplines or helpdesks, or instruction in device maintenance and management. Supporting the technical needs of community members includes orienting them to new devices, including powering on, set-up, settings, device customization and relevant applications.

Additionally, technical support can include device repair and refurbishment programs, and more.

What about applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration?

While these are critical components of digital inclusion, the applications, online content, and resources are actually the resources you will leverage to plan, prepare, implement, and evaluate your digital inclusion program. Throughout this manual, you will find a wide range of these necessary technical programs and applications that facilitate our work, but also may stand on their own.



Researching, Learning, and Listening: Understanding Your Community's Digital Inclusion Assets, Needs, and Goals

Documenting community assets and needs, through initial exploratory research, is a critical step for designing a digital inclusion program. Ongoing research into the state of digital inclusion work and promising practices, as well as regular evaluation of program performance and impact, will also contribute to your program's success.

Your initial and ongoing research will likely involve working with a combination of research methods that produce both quantitative and qualitative data. In addition to collecting new data, you should also review existing data, using the tools listed in this section. You may find that data about certain key topics, like digital skills, may be scarce or non-existent. Similarly, there may be data gaps for some geographies such as small towns, rural areas, and Tribal communities. Ultimately, you'll want to find out what is already known about digital inclusion in a given community and work creatively to learn about important unknowns.

While your initial research is a major step of program planning, your engagement with research and data shouldn't end there. Measuring your program's performance and evaluating impact will be necessary to make sure your work is effective and sustainable. For more details, take a look at the evaluation section of this manual.

Research: Collecting Data

Understanding your community through data and stories has never been more important. Most grant applications, program proposals, and partnerships expect that you understand your digital equity ecosystem and have details on digital access and use in your community, including data on connectivity, device ownership, and who could benefit from digital skills training.

The NDIA Data & Research webpage provides links to resources and basic guidance for many of the most trusted digital inclusion data sources and recommended tools. This page is regularly updated to reflect new information and data resources. Later in this section, you will find a few examples of the commonly used digital inclusion data sources.

Urban Institute published the **Do No Harm Guide: Crafting Equitable Data Narratives**[20] to help guide the work of those collecting data in all types of communities. Specifically, chapters provide guidance on minimizing harm when gathering data, recommendations on language, and other guidance to ensure communities are treated with dignity and empowered through research and data, rather than studied.

(20) Jonathan Schwabish, Alice Feng, and Wesley Jenkins. 2024. "Do No Harm Guide: Crafting Equitable Data Narratives." https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/Do_No_Harm_Guide_Crafting_Equitable_Data_Narratives.pdf.

Regardless of the data collection methods used, disclosure and transparency are critical anytime you are conducting human subject research. Engaging in responsible data collection from or about other people requires, at a minimum, informing them what information is being collected and how it will be used, and taking appropriate steps to protect their identities and sensitive information. Whenever possible, find an experienced research partner to provide guidance on sound and ethical research practices.

Researchers use the terms **quantitative** and **qualitative** to refer to different types of data.

Quantitative data are numbers, which means we can analyze and summarize them with descriptive statistics, like average, median, minimum, or maximum values.

Qualitative data are texts and talk. Analyzing them often involves careful, repeated reading, noting patterns and themes of interest, or identifying the presence or absence of certain words or terms.

Data collection methods may generate one or both kinds of data. For example, a survey form might collect **quantitative data** from respondents from a question about how much they pay for a monthly broadband subscription and **qualitative data** from an open-ended question about how they shopped for and selected their current internet service plan.

Data Tools for Your Region

American Community Survey (ACS)[21]

The American Community Survey offers data collected annually by the US Census covering a wide array of demographic, housing, and economic topics. In this survey, US households are asked about their device ownership and home internet. It is important to note that the data indicated is by household, not by individual.

(21) "American Community Survey (ACS)." Census.gov. US Census Bureau. Accessed July 20, 2024, https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs.

FCC National Broadband Map[22]

This is the definitive source of broadband access data for the US and Territories. It allows users to explore internet service availability at the individual address level. Details include which internet service providers offer services, the types of technology, and advertised speeds, among other information. Addresses can be added to the map, and internet service provider claims of service area can be contested via the mapping software to ensure the map is accurate and up to date.

Native Community Data Profiles[23]

Using data from a number of sources, including the American Community Survey, this tool provides data and information on specific Native communities by geography, including connectivity and device ownership.

Current Population Survey (CPS): Computer and Internet Use Supplement[24]

Sometimes called the "NTIA Computer Use Survey," this survey provides details on internet access, devices, and information technology usage and behaviors. This data is incredibly useful when considering all four areas of digital inclusion for a program, and can help to inform programs on digital skills needs. The tool is less user-friendly and may require a data-savvy community partner or librarian to help navigate.

It is created and maintained by a partnership between the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the US Census Bureau.

Asset Mapping

Asset mapping for digital inclusion program planning is an essential step for collecting data, building connections, and understanding your digital inclusion ecosystem. Asset mapping is a process of identifying the resources already present in an area (state, region, or community) that currently do or potentially could work to advance digital equity goals. This type of activity does not require extensive knowledge of mapping software, or even creating a data visualization of the data collected.

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(22) "FCC National Broadband Map." 2022. Federal Communications Commission. https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov/.
"Native Community Data Profiles | Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Accessed December 20, 2023,
(23) https://www.minneapolisfed.org/indiancountry/resources/native-community-data-profiles.
(24) "Computer and Internet Use." Census.gov. US Census Bureau. Accessed July 10, 2024, https://www.census.gov/data/datasets/time-series/demo/cps/cps-supp_cps-repwgt/cps-computer.html.

Digital inclusion asset mapping can uncover a diverse network of organizations, programs, spaces, and other resources that can be compiled into an asset inventory. Developing a digital inclusion asset inventory of your community will provide you with a database of organizations and their services, and help you to identify where there are gaps in services and opportunities for collaboration.

Visit **NDIA's asset mapping webpage** to learn more about the value of asset mapping, find tips to get started, see examples of public-facing asset inventories produced from asset mapping efforts, and to access NDIA's asset mapping templates.

Getting Started With Asset Mapping

- **Start simple.** Asset mapping begins with creating an informal list of organizations already engaged in digital inclusion work in the community. Begin with the seemingly obvious assets and build from there.
- **Standardize the format.** Formalize your asset mapping by selecting a software, standardized data fields, and data gathering processes.
- **Decide what data you need.** Define which information must be collected about all assets and which information is optional.
- **Enlist help.** Identify partners who can help collect asset data and consider creating a survey to collect data from a wider range of assets.
- **Consider end products.** How you wish to use the results of your asset mapping may influence how you organize and manage your asset mapping data. For example, creating an online map will require detailed location data, while a searchable directory may require keywords or categories of services.

Asset mapping and research can also lead you to locate under-utilized technology and resources in your digital inclusion ecosystem. When meeting with and learning about other digital inclusion work in your community, you will often discover how you can collaborate.

The **Baltimore County Department of Aging** in **Baltimore County**, Maryland, discovered under-utilized technology resources within their own county government during their asset-mapping and partnership building phase. They sourced iPads for technology classes from the health department, and discovered an under-used mobile computer lab waiting for users with their workforce development team.

Through these technical and partnership-based resources, they could begin classes and community visits with older adults without purchasing any new technology.

Gathering Qualitative Data

Qualitative data collection can take many different forms, such as conducting interviews, focus groups, or observations of daily life, and collecting documents and open-ended responses in survey research.

One key advantage of conducting qualitative research is the opportunity to learn from lived experience experts (in other words, community members experiencing the effects of digital inequities).

Qualitative research can shed light on questions about how and why people struggle to access affordable broadband, devices, and support for using technology to achieve their goals, and what kinds of support would be most useful for them and for pursuing digital equity at the community level. Qualitative research can add critical context for interpreting quantitative findings. When gathering qualitative data, incorporating community perspectives is important. Lived experience experts should be compensated for their time and expertise, the same as one would pay any other researcher or expert.

Make sure you are also saving and safely storing the information you have gathered. If you collected personal information, such as phone numbers, names, email addresses, or residential addresses for follow-up with community members, ensure these details are stored in a safe and secure manner, and that you will have access to these details again, so you can continue to work with your community and provide updates on your work.

You can learn of unserved pockets of neighborhoods, specific technical and consumer concerns, and support needs by engaging in conversations with community members and leaders who have their ears to the ground.

Research: Analyzing Data

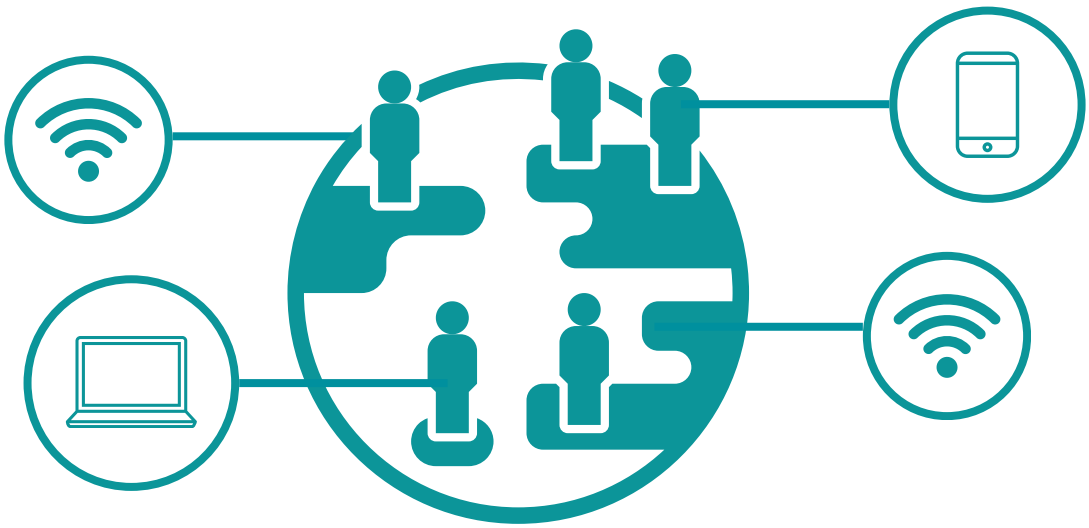
Collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data, both quantitative and qualitative, is critical to guiding your digital inclusion work, bringing together what you've learned, and acting on it.

Questions that might guide your analyses include:

- What kinds of trends do I see in the data? Are there average or median values for quantitative data that describe a situation in general? Are there frequently occurring or repeated responses or excerpts in qualitative data that indicate a trend, common experience, or concern?

For example, does data show that certain communities (geographic, demographic, or other kinds of groups) have more households that rely on cellular data subscription(s) and mobile devices to use the internet? This kind of finding could indicate where a program might support their access to more reliable home internet and to other kinds of devices.

NDIA and **Dr. John Horrigan, PhD.** developed a **digital equity survey template** for the **State Digital Equity Plan Toolkit,** to help guide state entities in their data collection. This template provides recommendations on sample size, survey mode, and sample frameworks, and other important elements of a community survey. The template includes draft questions that collect demographic, home internet, device ownership, and digital skills details that can be customized or specified to your unique community.



- Are there outliers in the data that you should pay attention to? Are there values (quantitative) or excerpts (qualitative) that don't follow trends and deserve a closer look?

  For example, do a handful of community members report knowing where to obtain ongoing technology support or to learn new digital skills? This kind of finding could indicate a need to better promote existing programs and/or to support this handful of community members in becoming trusted digital navigators in the community.

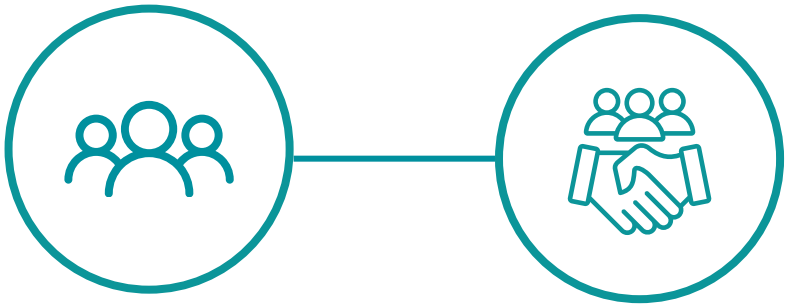
- Are there trends in one kind of data that have a deeper explanation in other kinds of data gathered?

  For example, survey responses might show respondents saying they don't have a home broadband subscription because they are not interested in internet use, while talking with them might reveal more specific reasons that make them uninterested, like a lack of stable housing or carrying past due debt to an internet service provider. This kind of finding could indicate that trying to spread the word about the benefits of a home broadband subscription alone is not likely to change the situation without addressing specific barriers.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is much more than a step in the planning process, or a box to be checked in the program checklist (available at the end of the manual). While marketing and outreach are often combined with community engagement, they are in fact, separate subject areas. **As a general rule, if you are the only one talking, it is not community engagement.** When program providers prioritize listening and multi-voice conversations, it is community engagement.

Community engagement as an ongoing area of focus within your program, beginning at the early stages of planning, and continuing throughout the full course of your program strengthens your impact. This is particularly true if it is done with intentionality, purpose, and forethought.



The Spectrum of Community Engagement, as presented by the **City of Long Beach** in their **Digital Inclusion Roadmap**, demonstrates the goals of public participation, and the promises made to the public during these activities. Consider the types of intentional community engagement actions that may fall within each area of the spectrum. [25]

This spectrum is not a timeline, nor a set of actions to be taken, but a scaling of engagement to guide the intention and implication of these actions.

Spectrum of Community Engagement

	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balance and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions	To work directly with public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decisions including the development of alternatives and identification of the preferred solutions.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input informed and influenced decisions.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will co-create and co-produce solutions with you. You will be a true partner in making and implementing decisions for your community. Your advice and recommendations will be incorporated.	We will support your decisions and work to implement solutions that you decide

Source: https://www.longbeach.gov/digitalinclusion/strategy-and-planning/digital-inclusion-roadmap/

(25) "Digital Inclusion Roadmap." www.longbeach.gov. Accessed March 15, 2022. https://www.longbeach.gov/ti/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-roadmap/.

Inform - When informing the community of new or changing digital inclusion programs, try to do so in the form of a dialogue, making space to listen as much as talk. Always make space for input, questions, and concerns during community information sessions. Trust is built when community members feel they will be informed of activities in their community.

Consult - We consult our community because they are the experts on their own digital inclusion experiences – you should be prepared to listen. Interviews and surveys may help to collect critical information from the community, but are also a chance to ask directly how best to continue to engage the community in your work.

Involve - When we involve our community, we begin to seek feedback on proposed plans and details. Listening sessions, feedback forms, specific surveys, and reaction opportunities are great ways to connect with community members. When offering community listening sessions for feedback and community requests, Jess Ross of **Austin Free Net** says, "We don't talk, we don't preach, we don't sell anything."

Collaborate - Ideally, by the time we are engaging with community members to co-create our program, they should already be aware of and familiar with the forthcoming program. It is hard to show up with ideas, requests, and inspiration if you don't know what the program is all about.

Empower - In the ultimate act of trust in our community, we can empower community members to have the final, decisive say in the actions, activities, and programs that serve and impact their community.

When considering key aspects of community engagement, work to find leaders trusted by their community to advise you on community needs and desires, and how to invite community members further to participate in your planning and development. The following recommendations have been distilled from feedback from digital inclusion practitioners in the NDIA community:

- Build trust through consistent communication and follow-through.
- Disclose what information you are collecting, how it will be stored, and how that information will be used.
- Share out findings from community surveys or feedback sessions for transparency and community awareness.
- Utilize community relationships to ensure you have the capacity to speak with all members of the community. Identify where translators and interpreters can be found, including for speakers of American Sign Language.

The Seattle Technology Access and Adoption Study has been conducted every four to five years since 2000 by the City of Seattle to better understand levels of digital equity and barriers. The data on internet access, affordability and use, devices, digital skills, civic participation, training needs, and safety and security concerns helps guide city and community programs. It provides in depth local data beyond data in the Census and American Community Surveys. Survey and focus groups are in multiple languages. Community members receive pre-survey communications from the city that include how the results will be used, information on the survey incentive, languages available, and options for taking the survey.

The community research is developed and conducted with assistance from the City's Community Technology Advisory Board and community partners, which has included the housing authority, public schools, Inclusive Data and Tribal Technology Training (T3). The City's website has a wide set of resources, including the summary report, detailed survey and focus group reports, Tableau data explorer, open data set, survey questionnaire in multiple languages, focus group facilitators guide and additional materials.[26]

In the summer of 2023, in addition to launching a statewide digital equity survey in 17 languages, **Colorado's Digital Equity Team** contracted with community-based organizations to host listening sessions for the communities they serve. By reimbursing organizations for listening sessions, the Digital Equity Team was able to create a plan that met the needs of historically marginalized communities across Colorado. Again, during the public comment period for **Colorado's Digital Access Plan** draft, the team had summaries of the plan's six strategies translated into nine languages, and also hosted listening sessions. The listening sessions provided comments from 337 Coloradans in seven languages, and the Digital Equity Team provided responses to organizations to share with participants about how their feedback informed edits to the plan. By working closely with community-based organizations in this way, Colorado's Digital Equity Team expanded its stakeholder base to include voices that had not been heard previously. Continued conversations will guide implementation of Colorado's plan, and the programs that are created in the future.

- **Melanie Colletti,** Digital Equity Manager, The Office of the Future of Work, Colorado Department of Labor and Employment

(26) "Technology Access and Adoption Study - Tech | Seattle.gov." Seattle Office of Information Technology. Accessed July 10, 2024. https://www.seattle.gov/tech/reports-and-data/technology-access-and-adoption-study.

Meeting Your Greater Digital Inclusion Community

Learning about and building connections with your greater digital inclusion community is critical to improving your research, community relationships, and all-round program planning.

When exploring your greater digital inclusion community, look for formal or informal digital inclusion coalitions or organizations in your region, including state or regional coalitions of digital inclusion advocates and practitioners. In addition to these community-led initiatives, there may be local, regional, or state offices and staff tasked with the job of providing and supporting digital inclusion work in their jurisdictions. As you develop your list of partners, look within workforce development, education, technology, social services, or broadband divisions of any level of government to find resources and people dedicated to digital inclusion.

The **NDIA affiliates database** includes the information of over 1,800 affiliates involved in digital inclusion worldwide. Many of these organizations, offices, and coalitions have developed their own maps and databases of digital inclusion-related assets and information that will aid your research and planning.

When developing relationships, keep track of the names, roles, and organizations you meet with, and what relevant resources they have to offer. This information will be useful as you maintain, adapt, and promote your digital inclusion program.

Digital inclusion work may be happening in unexpected places in your community, such as food banks, churches, Scout troops, refugee centers, and more. When exploring and building connections, try changing up the vocabulary you use, such as asking if there are “technology programs” or “tech tutors” around. Most programs have grown organically and may use their own preferred terms for their work, based on what resonates in their community.

Digital inclusion coalitions provide a unique service developing their communities’ digital inclusion ecosystems. Coalitions advance digital equity by providing collective empowerment, alignment, coordination, and amplification of member organizations’ digital inclusion efforts.

If your community has an existing local digital inclusion coalition, learning from the members of that coalition when developing your program will be beneficial to everyone involved. You can rely on the groundwork laid by your coalition colleagues and also help to contribute research, community feedback, and other details of your preparation and planning, as well as ask trusted community organizations and partners for assistance in providing community messaging, outreach, and engagement.

Informal coalition building is how many coalitions began: just a few colleagues in a digital inclusion meeting, introducing each other to new resources, mentors, and practitioners. If your community does not have a formal coalition, consider getting a few community partners together for coffee to talk about how you can support one another.

NDIA's Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook is a helpful resource for coalitions at all stages of development, and for those interested in exploring the potential for developing a coalition but need help getting started.[27] Additionally, NDIA's Fall 2023 Digital Inclusion Coalition Leadership Brief provides additional context and guidance as we have seen coalitions ebb and flow over the years.[28]

The Digital Inclusion Alliance of San Antonio, Texas, also known as DIASA, is an influential local digital inclusion coalition supporting the digital inclusion ecosystem of their greater metropolitan area. Their collaborative and community-based structure helped them bring together a wide range of community organizations and programs under a central steering committee. Their impact on their region has included device distribution, supporting digital skills classes and programs, and successfully advocating for improved fiber infrastructure in their region.

Thrive Regional Partnership is a nonprofit organization that inspires responsible growth through conversation, connection, and collaboration across the tri-state, 16-county greater Chattanooga region. Thrive's launch of the Regional Broadband Alliance in 2020 created a collaborative, regional digital ecosystem and network of relationships to address challenges related to internet connectivity and digital equity across sectors and state lines. The Alliance provides a regional framework for piloting research, attracting funding opportunities, and developing new methods that expand coverage and tackle affordability challenges.

(27) New Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook." 2022. National Digital Inclusion Alliance.https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2022/02/24/ndia-publishes-new-digital-inclusion-coalition-guidebook/.

(28) National Digital Inclusion Alliance. 2023. "Digital Inclusion Coalition Leadership Brief - Fall 2013 ." 2023. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/download/23712/?tmstv=1702482296.

The Importance of Community

Two years ago, I didn't know anything about digital equity. I didn't know anything about Lifeline, device refurbishment, or digital skills. And I didn't know anyone else was working on this. Since I came across NDIA, and especially the Digital Navigator Working Group, I have discovered that there's a sea of people working on these same issues, enough to fill a conference center and more, and it has helped me to be confident as I look in my community for partners. So many people in our area have been doing this work all by their lonesome, and now I get to work with them.

- **Jason Inofuentes,** Program Manager, Broadband Accessibility & Affordability Office, Albemarle County, Virginia

Understanding Your Program's Place in the Digital Inclusion Ecosystem

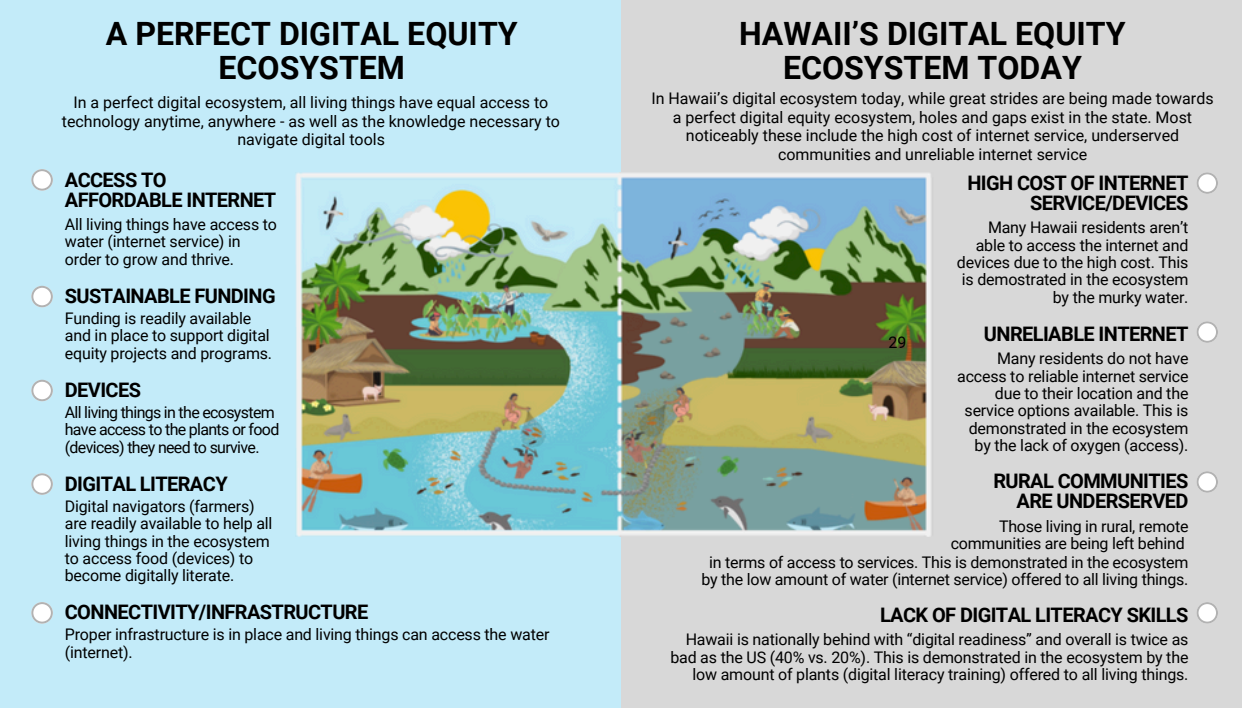
Once you have made the acquaintance of your local digital inclusion community, you can begin to understand where your future program will fit into the digital inclusion ecosystem.

If you are already aware of what area of digital inclusion you plan to provide services for (low-cost internet, appropriate devices, digital skills, technical support), you can develop relationships with programs similarly focused on identifying any gaps and how you can best support one another. Luckily, no one of us is expected to hold all the answers, but by working together, we can begin to see the big picture of digital equity come together.

Digital inclusion is a field of cooperation, community, and collaboration, not competition.

If you are unsure which areas you will be supporting, take time to engage with the digital inclusion ecosystem to learn what niche a new program may be able to occupy. There is always space for a new digital inclusion program, but in some communities, it may take a little more time and energy to determine just how that program can fit into the existing landscape.

When working to visualize a perfect world of digital equity, the **Hawaii Broadband and Digital Equity Office** developed their **Digital Equity Ecosystem Map**, comparing the delicate and unique ecosystem of Hawaii's nature to the complex and cooperative nature of a digital equity ecosystem. [29]



Building Strategic Alliances

Regardless of how your program was initially funded, a time is very likely to come when you will need funding and other support to keep the program growing and evolving to meet the needs of your community members. Even programs operating within the structures of large, stable anchor institutions, like libraries and community colleges, eventually find it necessary to raise outside money and develop external partnerships. Small nonprofit programs usually face this need from the beginning. Partnership and collaboration with other organizations that care about digital inclusion should be in the DNA of community programs.

(29) "Digital Equity Ecosystem Map." Hawaii Broadband & Digital Equity Office. 2021 https://broadband.hawaii.gov/deemap/.

A great time to build connections to potential partners, funders, and other digital inclusion programs is before your program is in motion. The next best time is now.

Community Partners

In addition to connecting with your local digital inclusion ecosystem through relationship building and mutual support, consider ways to more formally build bridges between organizations. This may look like working collaboratively to develop programs together, providing your program offerings to their participants, or jointly applying for funding.

Consider inviting your community partners to join a program advisory committee, engage in evaluation, or even join your organization's board of directors to help formalize your commitment to helping one another succeed. By forming strategic alliances with community partners, you are able to widen your network and social capital, showcase your work and impact with more people, and benefit from diverse perspectives, skills and experience. Further, your commitment to partner with others in the community, including funders, demonstrates that you're operating in a cooperative and transparent manner, and helps create opportunities for substantive program collaboration.

Putting It All Together

Now that you have thoroughly listened to and learned about your community, you may need to revisit your initial ideas about what your digital inclusion program would look like if community data and feedback do not support your ideas for your original plans.

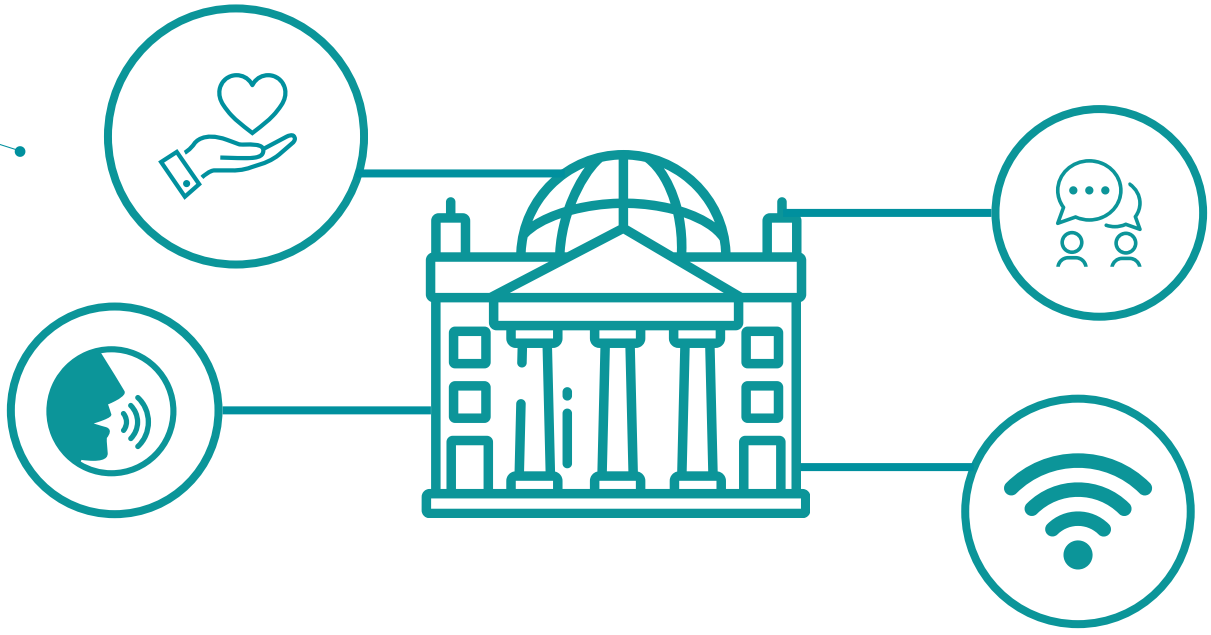
As data-driven and community-responsive digital inclusion practitioners, it is our duty and responsibility to create, adapt, and maintain programs that meet and serve the needs and desires of our communities. As tempting as it may seem to use new digital inclusion programs as sandboxes to test and explore new ideas, make sure these creative and innovative digital inclusion solutions are the appropriate response to community needs and requests. You must consider the collective impact your programs and work will have on the community, and ensure that the outcome is beneficial to the community first and foremost.

The **Columbus Metropolitan Library,** in partnership with the **Columbus Foundation** worked with community designers to learn about their community desires, and re-design the way their library offered technology support to community members. Their process included two months of community engagement, over 21 individual interviews, and community co-design sessions.

Combining the knowledge of institutional experts, lived experts, and design experts in a human-centered design method, the team learned that community members seeking technology assistance have the following specific needs:

- to feel safe, not judged
- to be seen, not rushed
- to feel help is abundant, not scarce

Through this work, they developed a variety of prototype programs to test and experiment with, focusing on the feedback the community provided surrounding "common language," leveraging pre-existing relationships, preserving dignity, and more. [30]



(30) "Community Design Project: Library Tech Assistance." 2022. Columbus, OH: Columbus Foundation, Columbus Metropolitan Library.

Building Your Digital Inclusion Program Plan

When it is time to build the plan for your digital inclusion work, use the following recommendations and checklist to guide you. There is no moment too early in your planning process to ask for community feedback; use repeated and regular interactions with community members to learn and listen. This stage of the planning process provides ample opportunities to reach out to other organizations to explore partnerships and share about your future program.

Selecting An Area of Focus

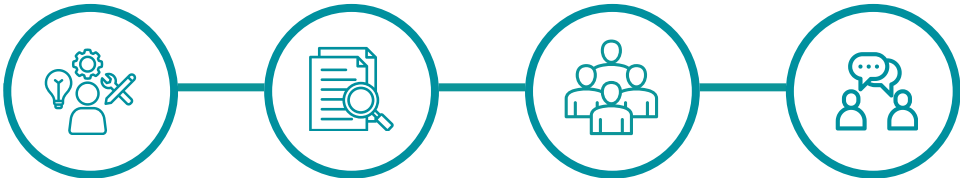
You may want to jump in and immediately solve the entire digital divide in your community, but selecting a specific area or areas of focus, with the possibility of expansion, will allow you to scale and adapt your work. Work within your abilities and strengths, according to your community's needs.

Identify your own strengths and assets. Following your community asset mapping, engage in formal or informal asset mapping in your own organization or direct community. Determine what resources, skill sets, and expertise you have in abundance. Do what you are good at.

Use the research. After performing community engagement, surveys, asset mapping, and cursory data analysis, you can begin to develop a picture of the gaps in your digital inclusion ecosystem. Learn about organizations in other communities with programs similar to the one you are planning. Determine if your organization can fill your ecosystem's gaps in a sustainable and equitable way.

Identify your target program participants. While exploring the digital inclusion focus your program will take, you may determine if your program will serve a specific audience. This may become apparent through identified gaps in the current digital equity ecosystem, recommendations from other organizations, communities that have already invested trust in your organization, and/or your own internal areas of excellence.

Engage in conversation. Conversations with community partners in your region, including organizations offering digital inclusion programming, can be helpful when determining a programmatic focus. In addition, discussing your intention to offer a digital inclusion program with an organization you have previously worked with in other areas may help to drive a specific focus. And of course, ensure that community members are invited into the conversation.



Examples of Digital Inclusion Program Service Models

While our communities may all have similar wants, needs, and goals from their digital inclusion programs, the methods of delivery will be unique for every community. The following examples of digital inclusion program models are by no means exhaustive, and offer a snapshot of common and successful program models.

Deciding which program model may best serve the needs and goals of your community and organization will be impacted by:

- feedback from community engagement and research,
- budgets and available funding,
- mission and capacity of the host organization and partners,
- staffing and expertise.

Drop-In Services

Digital inclusion programs offering consistent support, education, or devices to community members may use a drop-in model, where program staff are available during specific hours to serve the immediate needs of community members or help them to develop a plan for addressing their needs.

Advantages of drop-in support models include providing options for community members with inconsistent schedules or immediate needs to access support and services without having to pre-schedule an appointment. Drop-in programs work best in buildings where community members are free to come and go, rather than buildings with limited access, such as locked doors or security checkpoints.

Open Lab Hours

Many community centers, churches, libraries, telehealth centers, and other similar spaces provide public computers. These computer labs or stations might be the only place community members can access a device for personal use. Providing scheduled staff members to support users can help community members advance their digital skills and confidence.

Additionally, these locations are ideal spaces for connecting with community members who may be eligible for low-cost internet or device programs, but unaware of the options available. Maintaining a regular schedule of staff within a lab setting can be critical to building the trust of community members and encouraging their regular engagement with the digital world.

Setting Up a Computer Lab

Computer labs can be great resources for casual computer use, leading digital skills classes, offering space for digital navigators to meet with community members. Setting up a computer lab is not as daunting as it may seem.

Laptops, Chromebooks, and other portable devices mean a computer lab can pop up as needed and be safely stowed away in a locked closet or cart while the space is used for other community activities.

Guidance in this chapter surrounding space and place and sourcing your devices will also assist you as you plan for your computer lab.

One key element that must be planned for when setting up a computer lab is the aspect of support for the hardware and software within the lab. Ensuring that you have designated a partner or IT staff member to maintain, repair, troubleshoot and update devices will keep your lab sustainable and usable.

Take a look at the **University of Colorado Boulder Office of Information Technology** webpage on **Computer Lab Design Considerations** to learn more about device requirements and community usage, and **WebJunction's** recommendations on the physical aspects in their guidance on **Computer Lab SetUp**.

Phone Centers & Helplines

Phone centers and helplines offer immediate support, troubleshooting, and/or referral to digital inclusion programs. Here, program staff can provide verbal guidance on digital skills and support in locating appropriate devices or signing up for affordable internet. These Programs can serve community members spread out through a large geographic region, such as a whole state, or in more remote locations, such as across a whole reservation.

Helplines or hotlines offer direct support for technology skills and device troubleshooting. Helpline staff may walk a community member through a process to help them achieve the desired result, such as how to uninstall and reinstall a program, without the obligation to explain the "why" behind the process. Helplines are usually staffed by individuals with technical expertise, such as IT student interns.

Phone Centers, or call centers offer more broad digital inclusion services support, such as referrals to local programs, assistance signing up for low-cost internet, or completing the intake phase for a digital navigator program. During the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, phone-centric programs saw a revitalization, as community members prioritized physical distance, and remained at home.

Referral intake phone centers offer a centralized phone point to begin the intake process of a digital inclusion program, such as screening for eligibility, learning about the needs and goals of the caller, recording the information, and passing it along to a program or programs that may fit the needs of the community caller. Partner organizations with the infrastructure and capacity for a large volume of callers may host these phone centers.

Full program phone centers host the phone-side of virtual and remote digital inclusion programs, such as digital navigators. These programs may cover a wide geographic region, such as a state or number of rural counties. Program staff may do a combination of referrals to partner programs, direct digital skills training, and answer the how and why of technology questions.

Marylanders Online, an initiative of the University of Maryland Extension program offers both a tech support hotline for immediate IT solutions, as well as digital navigator phone line, where community members can reach a digital navigator to receive verbal digital skills instruction, direction to a device program in their region, and help signing up for low-cost internet.

In **Charlotte, North Carolina,** community members calling their local 311 service with a digital skill, device, or connectivity need will be connected to a digital navigator with **The Center for Digital Equity** at **Queens University**. This allows community members throughout Mecklenburg County to connect to digital inclusion support through the central call location that provides assistance with other utilities or city resources rather than needing to track down digital inclusion service providers on their own.

Digital navigators can then help connect community members to resources geographically close to them or help troubleshoot problems over the phone. [31]

(31) "The Center for Digital Equity." The Center for Digital Equity. Accessed July 10, 2024. https://thecenterfordigitalequity.org/digitalnavigators/.

Storefront or Retail Hours

Storefront hours are effective for programs where services include quicker, retail-style interactions, such as device distribution, technology repairs, or home internet access sign-ups and equipment. These standard hours allow community members to drop in at their convenience and have the familiar experience of a retail interaction.

PCs for People utilizes a storefront model for their refurbished device distribution shop. Their locations, aptly named stores, are in multiple communities across the country and offer devices for purchase to those who meet need eligibility criteria. Their stores offer the dignity and choice of a shopping experience and qualified staff to answer questions and connect community shoppers with free and low-cost home internet programs and digital skills training programs. In addition to a limited number of free devices and low-cost computer sales, the stores also offer tech support and repairs to eligible community members who may qualify for their services through income criteria or receipt of other social services. [32]

Scheduled Services

Appointment-based and scheduled service models for digital inclusion programs allow program staff to prepare for the needs of a community member. For in-person programs, scheduling appointments ahead can allow staff to choose a convenient space and place for the community member, and prepare the appropriate material, while increasing efficient use of staff time.

Classes

Classes require the commitment of an instructor and space. While there are occasional community-based classes that cover internet network development or device hardware building and repair, the majority of classes offered in digital inclusion programs cover beginner to intermediate digital skills, and basic to intermediate troubleshooting and device management.

(32) https://www.pcsforpeople.org/

Digital skills classes can cover the same topics with regularity, cover a series of topics in a specific order, or be focused on a longer-term, annual curriculum. Class schedules should be reflective of community schedules.

Options for classrooms can include existing computer labs in your community, pop-up computer classrooms, or a gathering space with internet and electricity where community members can bring their own devices.

What is a pop-up computer classroom?

A **pop-up computer classroom** or **portable computer lab** is a portable solution to the need for a computer classroom in multiple locations, or a computer lab in a shared or public space.

The main elements of the computer lab consist of laptop computers, and some auxiliary tech, such as external mice. Connectivity can be sourced through the locations where they pop-up, or by hotspots paired with devices that are portable or can be stored with the laptops.

Depending on additional site needs, table and chairs, power strips and other supporting equipment may be required to set-up and maintain the pop-up computer classroom.

Classes are often most successful when they are flexible and do not prioritize attendance over learning, as work schedules, transportation, and childcare demands may prevent students from attending a regular series. Adaptations to the standard classroom model may be a better fit for the community you serve, such as hosting virtual classes on video call platforms or holding classes in locations that are more accessible to learners. Classes are a good fit when your organization is connected with many individuals committed to increasing digital skills on the same topic and/or skill level who have similar schedules.

Ashbury Senior Community Computer Center (ASC3) in **Cleveland, Ohio,** offers computer basics classes to all community members through their organization's main campus on Ashbury Avenue, as well classes offered in partnership with other local nonprofit organizations, totaling over 31 locations. Classes focus on basic digital skills and digital readiness, with the goal of building the digital confidence and self-sufficiency of their community members.

Students in their 8-week classes can also engage with tutors, virtually or in-person, and are encouraged to maintain and practice their skills outside of class with the use of self-paced digital skills resources.

ASC3 is also an iconic example of flexibility and change in digital inclusion programming, as their name demonstrates their origins, beginning with a focus on providing digital skills instruction to their local senior community, and now expanded to offer services to every age, including an AT&T sponsored Connected Learning Center next to their main campus storefront that focuses on promoting reading skills as well as digital skills (e.g. virtual reality, gaming), within the local youth community.

Digital Navigators

In 2020, NDIA's community settled on the term "digital navigator" and then shortly after established a definition for the term. The digital navigator model is built upon years of similar work, tailored for the new realities of the time. Together, NDIA and our community continues to further defined the work of digital navigators, adapting and scaling the model, along with producing resources to help organizations launch and manage digital navigator programs.

Digital navigators are trusted guides who assist community members with ongoing, individualized support for accessing low-cost, affordable, and appropriate connectivity, devices, and digital skills. With on-demand services or through appointments, digital navigators support both urgent needs and long-term goals. They work with community members to understand their priorities, goals, needs, and assets and then connect them to the right resources and provide guided one-on-one assistance as needed.

Services to support community members getting connected and making use of technology may be provided under the name digital navigators, ambassadors, digital connectors, digital coaches, especialista en acceso tecnológico, or advocates. Most digital navigators provide general digital inclusion support and some provide specialized support for specific needs–education, healthcare, or workforce development–and serve diverse populations, including people with disabilities, returning citizens, migrants and refugees, higher education students, and caregivers to K-12 students.

Digital navigator programs have found success through phone lines, virtual appointments, in-person appointments, and drop-in support. This flexible program model can be adapted to most communities, and is open-sourced and available to all. Learn more from the NDIA Digital Navigator Webpage.

Digital Navigator Program Model and Template Materials

The digital navigator model is flexible as it can be adapted to fit the individual community member and the host organization, including location, topic, pace, skill level, and meeting time. It is designed to address any one or combination of digital inclusion areas of focus and to use referrals for areas not addressed by the digital navigator's organization. NDIA and our community have developed template materials to support the work of digital navigators.

The digital navigator process outlines the cycle of interactions with an individual and links to template forms for data collection and evaluation. Using these forms, digital navigators and their program managers can track growth and learning, individual success, and community member satisfaction.

Digital Navigator Community of Practice

There is a unique community of practice within NDIA called the Digital Navigator Working Group, where active and developing digital navigator program staff and digital navigators can learn from one another and engage in digital-navigator-specific conversations at monthly meetings and through an email listserv. If you're interested in joining the community, send us an email at digitalnavigators@digitalinclusion.org.

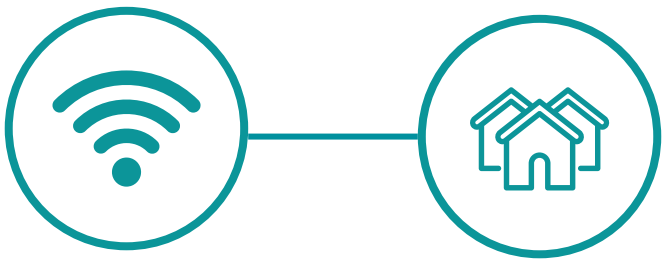
The National Digital Navigator Corps is a diverse cohort of digital navigator programs, managed and coordinated by NDIA with support from AMERIND Critical Infrastructure, and funded by Google.org, operating in rural America and Tribal nations. Eighteen different organizations adapted the digital navigator model to the needs of their community, each employing different aspects of instruction, referrals, and outreach.

NATIONAL Digital Navigator CORPS

Community Connectivity Programs

Community connectivity programs can span from gap network solutions, like providing hotspots to community members, all the way to creating a community broadband network, and everything in between.

When it comes to community connectivity programs, the goal should be to provide connectivity to individual households, wherever they are. This may look like targeting individual rural households, serving urban multi-dwelling units like apartment buildings or senior living communities, or building out a service network on Tribal land.



Hotspot Distribution and Management

Cellular hotspots are a means of connecting to the internet only if a computer or mobile phone is available. Hotspots use cellular data to provide wifi service to internet-connected devices, such as laptops or tablets. While they are an excellent solution for portal connectivity for community members, they must be able to connect to a steady cellular data signal, which can be difficult in areas of limited connectivity, such as rural and Tribal land. Additionally, most hotspots have a data cap which limits their usability.

Hotspot programs offer strong support for unhoused community members, and community members who may move with regularity, or travel with their work, such as migrant farm workers, and tree planters. Many organizations managing hotspot programs internally manage the cellular data subscription needed to maintain service.

Hotspots can be distributed to be owned by community members, or loaned to community members by libraries. Like other devices, longer loan periods are best for the community.

Connectivity Capacity Building Programs

Connectivity capacity building programs offer a central hub for information and training to help individual communities expand their capacity to engage in direct community connectivity work. These programs focus on teaching and sharing skills and values to community members who can lead connectivity efforts in their communities.

Tribal Broadband Bootcamp, led by **Matthew Rantanen**, a leader in Indigenous connectivity, and **Christopher Mitchell** of **Institute for Local Self Reliance**, provides a 3-day intensive training to community members interested in building and providing Tribal internet networks. Training topics span from digital inclusion basics to technical know-how, including how to build wireless networks.

Community Network & Community Internet Service Provider Programs

Developing a community network or becoming an internet service provider as a digital inclusion program is a large-scale and highly technical undertaking, but it has been done time and time again across the country. These programs leverage the expertise of network experts, and match their technical know-how with community knowledge to deploy the internet to individual households in their target area.

Key aspects of success for these programs include the inclusion and development of neighbors and community members to maintain, and install network infrastructure, and provide community-responsive technical support from trusted individuals.

The Detroit Community Technology Project's Equitable Internet Initiative (EII) trained and developed local digital stewards to provide skilled support in building community networks to serve digitally excluded neighborhoods in Detroit. Their program emphasizes sustainability, authentic engagement, and community ownership of their network and data through a set of Working Principles.

Location: Place and Space

Now that you have an idea of what your digital inclusion focus area and service model will be, you need to consider the location of your program. Even if you intend to offer services in a fully virtual space, there is still placemaking to consider.

Identify the geographic location of your program. Selecting the home base of your digital inclusion program may be as simple as setting up shop in your organization's current, community-based location and ensuring that the space is clean, accessible, and up to date. However, if you have options, choosing a location may be slightly more complex.

Using the maps and data from your research, along with your knowledge of your community, you may narrow down the geographic areas, census blocks, and zip codes in your service area that are much more in need of digital inclusion programming. If you are an organization that hosts multiple locations, such as a library or department of seniors and community elders, you may be able to choose an existing location within these identified geographic areas.

Consider offering services in a partner's space. Utilize your asset mapping from your prior research, but also include some of your more unique community assets, such as the 24-hour Walmart or a popular community park. For example, selecting a location on multiple transit lines where community members gather would be advantageous for denser populations, but selecting a location with a parking lot and near a favorite coffee stand may work better for rural or suburban communities.

When selecting a location, also consider the social and cultural implications and impacts of the place. Different people will feel comfortable in different places, but avoid offering programs and services in historically discriminatory or racially segregated neighborhoods or buildings. Working with community members to select a location can help to ensure community comfort, and prevent accidentally placing a program in a place or space that feels unwelcoming.

Cherokee Nation's digital inclusion program received a building early in their development. It was available and a good fit for their infrastructure needs. But, after a few months of providing services, they found themselves making house calls to many community members who were far from their building. They recommend doing a pilot study on where clients live before establishing a permanent location.

Consider partnerships that ensure you are meeting your community where they already are.

If space, location, or accessibility is a concern, or if your organization just does not have its own space to host a community digital inclusion program, partnering with other local community organizations with strong community bonds can help to connect with a wider community base. Often, churches, recreation centers, schools (public, private, and charter), universities, and other community spaces may be able to lend their space or want to partner to offer digital inclusion services.

Even if you do have a space for your digital inclusion program, working in a partner location has the advantage of building community trust and buy-in. Community members may feel safer exploring new skills and meeting with new people in a comfortable, familiar place.

The Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority's Digital Navigators in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, work exclusively in the housing properties where their residents live, visiting their locations on rotations to provide one-on-one services and classes.

Residents usually meet digital navigators in community spaces on each property, but digital navigator teams are also available to work with technology (that is not mobile) in the resident's homes, with permission and notification of the property managers.

Ensure spaces are accessible, clean, up-to-date, accessible, and safe for all.

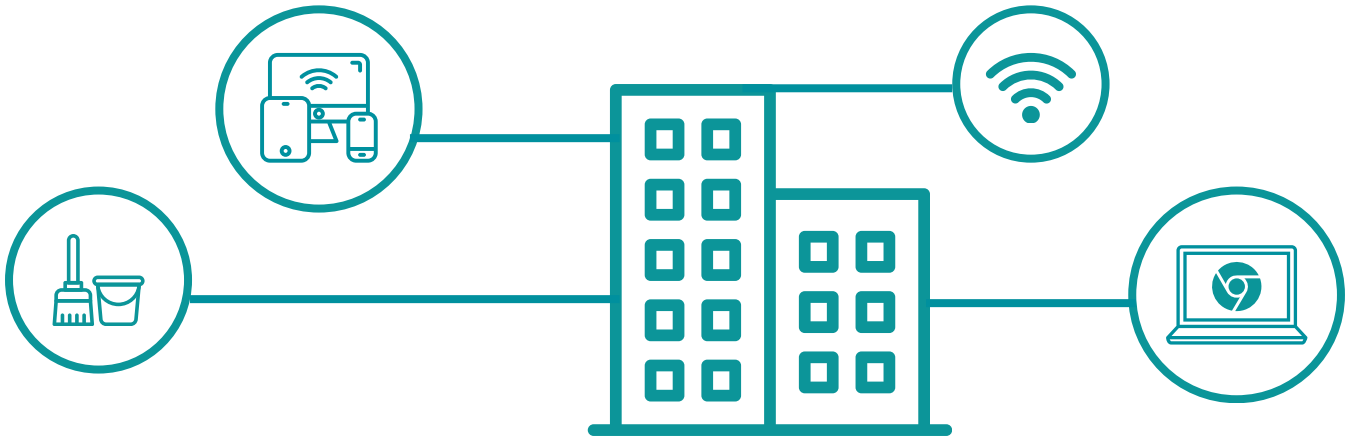
Demonstrating respect for your community is a key feature of building trust. One of the easiest ways to ensure community members feel seen, heard, and valued is to offer programs in spaces that are clean, up-to-date, and accessible.

When considering the **accessibility** needs of your community, ensure that all ramps and elevators are in working order, and there is an easy route of entry to the building. Ideally, community members should all be able to use the same entrance to the building. Restrooms should also be accessible, both in features, such as grab bars and adequate space, but also within the building. Chairs and tables should be able to seat community members of all sizes and abilities comfortably.

Clean, welcoming spaces can help maintain a positive experience for community members learning and receiving services. When possible, avoid using unwelcoming basements, unfinished industrial spaces, or other spaces that feel less than intentional for community use. When working with future partner organizations, include discussions of facility cleaning and maintenance in your pre-planning, along with climate and weather, such as how snow removal will take place, and whether the location has heat and air conditioning.

To the extent it is possible, use **up-to-date technology**, both for staff and community members. Training on or distributing out-of-date technology can keep community members behind on digital skills, prevent them from accessing the newest resources, and expose them to security risks if the devices or software are too old to receive security updates. When possible, make sure all devices are relevant and running software that is within one generation of current operating systems or editions to ensure staff and community members are best equipped to engage with the digital world.

If you're unable to use devices that are as up to date as you would like, there are simulation programs available that will allow community members to train on spoofed operating systems or devices. The **Chromebook Simulator**, developed by Google, and available for free in the app store, allows you to engage with any device as you would a device with ChromeOS.



Drexel University, in **West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**, is based in a **Promise Neighborhood**. They approach their community with intentionality and allow their location and community to inform their work and outreach. Following his inauguration in 2010, university President, Dr. John Fry committed to re-envisioning the university as the most "civically engaged" in the country. Rather than hoping the research produced by the university would benefit community members, he decided to become a force for good for the neighborhoods surrounding the university. Under his administration the Drexel **Expressive and Creative Interaction Technologies** (ExCITe) Center was established.

The Drexel **ExCITe (Expressive and Creative Interaction Technologies) Center** and technology and media learning and research hub is the center of the community engagement universe, embodying the belief that the digital divide that impacted their neighbors was not a problem that technology could solve. Instead, they began to invite the community in, offering digital inclusion programs for youth, and soon swelling their ranks to include community digital navigators starting in 2020.

Hiring the right staff for their neighbors, and offering culturally competent pedagogy (i.e. curriculum of knowledge and skills) is also central to their goals, as the university continues to build programs that will serve the needs and desires of the community that surrounds campus. Their digital navigator manager's position is funded by Dell Technologies, so they can continue to provide seamless community services.

Space and place continue to be key elements for Drexel's Office of University and Community Partnerships, as the university saw the continued importance of not just bringing their neighbors into the ExCITe Center, but also in bringing their digital inclusion programs to a location where community members already sought community resources, a mile from the campus at the Dornsife Center for Neighborhood Partnerships.

A place for programs or a place for outreach?

When considering community gathering spaces, ask yourself – is this space better for a program offering or for community outreach and building connections?

While some spaces, like laundromats, social services building lobbies, and transit hubs may feel like natural places to offer direct services, they may also lack the comfort and amenities needed to host a program long-term. These locations may instead be excellent places to engage in community outreach or to host an event.

Keep in mind that some community members value privacy when receiving assistance or discussing sensitive topics like income. Placing your program in a popular gathering place may increase the accessibility of your program, but choosing a space within that location that is less public or visible for service delivery may make the program more approachable for community members.

Consider piloting services at potential locations to determine which location is most accessible. During the pilot, count the number of services provided at each location and ask community members about their perception of the location when they receive services. If you are also collecting location demographic data, look into the distance program participants traveled to access the program in that location.

Considering Place When Serving Tribal Communities

Place and land are important in the recognition of the sovereignty of Tribal communities. It is important to recognize that Tribal governments and their lands/territories are distinct and separate. Tribal communities are diverse in their geographic locations, needs, values, and priorities. Understanding how other services are administered or distributed to Indigenous community members is useful. Many reservations are located in rural areas, where travel can span from long hours of driving to only being accessible by plane, while other reservations are neighbors to large cities. Community members could live on the reservation, but commute to work and school at neighboring border towns or cities.

Outreach to urban Indians, or people living off reservation, is an opportunity to ensure their unique perspectives are being considered in digital equity initiatives. Partnering with an urban Indian Center is a great start to understand Native people living off a reservation.

People and Staffing

When building the right team for a digital inclusion program, keep in mind the non-technical skills that lead to excellent community programming: cultural competency, empathy, effective communication, and comfort with flexibility and adaptations. Choosing the right people for the work can mean the difference between a strong or a “just okay” program.

As you distribute responsibilities make sure that duties are shared and staff are cross-trained, as many digital inclusion programs have struggled to continue when the service-providing staff accepted promotions or changed careers.

Jemez Pueblo Digital Navigator program is located on the **Jemez Pueblo**, and coordinated by **JNET**, the Tribal internet service provider. Their full-time digital navigators work directly with community members in their Towa language to provide digital skills instruction, devices, and technical support. Their office is centrally located and offers a comfortable and familiar building within the community, steps away from the Tribe's utility offices and other Tribal entities.

Staffing Models

Leveraging and training existing staff is a low-cost but high-effort option, requiring you to provide the staff support and leadership that your digital inclusion program needs. This model is often used by organizations that are already engaging in digital inclusion work, such as libraries, community health programs and workforce development centers, and are striving for a sustainable model.

You must consider the capacity of your staff members when choosing this model. It may require hiring additional staff to take over some of the responsibilities of team members directing their time and energy to your digital inclusion program.

Adding the additional "hat" of digital inclusion programming to the number of hats that the average social services employee wears, without rebalancing their existing workload, may lead to personnel burnout, employee turnover, low morale, and poorly delivered programs. Schedule regular check-ins with digital inclusion staff to prevent workload and mission creep, with proactive solutions for balancing workloads and expectations. Changes in their role and their role in digital inclusion programs must be clearly communicated internally to their colleagues.

Digital Navigators of the Hudson Valley first piloted their program in the spring of 2022 by providing digital navigation training to staff from libraries and other community-based organizations.

These digital navigators received six hours of training and engaged in regular "office hours" for peer support and additional expert instruction with NDIA. The cross-trained staff were

incentivized to provide digital navigator services to at least five community members over their first three months with a one-time financial incentive to their location. Each participating organization's staff person worked with their colleagues and managers to determine how best to spread out existing responsibilities so that digital navigator staff could take drop-in or appointment sessions.

Digital navigators, community members, and data showed that the program has a significant impact on everyone involved, and the program found additional funding to maintain and expand this model. Southeastern NY Library Resources Council manages the program in partnership with Ramapo Catskill Library System, Mid-Hudson Library Systems,[33] and Westchester Library System.

Hiring new employees is an ideal way to upskill your own community, while also ensuring that your digital inclusion program staff are members of the intended program audience and have lived experience with the digital divide. When hiring new staff, focus primarily on their ability to do the job, rather than education requirements. Many digital inclusion organizations have reported success through hiring their clients who have the direct experience of receiving services from the organization, making them experts in the client experience and members of the served community.

Compensation for digital inclusion staff should be competitive to encourage retention and to demonstrate a commitment to equity. New staffing models also open the possibility to explore whether full-time, part-time, or contract positions will best serve the needs of the program.

Community Tech Network (CTN) employs a distributed workforce to oversee virtual, in-person, and hybrid programming. Staff support basic and intermediate digital skills instruction, capacity building training and resource development, and the creation and maintenance of a robust catalog of multilingual curricula. Team members are selected for their community language fluency, cultural competency, digital skills knowledge, and deep desire to serve their community. By hiring staff specifically to serve their learners, CTN is able to offer classes in English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese and Russian.

(33) Carolyn Bennett Glauda, 2023. "Digital Navigators of the Hudson Valley Final Report Summary." https://libguides.senylrc.org/ld.php?content_id=71846481.

Interns and volunteers provide the flexibility of adding new staff at a low cost, similar to the cost of retraining existing staff. These team members can bring fantastic knowledge and experience from other positions and skill sets but may not be able to offer the program the same level of consistency and investment that a paid employee could. Further, it welcomes interns to digital inclusion work in their community.

Volunteers offer access to a wide range of skills and languages that may be beneficial to your program but would otherwise be inaccessible due to cost. Maintaining a database of casual volunteers who will provide specific support or instruction on an as-needed or as-available basis does require regular communication and time-intensive management, but it can be worth the effort.

Interns, paid or not, may be energetic, bring diverse skill sets, and offer unique insight into your program. Their work with organizations is often short-term, meaning training investments will need to be made repeatedly at the start of each new intern term. Intern programs often come with reporting and mentorship requirements for the host organization, which increase the management and support effort needed.

Some programs have built fantastic and strong networks of interns and volunteers by investing in relationship-building and training. If you are considering the casual, unpaid staffing route, be prepared to invest the same or higher level of energy and management into these digital inclusion workers as you would a paid staff member.

Austin Free-Net serving residents of **Austin, Texas,** relies on a network of invested and trained volunteers and their staff to deliver excellent digital skills support to their community.

The organization has a full-time volunteer coordinator who helps recruit, test, and train volunteers during their onboarding process. New volunteers then shadow experienced volunteers, learning the ropes of digital navigation. The organization and volunteers co-create their vision for success, sharing feedback, socializing, and building community internally and externally.

Many volunteers find their niche working with community learners, leveraging their existing skills and knowledge, such as their love of multiplayer video games or fluency in a language other than English. Their work is supported in part by Dell Technologies and GoogleFiber.

Training & Support

As with all programs, staff should be provided additional training and development unique to their role, and personal and professional support as the program starts up and moves forward.

Regular **training and development** for staff and supervisors demonstrates your investment in them. Topics including trauma-informed work and social-emotional learning, along with topics that meet the specific needs of individual staff will build a solid foundation for your digital inclusion program. Incorporating funding for professional development into your initial budget will ensure there are ongoing opportunities for growth and learning. Additionally, if your digital inclusion program is taking on a new mode of training delivery, such as using remote learning or assistance, training for staff and supervisors in remote work or program management may be helpful.

National and regional digital inclusion organizations may be available for training resources and recommendations. Local partners may be interested in reciprocal training agreements, where they can share their unique skill sets.

Digital inclusion staff may not fit neatly into pre-existing staffing structures, but will need the same level of support, supervision, and structure as other staff members. Ensuring supervisors understand the unique role and needs of a digital inclusion staff member can make a huge difference in preventing staff turnover and burnout. An enthusiastic and proactive manager is instrumental in supporting staff.

> Digital inclusion staff often work regularly with people in difficult situations that go far beyond their technology needs. These staff often hear a constant flow of difficult stories and situations which can be difficult to deal with and can lead to quick burnout if they're not processed. Trauma-informed care training has been a component of staff training at Denver Public Library for years. Giving staff insight into how customer's current behavior can be driven by bad experiences or trauma in their past helps staff cultivate empathy and patience. Giving staff tips on how to interact in transparent and responsive ways in these situations creates safe, empowering spaces for customers who may already feel nervous about technology. Some examples of training sessions we've offered at our library include Trauma-Informed Systems of Care, Verbal Interventions and Mental Health First Aid
>
> - **The Denver Public Library Digital Inclusion Team**

Sourcing Materials: Resources, Curriculum, and Tech

Digital inclusion resources, including curriculum, lessons, and hardware are growing and changing every day thanks to the increased awareness and focus on digital inequities. Identifying key local and national experts to learn from can help to keep your resources relevant and lower your costs.

Digital Skills Resources

You may be tempted to jump in and immediately build your own digital skills resources. Instead, start by determining what you need and reviewing existing resources. Customizing an existing resource can save you significant time and money. Remember, so many other organizations have done this work before us.

First, determine if there are state or regional programs already established to disseminate digital skills resources. If your organization is a library or affiliated with a university, work with your state or territory library to locate existing resources, such as state-created digital skills frameworks, or subscriptions, such as **Northstar Digital**, a digital skills assessment and instructional tool. For other organizations, engage with professional organizations, governing bodies, or other groups to see what is available. For example, tech extension programs at many land grant colleges and universities may have training resources for digital inclusion staff and community members.

Your state offices may also be preparing guidance on digital skills training, and have specific programs, lessons, or digital skills frameworks they are looking to implement state-wide. On a more local level, your public library or local public school technology director may also have resources available for community use.

If it turns out you are on your own, here are a few examples of digital skills resources you may consider using with your community:

- Digital Skills Library - developed by the **Digital Resilience in the American Workforce** initiative, this compendium of lessons and tutorials draws from a wide range of digital skills platforms to create a comprehensive overview of most digital skills.
- DigitalLearn - developed by the **Public Library Association**, this resource offers direct support to learners, tools and resources for trainers, and a checklist of digital skills that most library workers should be familiar with.

- GCFGlobal - developed by **Goodwill Industries**, this free online learning platform offers tutorial-style lessons in Spanish, English, and Portuguese, covering a wide range of technology topics and other basic adult education. Resources for instructors include guides on how to use the tutorials, and teaching tips.[33]
- Denver Public Library's Technology Classes and Worksheets - an example of the spirit and nature of digital inclusion work, the **Denver Public Library** has provided the lesson plans and worksheets for their technology classes to anyone who needs them. In addition to using the DPL resources, check with your local and regional libraries for similar open-source materials.

The world of digital skills training resources is ever evolving, so keep an eye out for new platforms, and check to see if products or services you're engaging with have their own educational resources. For example, there are free resources available from **Google** on using their workspace and high level courses offered by **Microsoft Learn**.

While NDIA does not maintain a full database of digital skills training resources available online, we do try to share a highlight of what our community is using, or has recently discovered. Discussions often take place on the listserv, with occasional blog posts highlighting unique or new options.

Digital Skills Frameworks

Digital skills frameworks are guiding documents that organize and categorize different digital skills that can be learned and mastered by a community member and can determine the direction, audience, and focus of a digital skills program. These frameworks often help guide instructional pathways, class structures, and decisions surrounding purchasing and developing curriculum. A framework can help to define fundamentals and to incorporate culturally relevant digital skills. It lies somewhere between a map and a checklist for developing digital literacy within the expected audience.

Developing a digital skills framework for your community can help to prioritize and elevate the needs and desires of your learners. You don't necessarily have to develop your own, but instead can develop classes or pathways based on other frameworks available as open access under Creative Commons licensing. Creative Commons licenses give everyone from individual creators to large institutions a standardized way to grant the public permission to use their creative work under copyright law.

When developing your own digital skills framework for your community, ensure that it includes some social, entertainment, and communication skills, not just the skills required to engage in the workforce. Listen to the needs and desires of your community, and ensure that your framework reflects their interests.

The Maryland Department of Labor developed a Digital Literacy Framework for Adult Learners and an Instructor Implementation Guide for community organizations and state agencies providing workforce development instruction.

The framework provides overarching guidance on teaching digital skills, while the instructor implementation guide helps share how these skills can be taught to adult learners.

What are foundational digital skills?

Determining foundational digital skills may seem like a daunting task. As technology grows and evolves, it would naturally seem that the list of foundation skills would grow longer and longer each year.

Instead, what digital skills educators have found is there are so many different directions a community member's digital skills journey can continue, but the foundational digital skills remain the same.

Following an extensive review of digital skills publications, the **Seattle Digital Equity Initiative** and the **City of Seattle** published their findings, and outline the following skills:

- **Communication**: Exchanging information with others on digital platforms using various strategies to collaborate, share, and communicate.
- **Creation**: Engaging in digital spaces to design, create, and revise content online.
- **Device ownership**: Practices that support device longevity, including physical care, protective software, and using technical support.
- **Gateway skills**: Foundational skills required to use a device and participate online. • Information skills: Skills to apply, evaluate, and manage information across digital and physical environments.
- **Lifelong learning**: Engagement in self-assessment of digital skills. Using self-reflection to tailor accessible digital environments and continue digital skills learning.
- **Mobile**: Understanding basic functions of a mobile device to communicate and access goods and services.
- **Online life:** Access to online resources that support digitalization of daily tasks and socialization within a broader digital community.
- **Privacy and Security**: Maintenance of practices to secure digital identity, recognize threats, and understand the broader safety implications of working in a digital environment.
- **Workplace**: Advancing workplace success and professionalism through engagement with an organization's online tools and other supportive digital systems. [34]

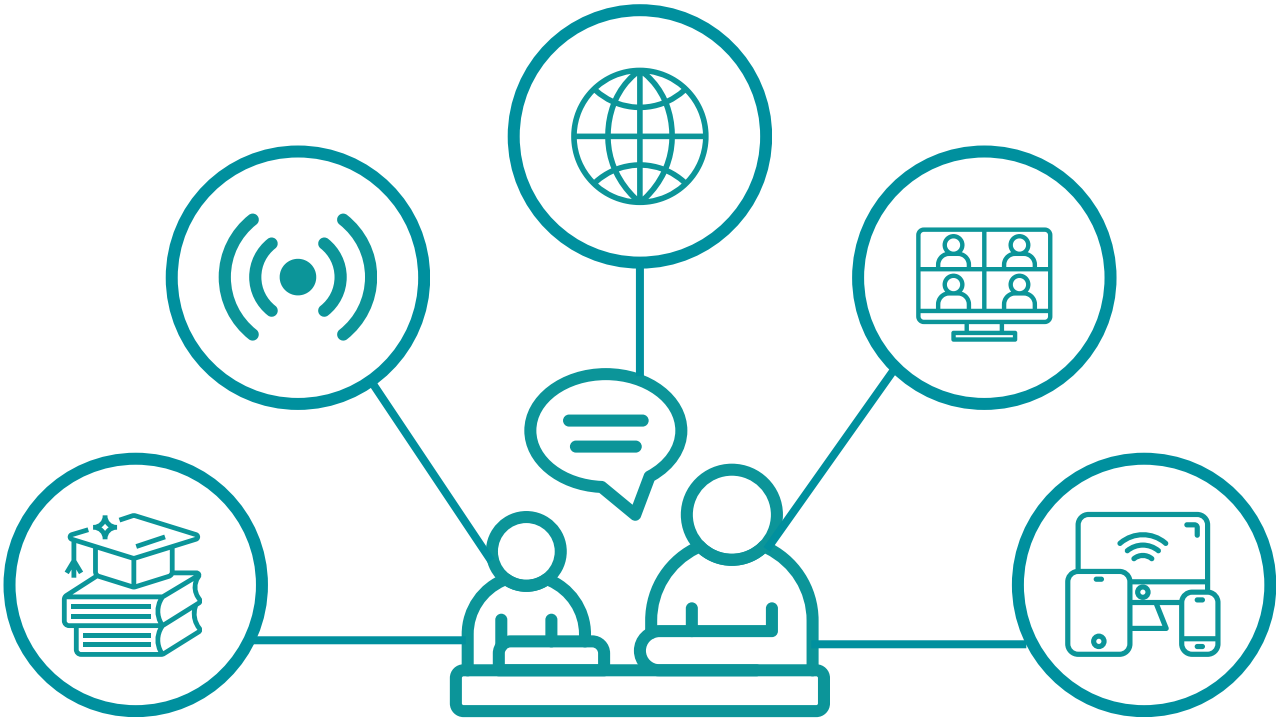
(34) Stacey Wedlake, Karah Lothian, David Keyes, and Chris Coward. 2019. "Digital Skill Sets for Diverse Users: A Comparison Framework for Curriculum and Competencies Digital Skill Sets for Diverse Users a Comparison Framework for Curriculum and Competencies." https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/Tech/DigitalEquity/digital%20skills%20for%20diverse%20users.pdf.

Lessons and Curriculum

Once you have developed or decided on a digital skills framework for your community's pathways into digital skills, you can begin to construct a curriculum that meets your community's needs.

When looking for lessons and resources, consider your first stop to be **Digital Resilience in the American Workforce (DRAW),** a federal initiative led by **The Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS),** which performed a landscape scan and developed a number of tools of their own that can be found in their 2021 report. [35]

Most areas of digital skills training can be supported by existing tools and curriculum, but it is then up to us to fill out the more niche and local needs of our community. For example, developing content to assist students in enrolling in a local online 4-H portal, or creating a lesson plan for helping community elders download and utilize a local transit app for the first time would be a great investment of time and enthusiasm.



(35) "Digital Resilience in the American Workforce (DRAW) | Adult Education and Literacy | U.S. Department of Education." 2021. Lincs.ed.gov. 2021. https://lincs.ed.gov/state-resources/federal-initiatives/draw.

Digital Skills Training Resources: Self-Guided Learning and Instructor Support Materials

Most digital skills training resources can be sorted into two major buckets: tools meant for self-guided learning, and tools meant for an instructor to use in a classroom setting. Both are beneficial and can also be used one-on-one with a community member, or by an instructor leading a classroom of learners.

Self-guided learning materials encompass tools that offer tutorials or other step-by step instructions to teach someone a skill. Community members can use these resources on their own, such as in a computer lab or at home, or they can be incorporated into digital navigator instruction or classes as preview, review, or homework.

Instructor support materials are slides, lesson plans, activities, or other written guides that help a digital skills instructor deliver a lesson on a specific digital skill. Many self-guided learning websites also offer instructor materials that can assist in converting existing tutorials into interactive classroom experiences.

Curriculum Building at a Glance

- Identify specific curriculum needs, such as target skill areas, or methods of instruction that reflect the community's interests.
- Research and identify current instructional materials, programs, and courses on digital skills that will fulfill goals.
- Determine which areas of digital skills instruction are unable to be supported via the materials available.
- Create a plan for developing supplemental materials necessary to support the full digital skills acquisition of your community members.
    - Using prior program research and knowledge, determine if existing community organizations in your state may have the capacity and expertise to provide the curriculum and materials.
- Create a plan for evaluating and expanding curriculum offerings based on feedback from community members, including awareness of other programs and offerings you have not yet employed.

How to Teach : Resources for Learning to Teach Digital Skills

Digital Resilience in the American Workforce (DRAW) released their findings of **Instructional Approaches and Practices: Detailed Findings and Discussion** provides specific tools and discussion of digital skills instructional methods for different audiences.[36]

The Barbara Bush Foundation developed the published **Promoting Digital Literacy for Adults: A Resource Guide** to assist librarians in their role as digital literacy instructors and ambassadors. While it was initially developed for library staff, this guide pulls from a variety of learning principles to help serve the whole person in their digital skills journey, and is useful and accessible to all digital inclusion workers.

Sourcing and Providing Technology

Partnerships are key to sourcing technology that will be relevant, responsive, and appropriate for your community. Choosing technology that meets the whole person needs of your community is critical to impact, but finding these devices at an affordable price can be complicated.

Purchasing Devices

Refurbishing partners can provide devices at an incredibly low cost to community organizations, or community members directly. These organizations often also provide jobs and technical training to community members who would otherwise be uninvolved in the tech industry.

Digitunity, an organization that aims to advance digital equity through device ownership and promote sustainable device ecosystems, has recommendations on how to select and purchase refurbished devices. You can learn more by taking a look at their resource hub, specifically their guide **How To Purchase A Refurbished Computer** [37] and **Benefits Of Purchasing A Refurbished Computer**. [38]

(36) "Instructional Approaches and Practices:Digital Resilience in the Workforce: DRAW, Detailed Findings and Discussion." 2022. Jobs for the Future and World Education. https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/FINAL_-_DRAW_Instructional_Approaches_and_Practices.pdf.

(37) "How to Purchase Refurbished Computers - English and Spanish." 2021. Digital Opportunity Network. https://digitalopportunity.network/resource-hub/refurbishing-reuse/how-to-purchase-a-refurbished-computers/.

(38) "Purchasing a Refurbished Computer." 2021. Digital Opportunity Network. 2021. https://digitalopportunity.network/resource-hub/community/benefits-of-purchasing-a-refurbished-computer-english-and-spanish/.

Kramden Institute is a nonprofit computer refurbisher with a mission to advance equitable access to devices, connectivity, and technology education. Over the last 20 years, the digital inclusion organization has awarded over 55,000 devices to low-income students and adults in North Carolina. Over 12,000 people have completed digital skills training with Kramden. As a member of local and state level digital equity collaboratives, Kramden supports other organizations in their digital inclusion efforts. These milestones have been accomplished through partnerships with municipalities, schools, and nonprofits. Their work has been instrumental in keeping students, telehealth patients, and everyday community members connected.

Corporate partnerships and discounts are sometimes available to nonprofits and municipalities. These programs may require documenting the intended community audience or programming, but may reduce your cost.

DELL Technologies

Corporate partnerships for technology sourcing

Corporate partners and technology specialists may be able to provide access to hardware, technical insight, support, and best practices from similar programs to help underserved communities. It is best to identify corporate partners that have digital inclusion as a priority, like Dell Technologies, so you can start from a strong foundation with mutual goals. In addition, it is key to recognize the variety of ways in which a corporation can bring value to your plans for sourcing technology, such as through consulting and long-term collaboration that bring industry expertise and technical support.

Dell Technologies partners with community organizations to offer affordable devices for digital inclusion programming. Dell works with partners to build the device solution that is most appropriate for their communities. Technology companies like Dell may offer a variety of discounted or donated hardware, depending on the unique attributes and needs of their community partnerships. A few examples of Dell's offerings include:

- Discounted new hardware available through the Dell Outlet
- Certified refurbished devices available directly from DellRefurbished.com For some bulk orders, a negotiated discounted rate may be possible through Dell's sales channels.
- Pro bono engagements with technical experts. Dell offers a portfolio of pro bono programs that connect their employees with nonprofits around the world that need support on their digital transformation journey. Dell has made an ESG (i.e. Environmental, Social and Governance) commitment to support the digital transformation journey of 1,000 nonprofits by 2030. Nonprofits can be nominated to receive pro bono services to work with Dell employees.

Dell's strategic grantees, community organizations that work in partnership with Dell on their digital inclusion programming, may be eligible for hardware donations. The specifications for these donations are built on the unique needs of the partnership and co-designed programming

Selecting Devices

When selecting technology for your digital inclusion program, try to balance the following factors:

- lifespan of a device (including repair options, security updates, and warranties),
- the priorities of the program,
- the priorities of community members,
- connectivity options available,
- ease of use.

Internet-enabled, large-screen devices generally offer the most benefit to the most users, as they allow users to fully engage in most browser-based activities, and install and execute programs and applications. Devices in this category include Chromebooks, standard laptops running Windows, AppleOS, or Linux, desktop computers, and tablets with add-ons such as keyboards. Durable laptops and tablets can be loaned to multiple users, while desktop computers are more difficult to transport, so they are best suited to stay in a singular location, such as in a user's home or a computer lab.

More agile, smaller devices may also serve the needs of your community. Smartphones and some smaller tablets are enabled to connect to 5G or cellular data networks, increasing the opportunities for connectivity and range of use. Community members looking for a device they can use anywhere, easily transport, and with a longer battery life may be better served by these devices. Additionally, 5G tablets and phones can also be enabled as wifi hotspots, providing multiple avenues of connection for multiple devices. Smartphones do not offer the option for loan, as they are based in individual cellular plans, but tablets and 5G-enabled tablets do.

Computer Reach is an organization and National Digital Navigator Corps grantee that provides refurbished devices, digital skills classes, and digital navigators for community members in the greater Pittsburgh area.

They provide devices at no cost to their community via a device lottery system with weekly winners. Community members sign up to win technology bundles, including a keyboard, mouse, monitor, necessary cords, and a refurbished desktop that runs the Linux operating system. This operating system is open-source, free for all to use, and is cited as running better than MS Windows on their devices. To learn more about their choice to use Linux, check out their website.

When considering devices for your program consider the following questions:

- What level of connectivity does our community have access to?
- How long do you plan for these devices to last?
- Are you hoping to provide these devices to loan or to own?
- Are you providing a device to facilitate only your program, or to encourage connectivity in the community as a whole? (there is no wrong answer!)
- Do you have a plan or partnership for device repair, troubleshooting, and maintenance?

The Chromebook Conundrum

Chromebooks and other low-cost laptops often have an "expiration date" whether intentional, like the planned obsolescence of Chromebooks that have limited operating system updates, or physical, such as hardware that is not able to sustain a few years of daily use.

Many Chromebooks provided by schools and organizations during 2020 have already cycled through their usefulness, and are unable to be refurbished due to their lightweight parts.

Try to select devices that will be part of a longer device ecosystem, with replaceable parts, durable hardware, and unlimited software upgrades. Thinking about the "cost per use" of a device - the idea that a device actually costs less the longer it is usable.

Digitunity's Large-Screen Computer Baseline Specifications for Digital Equity was developed in response to an NDIA community discussion surrounding the need for better understanding of specifications of technology including details on device age, RAM (random access memory), storage space, drive type, and operating system when shopping for new and refurbished devices for community digital inclusion programs.

Distributing Devices

TO OWN OR TO LOAN?

When possible, the best option for consistent device access and usership is to offer devices for community members to own. Having personal access to a device when you want and need it is transformative not just for all the activities you can do online, but also for maintaining digital skills and online opportunities.

If offering devices for ownership is not feasible for your organization and program, try exploring options for longer-term loans. For example, the **Seattle Public Library** and **Columbus Metropolitan Library** offer loan periods longer than the standard 3-week book loan period to allow community members the necessary time to gain comfort with using the device and learning digital skills.

LEARN TO EARN

Learn to earn programs are exactly what they sound like - programs where community members can earn a device by attending and completing classes. In this model, the incentive runs both ways, where community members are incentivized to attend classes with the promise of earning a personal device, and they are provided the digital skills they need for the personal device prior to ownership.

When considering a learn to earn program model, ensure that the devices you will be providing will be matched with the digital skills curriculum in the classes. A mismatch between operating systems, such as iPads as an earned device, should not be provided to a classroom of learners who just mastered a PC and Microsoft Office. Learn to earn programs should also have an element of flexibility when it comes to earning requirements, as program attendance and test scores can be negatively impacted by many external factors.

The **Lummi Nation's workforce development office** uses a learn-to-earn model, and loans refurbished devices to those participating in lessons through Metrix Learning. When people complete five lessons they can turn in the loaned device and receive a brand new device to own. Lummi's workforce development office feels it is critical to ensure individuals know how to use the devices before owning one of their own. The community members decide which class(es) they want to take and will receive a certificate of completion for every course they pass. There is an assessment at the end of each class to test proficiency.

Outreach and Marketing

Marketing and outreach are distinct activities, different from community engagement. When one is incorrectly substituted for the other, whether in name or activity, the results can be hard to repair.

The Hamden Public Library in **Hamden, Connecticut**, leveraged an outreach and marketing strategy to connect with their community members by meeting them where they were - at home. They paired direct outreach to seniors through partners in Hamden, including a senior living residence, Davenport-Dunbar, and the Keefe Community Center with paper marketing mailers that directed town residents to the library for more information.

Outreach is single-direction communication from your organization or program, delivered directly to the community. Generally, outreach is exciting and informative, alerting community members of services and programs available to them. Community outreach often involves connecting with community members where they feel comfortable and where people gather.

During outreach, staff should focus on leveraging their unique skills and personalities, rather than adhering strictly to a customer service script. Staff performing outreach should be proficient in community languages and dialects, and feel comfortable building rapport with community members before sharing information about their digital inclusion program.

Engaging in outreach will look different to every community. We all gather, talk, and share information in different ways. What works in one community may not necessarily work in another, even if they share similar demographics. As a member of your community, consider the dates, times, places, and seasons that will work best for connecting with your neighbors, and plan accordingly.

When out in your community, people may ask you for services right then and there! Be prepared to provide a rudimentary level of your digital inclusion program during outreach or community engagement when asked. Be prepared to refer folks to appropriate resources, offer basic digital skills instruction on mobile devices, and even help sign up for discounted internet programs!

Outreach doesn't always have to take place at resource hubs, farmers' markets, or other intentional gathering spaces. To celebrate Digital Inclusion Week in 2023, **Connect Rhode Island** and the **East Bay Community Action Program** hosted an **Affordable Connectivity Program Awareness Outreach** event at the Friday night varsity boys soccer game! While Mount Hope High School lost to East Providence High School 2-4, community members all won- with updated information on how to access their federal internet benefit.

Marketing demands less of the person-to-person connection of outreach or community engagement, and more of a focus on sharing critical information in a targeted and engaging manner. Marketing can include written materials such as flyers, media opportunities like news stories, advertising, inclusion in community calendars, or other creative ways to communicate the details of your digital inclusion programming. The need to target community members who are often disconnected from technology means communication and information sharing should be centered around where people already get information, in digital and physical spaces.

Flyers, mailers, advertisements in newspapers, and other paper or hard copy marketing materials may be necessary for reaching digitally excluded communities. While it may be tempting to try a social media

campaign or build a website to advertise your program, keep in mind the audience you're trying to reach. Building relationships with local media, such as radio stations, and TV programs, especially those that are popular within your target audience and community is a fantastic way to share program details and updates. Be sure to leverage your existing community partnerships to support your marketing efforts.

Try to provide any and all marketing materials in the spoken and read languages of your community and make sure you indicate what languages programming is provided in. **Marylanders Online**, a collaboration of the University of Maryland iSchool and Extension Program, has a Marketing Toolkit with a wide range of assets and languages.

Cayuse Native Solutions of the **Umatilla Indian Reservation** advertised their digital navigator program to their greater Tribal community by participating in their Treaty Day Parade, riding on a float dressed as a computer, and passing out flyers with information on how to get in touch with a digital navigator.

Marketing your digital inclusion program can be as simple as sharing information in popular spaces, and sometimes using an eye-catching mascot or banner!

Funding and Sustainability

Funding may be a major factor in determining the type of digital inclusion project, program, or event you are able to develop. As mentioned at the beginning of the manual, where we delineated the different types of digital inclusion initiatives, pilots and projects are often limited by time and funds, but pilots should have a clear purpose, which is often to test an idea, resulting in a permanent program. In an ideal world, programs are funded in a manner that will not leave gaps in service due to lapses in funding.

> Don't pursue temporary funding for what are meant to be permanent services/programs. Unless it's a pilot to test or evaluate something new.
>
> - **Tracy Treece**, Digital Inclusion Manager, **Denver Public Library**

All Funding Can Be Digital Inclusion Funding

Digital inclusion programs have been funded through grant funds available for all types of innovation, education, and community development and support. When seeking funding, consult your partners, consider your digital inclusion ecosystem, and refer to your community engagement and research to identify the unique locations and populations to be served. From there, expand your search for grant funds to include specific populations, communities, geographic regions, and partner institutions.

Digital inclusion programs have been developed from funding designated for a wide variety of work, including:

- Rural and community development
- Education (including adult education) and libraries
- Telehealth and mental health services
- Workforce development and unions
- Civic engagement and US Census participation
- Community elder engagement and care

Thinking creatively about who may fund your work, and who else will benefit from a digitally included society can guide you to find unexpected partners, funders, and solutions for program sustainability and growth.

Before designated digital equity and inclusion funds, the digital inclusion programs that lead the way were funded through a variety of funds. Since 2020, more digital inclusion funds are available than ever before, but there are also more fantastic programs and organizations competing for them. Think creatively, embrace non-traditional partners, and see where your work takes you.

Sustainable Funding

Specialized grants and donations can provide start-up funding for a digital inclusion program, but developing a sustainable funding plan is critical to ensuring continued service to your community.

If you are piloting a digital inclusion program within a larger organization, ensure your program will have a budget line item in all upcoming budget planning and conversations. Often, the initial cost of a program is higher than the costs of maintaining it, but don't forget to factor in ongoing salaries with increases, operational costs, and funds for keeping up with technology maintenance and emerging technologies.

When engaging with budget committees or board members who will require justification for spending, be prepared to share qualitative and quantitative data from your program such as the number of community members served, and stories of impact.

Often, quilted funding – money from a variety of sources/funders – is necessary to keep a program going. The goal is to ensure there is a consistent overlap of funding coming in for your program, to avoid service interruptions, which may affect community trust. Ideally, your funding strategy will include setting aside additional funds to support program services when your revenue streams lapses.

Regardless of which fundraising strategies you will use, it is never too early to draft a one page outline detailing the problem your organization seeks to address (often called a problem statement in a grant application, the case for support, or as the introduction in a fundraising appeal) and how your organization's program or services addresses that problem with examples of your impact. Having this information on hand will greatly assist you with any fundraising strategy that you implement.

Where to Find Funds

Prior to the rise in awareness of digital inequities in 2020, funding options for digital inclusion programs were limited to innovative grants and forward-thinking foundations. Now, there is a national understanding that digital inclusion programs have vast impacts on community wellness, and funding opportunities reflect this progress. We have outlined some common options for funding in this section, but this is not an exhaustive list.

Philanthropic Funding

Philanthropic funding has historically been a major avenue for digital inclusion work. These funds may be more flexible, but have different receiving and reporting requirements, and may have more options for renewal.

These funds may include, but are not limited to, donations from community foundations, family foundations, and the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arm of corporations (which may or may not have separate foundations), or individual donors.

Local funders differ from federal funders because they want to ensure their investments directly impact their neighbors and communities. They rely heavily on building relationships with community-based organizations and supporting initiatives impacting their communities as a whole. Some sources of philanthropic funding, such as foundations and individuals, involve extensive relationship building and demonstration of the impact of your work.

This may offer a renewable source of funding for your digital inclusion work, but funders often hope to diversify their efforts to create community success and may be more interested in the initial investment of “start-up” funding for a program, rather than maintaining the program long term.

Often, philanthropic funders will rely on their networks to help identify projects and programs that meet their curiosity and interests. A funder may approach you, but if you’re not the right fit for their niche, referring them to your fellow digital inclusion ecosystem community will help to benefit the greater community and build camaraderie in the space.

How you approach a funder for opportunities depends a lot on the funder. However, there are ways to help your conversation with potential funders go well. Here are some strategies to successfully build relationships with local funders to keep your strong digital equity programs running:

- Build relationships with potential funders before seeking funding. Bring them into the conversation as community partners, not just as potential funding sources for a specific program or project. Ask them to join a coalition, and find ways to educate and engage their staff/donors/decision makers on digital equity as an important community issue.

- Find out how digital equity aligns with their priorities and investments - "make it make sense for them." Rather than asking someone to fund something entirely new, help them see how investing in digital equity work will help achieve their own goals. Even if it seems that they haven’t funded digital equity programs in the past, look at what they have funded and show how digital equity is connected.

- Be confident - you have the digital equity expertise to do this work! Prepare a one-pager that describes your program, accomplishments, and impacts.

- Collect impact stories from your community to share with potential funders.

- Leverage your networks to identify potential funding partners. Organizations with which you have existing relationships will be more receptive to partnering and supporting programs.

- If you know that you’ve been included in your state’s capacity grants, continue those conversations with them and set about preparing for what’s to come. The turnaround time on grants and contracts can be short.

- Use data to demonstrate the need. Publicly available data from sources like the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, data from local sources, and data you’ve collected yourself can all play an important role in making the case for financial support.

Every Digital Inclusion Program Needs A Budget

Every program should have, maintain, and track their budget and spending annually. Even if your only program expense is snacks, it is worthwhile to plan for and track those funds.

When working with partners, it is important to gain an understanding of their budgeted funds and how they are spending them within your joint digital inclusion program. That way, you have a full picture of the program's costs.

Projected budgets are required when applying for funding. Use the information you have about previous spending to help inform these budgets.

If you are new to the field of nonprofit or program budgets, connecting with other organizations in your digital inclusion ecosystem may help you to determine specific line items you'll need to account for (e.g. occupancy/rent, utilities, equipment, internet, staffing, marketing, travel, professional development, recognition of staff/volunteers/participants, etc,). The **National Council of Nonprofits** offers webinars and toolkits for understanding the format and nuances of your budget, along with a variety of resources available for budgets on their website.

Grants

Grants are application-based financial awards provided to nonprofits and similar organizations to execute specific aspects of their work. Generally, grants require an application process that requires disclosures from the organization requesting the funds, which may include financial details, staff resumes, and background information on previous programming.

Connect and communicate. Unless you are explicitly told not to reach out to the grantor, ask to meet with them to learn more about their funding opportunities and begin to build rapport. In addition to staying in communication with the funder, make sure to maintain communication with partners in your application, and keep other stakeholders informed on the progress of the grant application.

Get your documents in order. Make sure your supporting documents, including staff resumes, budgets, and financial statements are up to date, and support the narrative of your grant proposal. Keep these documents up to date at all times.

Consider partnerships. When drafting a grant application for funding consider which of your community partners may be a good fit to join you in your grant funded program. Demonstrating your commitment not only to supporting your community, but to uplifting other organizations and expanding the reach of community programs through partnerships can be key to your application being funded.

Share letters of support. Sharing letters of support from your community members, partners, and other stakeholders in your application, even if they are considered "optional" in the application, can communicate the investment and value of your work in your community.

Do your research. Research best practices and impact of programs similar to your proposed program, and grants the funder has awarded. What themes do you see in the grants they have awarded? Are you a good match?

Ask for help. Many larger nonprofits in your region may offer assistance in grant preparation, or offer their fiscal sponsorship to smaller organizations. If you are struggling to apply for a digital inclusion program grant, ask for help in your local digital inclusion ecosystem.

Check your alignment. Make sure all your documents, letters of support, social media posts and other publicly available information are in alignment with the narrative you have shared in your grant application.

Don't feel intimidated by potential funders. Invite them to your community outreach events, schedule quarterly or semi-annual coffee times to stay connected, invite them to join your organization's mailing list, and share targeted stories with them so they can really get to know the impact of your digital equity work on the local community. Many grants are awarded based on the knowledge of the recipient's organization and previous work, so get to know as many people as you can.

Make sure to get it in on time. Late proposals, however good they may be, will be disqualified. Circle back to make sure your proposal was received and keep those email receipts.

Celebrate and reflect on success and failure. Just writing a grant application can be a monumental feat! Celebrate a well-crafted request for funds, and take a moment to reflect on your hard work. Even if your grant proposal is not funded, don't be discouraged! Ask for feedback from the funder, and keep trying!

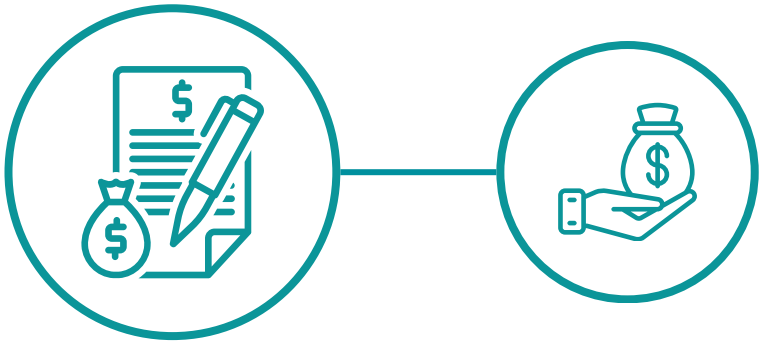
Do not apply for grants that do not address the needs of your program and community. It can be exciting to learn about digital inclusion funding and opportunities, but not every grant will be the correct fit for your organization. Instead, refer your fellow digital inclusion practitioners and organizations to these funds and continue seeking funds that match your work.

Plan and develop your sustainability plan. Developing and incorporating a sustainability plan for continuing funding and maintaining your program will ease your own transition following a grant period, and provide evidence to potential funders that this program is prepared for the future.

Subgrants

Subgranting is the processing of allocating funds from a large grant to additional (sub) organizations to partner and perform work. This allows grantees to use granted funds to further distribute them to partners or other entities through an application process or partner agreement.

An example of a program using a subgrant is when a local library applies for a grant to have an extensive digital navigator program in their region. They agree to subgrant funds from their program to smaller nonprofits to provide digital navigator services, including the pride center, senior center, and a local violence prevention group to fund their inclusion in the program.



Opportunities as a subgrantee are just as exciting as opportunities to apply for a grant directly! Often, being a subgrantee can offer more support, guidance, and mentorship from the main grantee than if you worked directly with the funder.

Talking About Your Work: Elevator Pitch

Imagine you have stepped into the elevator with a beloved digital inclusion funder. You have less than 3 minutes to share your organization's mission, work, and impact.

Practice your elevator pitches with your team to hear what they highlight and how they incorporate community vision, partners, and dreams into their short overview.

Queens Public Library in Queens, New York, designed and proposed a digital inclusion program, and received funding from the New York Digital Inclusion Fund in 2022. The grant they received funded digital skills training, large screen device access, and connectivity for justice-involved community members from all over New York City. Through digital skills training and connection to communication and the digital world, multiple cohorts of community members were able to gain access to the social support they needed to transition back to community life.

The grant program also helped build the capacity and sustainability of digital inclusion work within the Queens Public Library, which is expanding today.

Tips from Dell Technologies for Writing an Effective Partnership Proposal to a Corporation

The strength of partnership is realized when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When assessing grantees, Dell Technologies looks for organizations that will join forces and form partnerships that together enable each organization to have a higher impact than they could on their own. Compelling partnership proposals demonstrate to the corporation that they need your unique perspective to address a community issue and that you understand the value proposition that the corporation brings to your work.

Here are a few tips for preparing and writing a compelling grant:

- Use data to illustrate the issue and highlight your value. Demonstrate that you have done research on the corporations' values, recent initiatives, and areas of focus, and that you've taken a data-backed approach to find alignment between those areas and your proposal.
- Describe how your solution is innovative and how it will have long-term impacts on the problem. Dell Technologies wants to understand how your solution brings a new idea to a challenge while building on a tried and tested foundation.
- Use clear and concise language to outline your objectives, the problem you aim to solve, and how you plan to execute your solution. Establish a clear timeline for your project milestones.
- Specify the measurable outcomes and impact of your project and the evaluation methods you will use to assess progress and success. Validate that the metrics you plan to use meet the corporation's needs.
- Describe your network and include information on other funding sources, partnerships, or resources you have secured, as this demonstrates additional support and credibility.

Sponsorships

Asking for sponsorships is often less complicated than applying for grants or soliciting donations. Sponsorships are mutually beneficial agreements between two organizations, where one provides funds, or donated items in exchange for recognition and promotion.

Local sponsorships from community businesses can offer funding or donated items for program events, outreach or celebrations, such as food and drink, tables and chairs, or marketing materials. Try to tailor your sponsorship requests to the strengths or surpluses of their businesses, and have a plan for how you will recognize their sponsorship, promote their involvement, and thank them for their support.

Annual and Major Gifts

Fundraising from individual donors is a multi-pronged strategy, and can involve everything from cultivating long-term relationships with wealthy individuals to conducting a crowdfunding campaign where many donors contribute small gifts. The following is some terminology you'll want to be familiar with if you're raising money from individuals

Annual Giving Campaign: This includes end of year fundraising, which may be tied to your annual impact report or a seasonal social media campaign such as Giving Tuesday.

Major Gift Fundraising: Major gift fundraising is targeted to donors who have the capacity to make a large gift, and involves building a philanthropic relationship. When soliciting major gifts, be sure to find out what motivates your prospect and their needs and hopes for their philanthropy, so you can offer specific giving opportunities that align with their interests.

Planned Giving: This includes wills and bequests, often a percentage of the donor's estate.

Pooled Income Funds: Cash or securities are transferred to a nonprofit in return for a stated percentage of the donor's assets each year.

Some donors choose to give anonymously so be sure to allow for accepting such donations within your organization.

Are you a funder?

If you are a funder searching for digital inclusion programs to support, this manual can guide your understanding of programmatic best practices and ways to support your community.

When investing in digital inclusion programs in your community, consider your role and influence.

- Are you making space for program leaders to work with community members?
- Did you allow for the time and funding for the program to be co-created between a community organization and the community served?
- Do your timeline and expectations adequately reflect the time it takes for a community to develop and uplift a new program?
- Are you asking your programs to use community-based evaluation? Do you provide guidance and funding to conduct this evaluation?
- Do you include time for outreach to increase the diversity of your funding applicants?
- Does your funding application process include pre-application information sessions or workshops?
- Do you provide 1:1 guidance and support throughout the funding application process?
- Do you follow Race and Social Justice best practices in your digital inclusion program design? Refer to the resources shared in the Digital Equity as Community Equity and Power section for ideas.
- Is your match requirement reasonable? If you must include a match, make it as expansive as possible. This may include time spent preparing and submitting the proposal, higher in-kind volunteer rates, etc.

Local, State, and Federal Funding

The Digital Equity Act

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) of 2021, or the **Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL),** provides $65 billion in federal funding to help everyone in America connect to high-speed internet access and use. Of those funds, $2.75 billion funds two grant programs to support digital equity and digital inclusion activities: the **State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program,** and the **Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program.**

The **State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program** is one program divided into two phases of grants distributed sequentially --(1) planning ($60 million), then (2) capacity ($1.44 billion) with the Capacity Awards intended to implement the state plans devised in the planning phase. States embarked on a planning process in 2022 and their state digital equity plan will be their roadmap for working towards digital equity within their state.

Now that states and territories have completed their digital equity plans, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), US Department of Commerce has opened the first round of funding for the State Digital Equity Capacity Grant program. States and territories are permitted to subgrant their Capacity Award to eligible entities to help implement the state's digital equity plan. Each subgrant program (including the eligibility criteria and allocation sizes) may vary as states and territories will align their program with the goals outlined in their plans. If you haven't connected with your State's Administering Entity (usually a state broadband office), now is the time to do so! NDIA has published a series of blog posts about the Capacity Grant program and steps to take to help prepare for subgrant applications.

NTIA opened the **Digital Equity Competitive Grant** program in August, 2024. These funds will be available on a competitive basis, and NDIA is encouraging organizations to apply using the "hub and spoke model," with one organization serving as the lead for a consortium application.

All states have an Administering Entity that will administer the funds for the Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program to support the digital equity plan they created as part of the **Digital Equity Act**. Contact the Administering Entities in your state to learn more about working with them.

Other Government Funding

There are considerable federal funding opportunities available to eligible entities, like nonprofits, through federal grants, but these are not explicitly digital inclusion opportunities. Federal grants can be complex and intimidating, but resources are available to support you through the often tedious process of applying. Grants.gov is an official website run by the United States Government that provides information on the application process, determining eligibility, getting help, grant writing basics, a learning center, and more.

Consider partnering with other cross-sector organizations on digital equity programs to expand your eligibility for federal funding. This is a great opportunity to work with other programs in your ecosystem, and partner with different types of organizations, such as libraries, schools, universities, and nonprofits. Federal programs are often administered through state offices. Contact your state office to see if you may be eligible for federal funds directly through them.

State agencies may also be good partners for funding opportunities, including the state broadband office, state library, state board of education, and colleges and universities.

Local-level funding opportunities are a good option for community-based organizations and anchor institutions. Digital equity coalitions are a great way to connect with local organizations working toward digital equity in your area and learn about possible partnerships and funding opportunities.

County and municipal governments may also have grant opportunities. Departments and divisions with digital equity initiatives may include aging and adult services, community services, criminal justice services, homeless services, housing and community development, information technology, library services, and youth services. Internet service providers, technology companies, banks, and other for-profit organizations may have social impact, grants, and/or volunteer programs that may be a good fit for your program.

Contracting and Consulting

As you build your digital inclusion programs, opportunities to contract with another organization for your program's work may arise. Different than subgranting, contracting is a direct agreement that you will perform a service and be compensated for it. Consulting means you're being asked to advise on specific topics of lived experience and/or expertise and have a signed contract agreeing to a set of deliverables. This work can be paid or gratis (free).

Fee for service work, including consulting, is an excellent way to keep your organization funded and able to provide digital inclusion programs to a wide range of community members. When considering if a contract or consulting opportunity is right for you, consider the following:

- How will this bring about positive change in your community?
- Who will be impacted by the outcomes of this work?
- Are you the right people for the work? Can you recommend or include someone with lived experience?

Community Tech Network offers capacity building support to organizations working in digital inclusion. They offer a variety of service bundles that include a diagnostic needs assessment, and then help to co-create pathways for success, which includes staff development through the CTN DigitalLift courses, resource packages, customized audience content, cohort meetings and more.

By sharing their expertise gained from years of experience in the field, they can help organizations with less capacity and experience.

Sustaining the Movement

Sustaining a strong flow of funding into the world of digital inclusion work depends on sustaining the momentum the movement has gained over the last 5 years. NDIA's executive director, Angela Siefer outlined six strategies you can use to sustain the momentum of your work and movement, and sustain the work for the future. [39]

1. **Spread awareness.** Keep discussing your work and impact. Talk about both the programs and the success community members have found.

2. **Build partnerships and coalitions.** Our ecosystems are our strengths. We have already seen how coalitions have an impact on local and state decision-making around digital inclusion funding and policy.

3. **Use your data and analytics strategically.** Data has repeatedly shown the digital divide is real and increasing. Now, we have to prove that we have the solution. Studies, program evaluations, and data collection are critical to creating a future for digital inclusion.

4. **Layering digital inclusion with other programs.** Digital inclusion programs don't just solve the digital divide. Embrace the fact that digital inclusion cannot stand alone, and requires the co-creation of digital inclusion programs with partners in all different sectors.

5. **Keep growing an inclusive community.** Keep up the momentum of bringing new and diverse community members and professionals into the digital inclusion world. Fresh expertise, lived experience, and new connections will help to keep the movement moving forward.

6. **Advocate for ongoing federal support.** Digital inclusion work is not a trend. It is not a solution to a temporary problem. By engaging with our federal allies and elected officials, we can continue to request ongoing, permanent funding to help keep our work alive.

Strategic Allies and Investors

Another key relationship to build is with the organizations and corporations that will directly benefit from your work (whether they know it or not) and have the ability to fund the work directly and/or influence the funding decisions of others. Digital inclusion programs are proven to have economic, health, and social benefits to their communities, and this benefit does not stop with program participants.

(39) Siefer, Angela. 2024. "Sustaining the Movement and Funding: The Future of Digital Inclusion." Https://Www.digitalinclusion.org/Blog/2024/02/15/Sustaining-The-Movement-And-Funding-The-Future-of-Digital-Inclusion/. NDIA. February 15, 2024.

Community institutions, especially social service programs, internet service providers, healthcare systems, banks, and businesses directly benefit from a community that has home connectivity, devices, and strong digital skills.

Your program should put effort toward developing your messaging around how your program will impact them and how your digital inclusion work solves problems that they have been experiencing but are unable to address. Help them understand how they gain from your success. Frame opportunities to fund or access in-kind support for digital inclusion programs as a return on investment (ROI) for their own benefit .

Examples of digital inclusion programs impacting local economics

Banks - with more devices and digital skills, more community members will have access to banking in their region, especially in underbanked urban and rural regions.

Higher Education - digital skills and devices mean more community members will have access to the tools needed for higher education, or to become employed by local universities

Healthcare Systems - with a combination of devices, skills, and connectivity, more community members will be able to engage in telehealth options, and keep up to date with their providers via online healthcare portals

Large Local Corporations - digital skills, access to devices, and connectivity can offer a local corporation a larger, more digitally skilled, self-sufficient workforce, and more online customers

Government - robust connectivity options are a draw for remote workers, and digital inclusion work can easily create a healthier, more engaged, and more economically mobile workforce in a region

Internet Service Providers - with more and more community members having digital skills and devices, in addition to the desire to get online, internet service providers will see a rise in demand for their service and increase in their customer base

Banks

While the impact digital inclusion programs have on banks is obvious - our programs drive economic development, build wealth in communities, and provide more community members who are willing and engaged in online banking. But there is also a strategy behind the allyship of banks and digital inclusion programs.

The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA), a Federal law from 1977, requires federal banking regulators like the Federal Reserve to help meet the credit needs of communities where they operate and do business. The Federal Reserve supervises their state member banks to ensure their compliance, and assists them in learning about and participating in community development activities. A bank's investment in a digital inclusion program may now count (dependent upon the regulatory authority) as a "qualifying activity" for Community Reinvestment Act credit. [40]

The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas released a framework for their community in 2016, becoming the first banking institution to explicitly identify closing the digital divide as a critical goal for communities and banks.[41] Their framework identifies the impact digital skills, device, and connectivity programs have on their communities, and how the issues of digital inclusion are tied to issues of social equity and economic development.

Since 2016, more and more banks are doing the important work of funding and supporting digital inclusion programs. When working with banks, try to gain an understanding of their funding interests and priorities, and see where your goals may overlap.

Healthcare Systems

The need for digital inclusion programming was felt acutely by healthcare systems in 2020, and the shift to a more virtual healthcare space has not slowed down. Tools that allow community members to receive care remotely, and to be active in their health care are only useful for reaching their patients if they have the right devices, connectivity, and digital skills to use them.

The connection between digital inclusion programs and positive mental health outcomes is also a rising priority, with organizations such as **Division of Digital Psychiatry at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center** and the **Mental Health Association of San Francisco** developing their own digital inclusion programs offering devices and digital skills instruction to combat isolation and promote engagement with their wellness teams.

In addition, as of January 2024, the Medicare Advantage plan required recipients to be screened for digital skills knowledge, and be referred to assistance in their community.[42]

(40) "Community Reinvestment Act (CRA)," Board Of Governors Of The Federal Reserve System, updated December 7, 2018, https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/cra_about.htm

(41) "Closing the Digital Divide: A Framework for Meeting CRA Obligations." 2016. Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. https://www.dallasfed.org/cd/pubs/digitaldivide.aspx

(42) "Medicare Advantage | Northstar Digital Literacy." Northstar Digital Literacy. Accessed July 10, 2024, https://www.digitalliteracyassessment.org/solutions/medicare-advantage

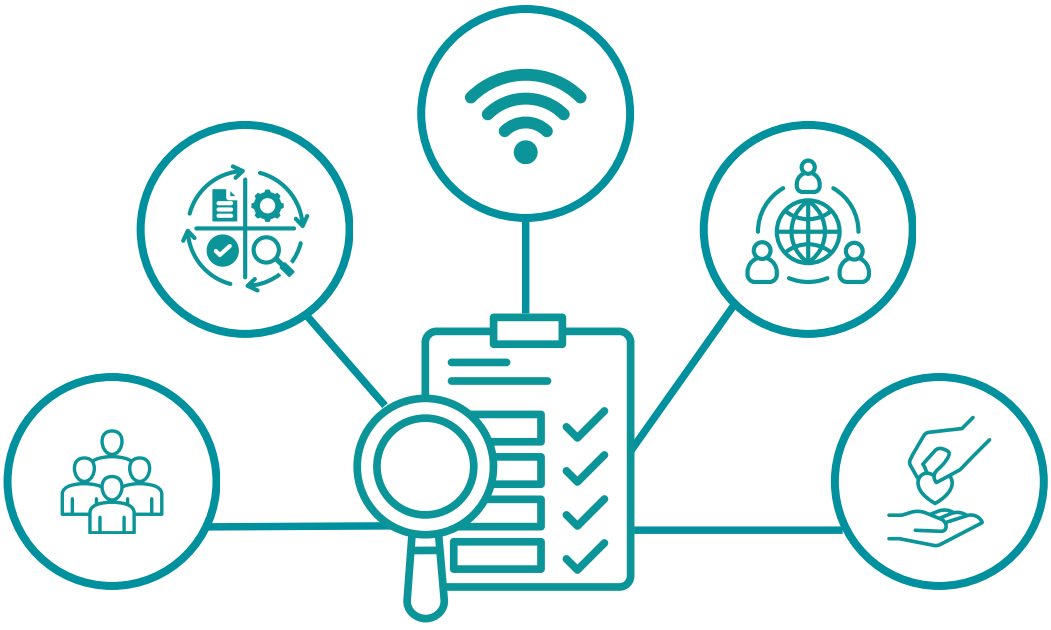
Evaluating Your Program

Planning and implementing a digital inclusion program should also include space, time and funds for evaluation, adaptations, and change. Adapting or changing a program is progress. The opportunity to learn from new information, and adjust to new technologies and use of them, creates opportunities for more sustainable programs.

In this manual, we are addressing evaluation for the purposes of program development, with a focus on continuous improvement, and establishing some credible measurements of program performance that are helpful when seeking funding for your program.

However, many programs will also encounter evaluation and reporting standards focused on compliance, quantifying return on investment, or other specifics dictated by a funder. To learn more about evaluation with these purposes in mind, we recommend you explore *Chapter VI: Performance Measurement, Program Evaluation, and Sustainability* in NDIA's **State Digital Equity Implementation Manual**.[43]

Evaluating your digital inclusion program is more than just counting the number of seats filled or devices distributed. Thoughtful program evaluation can help you determine which aspects of your program are the most effective, allow for tracking services and anticipating future capacity needs, advocating for additional funding and resources, and, most importantly, understanding if your program is achieving its desired impact.



(43) Amy Huffman. 2024. "The State Digital Equity Implementation Manual." NDIA. 2024. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/state-digital-equity-implementation-manual/.

The ideal time to develop the evaluation plan for your program is at the same time as you are developing the program scope and strategies. Recognizing that evaluation will help you understand multiple facets of your program, consider the following areas:

Community member satisfaction - Are community members satisfied with services being provided? Are you being asked for different offerings? Are needs and desires not being met?

Program relevancy - Are you prepared to meet the needs of community members with regard to current technology, internet, and digital skills? Are you internally preparing for new technology and developing plans for how to work with emerging needs?

Ease of participation - Are community members able to easily engage with the program? Does the time, place, and methodology decrease barriers to entry for the community? Are there adaptations for appropriate covered populations?

Sustainability and growth - How will this program remain consistent and sustainable? Are there plans for growth and development to match the pace at which the community learns, and develops new needs and goals? Are you aware of possible partners and networks for your community members? Are your community members learning and growing?

Ease of participation - Are you serving your target audience and those who wish to be served? Are your staff, volunteers, and community members experiencing fair and equitable service and employment? Is this program advancing racial, class, and community equity?

When engaging in the evaluation of your digital inclusion program, do not limit yourself to summative or formal evaluations at designated points in your funding cycles or fiscal year. Instead, try engaging in more regular check-ins or formative assessments to check for new areas of growth and to monitor current areas of success. When you maintain a rolling cycle of evaluation, you can easily determine areas of adaptation, change, and growth for your programs, and not waste any time as you meet all the needs of your community members.

The Digital Opportunity Compass[44] is a tool developed by the **Quello Center, Merit, NDIA**, and the **Digital Equity Research Center** for implementing and evaluating digital equity work, specifically planning and broadband implementation. While these types of digital inclusion activities differ significantly from digital inclusion community programs, the Compass provides a meaningful framework for the future of digital equity, and may help to influence your own unique program evaluation.

(44) "Digital Opportunities Compass | Digital Opportunities Compass: Metrics to Monitor, Evaluate, and Guide Broadband and Digital Equity Policy." 2023. https://quello.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Digital-Opportunites-Compass-Paper-20220223.pdf

Temple University's Computer Recycling Center has been at the forefront of digital equity in its north Philadelphia region. Their core strength of providing refurbished and affordable devices to their community members, including essential support staff, has grown to include digital skills instruction and support.

Staff from the IT department serving in the Computer Recycling Center listened to what the community wanted and needed and responded. After 16 years of dedication to digital equity by the Computer Recycling Center, the Temple University IT department connected with local and national partners, including Lenfest North Philadelphia Workforce Initiative (LNPWI), and Dell Technologies to create the robust Digital Equity Center for North Philadelphia residents.

The center offers an expanded vision of the initial work of the Computer Recycling Center, and additional services in response to their continued growth and community feedback, including a technical support line, affordable home internet navigation, digital skills instruction, and a community computer lab.

Telling Your Story and Sharing Your Work

Reporting Out

Many organizations are obligated or choose to create and share reports on their programs. These reports may include stories of impact, narratives of services provided, and specific data on which and how many community members were served.

Your reports should follow an asset-minded approach, celebrating the strengths, achievements, and assets of the program and community, and where growth and change have occurred. Lessons learned and changes made should also be included in reports, including the feedback and data that may have informed them.

Share your reports widely and maintain them online for future research. Many of the examples we share in this manual were first shared or discovered from a reporting document. While you may not initially feel the impact of reporting out to your digital inclusion colleagues, it is important to help other program managers learn from your work. If you explore the footnotes throughout this manual, you will find a variety of reporting structures and methods, as much of the information shared here is derived from publicly available reports. If you don't share about the work you've done, you cannot help others to do their best.

Reports should always be interpreted and shared with the direct community served by the program. Sharing out how you view and evaluate your community is critical to maintaining trust and transparency around your digital inclusion program. Additionally, providing context to your reporting, such as explaining the connection between the data you share and incoming grant funds, can be helpful when discussing what you're sharing and why. Try to find a way to celebrate your reporting with your community and share your findings in a fun and interesting way, such as colorful graphics, a short video, or on t-shirts.

Ethical Storytelling

When considering impact stories for internal and external reports in the media, keep in mind the privacy and dignity of your community members. In digital inclusion, we aim to empower our community members, not just to share where they began and where they are now. Here are a few tips for ensuring your storytelling is accurate, ethical, and community-centered:

- Ensure you have the informed consent of community members featured. If your community member is not fluent in English, ensure a translator is involved in this discussion.
- Tell a story that uplifts the community member and the community's strengths and achievements.
- Use the asset-framing mindset you have used throughout your planning and program.
- Engage in preferred language and people-first language. Ask your community members how they would like to be described.

Just as with sharing a community member's story, ensure you have the explicit and informed permission of community and staff members before using photos, videos, or other identifying materials. Just because someone's name or face is not shared in a photo or story, does not guarantee anonymity.

Digital Inclusion Week

Digital Inclusion Week is an annual celebration of digital inclusion excellence bringing our community together and promoting awareness of our work. Powered by NDIA, Digital Inclusion Week 2023 highlighted over 503 organizations worldwide. Through videos, social media posts, declarations by elected officials, community events, and more, stories of digital inclusion programs were shared driving more awareness for digital inclusion work.

Digital Inclusion Week is also celebrated by digital inclusion events, such as classes, internet program sign-up campaigns, educational webinars, and more for both digital inclusion practitioners and the community. It is a dedicated time where we can learn from each other, formally and informally, and share the importance of digital inclusion with the nation.

Each year, a committee of NDIA affiliates and staff develop marketing materials, event outlines, social media graphics, and other materials to support the week-long event. These materials can be found on the NDIA website. Explore Digital Inclusion Week social media content via the hashtag #DIW2023 for content from 2023, and #DIW2024 for Digital Inclusion Week 2024.

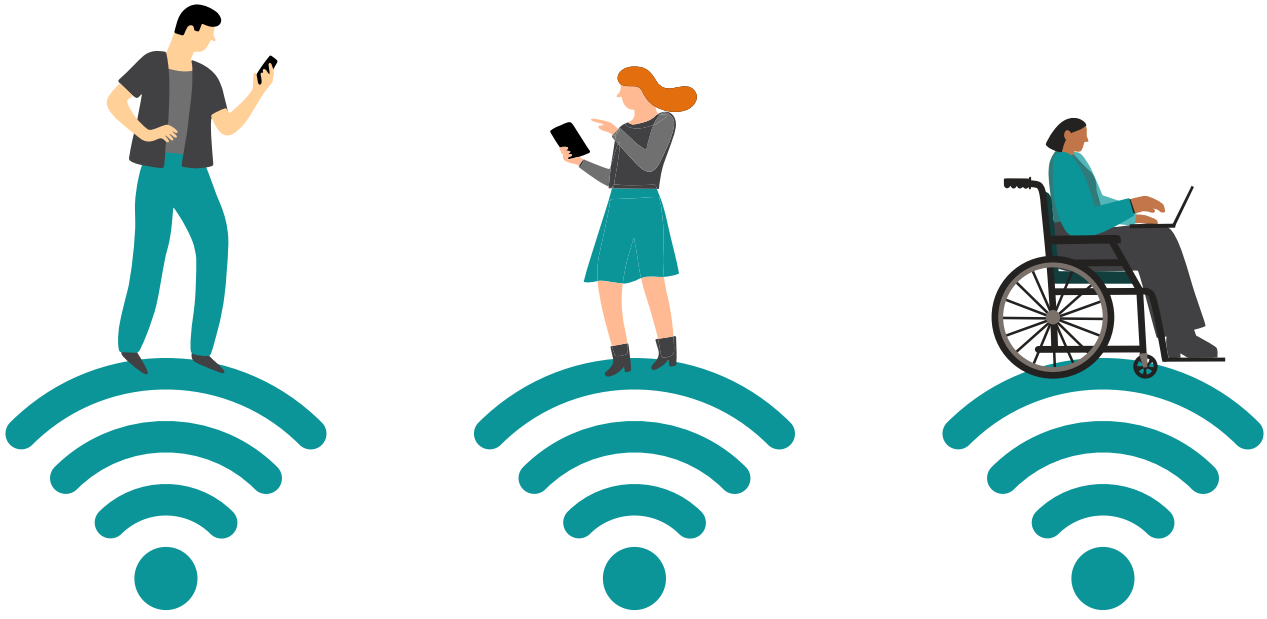
Bringing It All Together & Looking Forward

Digital inclusion is a field based in trust as a foundational element. Our communities, coalitions, and programs all work collaboratively toward digital equity, addressing the barriers to digital inclusion everywhere.

You may finish reading this manual and feel overwhelmed by the advice and experiences from the digital inclusion practitioners who came before you. Or you may be thrilled and excited and ready to begin! Regardless of how you may feel, you probably have questions.

The NDIA community is ready to support you through our conversations on our community listserv, webinars, community calls, and our annual gathering, Net Inclusion. Net Inclusion is a conference that brings together thousands of digital inclusion experts, community-based programs, novices, government officials, funders, and more to learn, share, and network. Learn about previous conferences, and be the first to know about future convenings at NetInclusion.org.

If you are an affiliate of NDIA, you already have access to the thousands of digital inclusion experts and practitioners, but if you aren't, consider joining us. Learn a little more about that here: https://www.digitalinclusion.org/join



The Digital Inclusion Program Manual Checklist

- [ ] **We have defined who we are:**
  - [ ] Program manager
  - [ ] Program funder
  - [ ] Program designer
  - [ ] Program employee
  - [ ] Other
- [ ] **We have engaged in research, listening, and information gathering**
  - [ ] We located data about our community
  - [ ] We have learned how community engagement works, and understand the spectrum of engagement
  - [ ] We asked community members for input
    - [ ] We established a method for ongoing feedback
    - [ ] We have identified key community members to speak to again
  - [ ] We engaged in asset-mapping to learn about community programs and potential partnerships
    - [ ] We have discovered possible partners and organizations to connect with
  - [ ] We connected with other organizations doing digital inclusion work
    - [ ] We understand how we can fit into the digital inclusion ecosystem
  - [ ] We have a plan for continued research, feedback, and community engagement
- [ ] **We determined our area of focus and it is:**
  - [ ] Digital Skills Training
  - [ ] Appropriate Devices
  - [ ] Affordable and Low Cost Internet
  - [ ] Technical Support

- [ ] **We have determined our service model**
- [ ] **We have determined our staffing model**
    - [ ] We have a plan for staff training and ongoing support
- [ ] **We have built partnerships to source hardware and software**
- [ ] **We have explored options for digital skills training and staff training**
- [ ] **We have planned for sustainable funds for our program**
- [ ] **We have planned how we will evaluate our program**
- [ ] **We are prepared for change and excited about continuously adapting our program to the needs of our community members**
- [ ] **We understand the importance of telling the story of our program, and how to do that ethically**
- [ ] **We have questions to ask the NDIA community, and know how to reach them!**