Bridging the Gap: Findings and Identified Needs from the 2024-2025 City of Albuquerque Public Library Digital Navigator Program

Introduction

New Mexico State Library's Digital Equity Program addresses community needs for technology assistance, privacy spaces, and training opportunities primarily through the system of public libraries that reach urban, rural, and suburban areas of the state. As access to technology has increased, so too has there been a decrease in non-digital access to services, information, and educational opportunities. This creates growing gaps between those with the skills, hardware, software, and comfort levels to take advantage and those without.

One way to directly address digital equity gaps is through digital navigator programs that provide one on one assistance to the public, meeting community members where they are to address their unique challenges and help identify opportunities to help them thrive. Such programs are by their nature complex and not easy to start but can be significantly valuable to those who are able to take advantage of them.

New Mexico's public libraries offer a network of community anchors poised to meet individuals where they are. There are currently 103 public libraries, with 135 outlets including branches, comprising x municipal libraries, x nonprofit libraries, and x tribal libraries. About 60% are considered rural libraries.

A small Digital Equity Program pilot program in 2024 and 2025 sought to test the feasibility of digital navigator programs for scalable use statewide primarily through public libraries, as well as identify specific needs of the Albuquerque, New Mexico community.

Methods

In September 2024, the New Mexico State Library (NMSL) launched a pilot program aimed at addressing technology access gaps at the Public Library in Albuquerque, NM. The program aimed to train Digital Navigators to serve as key digital access points within libraries, offer classes, and provide informal tech support to patrons. Additionally, the initiative sought to empower the navigators to educate in-house staff on digital equity opportunities and resources available in libraries.

Comcast contributed $70,000, which was managed provided by AmeriCorps through their Lead for America service program. The project was led by the New Mexico State Library's Digital Equity Program Manager, Bo Ford, in collaboration with the City of Albuquerque's Broadband Program Manager, Catherine Nicolaou and the Assistant Albuquerque Bernalillo County Public Library's Associate Library Director, Kelly Murphy. Additional support and guidance came from local nonprofit organizations, including the New Mexico Black Leadership Council, Encuentro, and Teeniors.

The New Mexico State Library (NMSL) and AmeriCorps collaborated closely during the interview process to select two Digital Navigators from a small pool of candidates. Each navigator received a $35,000 stipend through the Lead for America service program. Service members were expected to submit weekly timesheets reflecting a 40-hour workweek, with the goal of completing a 10-month term or reaching 1,700 service hours. Lead for America assigned a Program Officer to each fellow, who conducted bi-weekly check-ins and provided guidance on program expectations.

To support the fellows and ensure program alignment, NMSL, the City of Albuquerque (COA), and the New Mexico Black Leadership Council (NMBLC) began meeting monthly. These meetings focused on learning from the Digital Navigators' weekly experiences and providing them with resources, connections, and guidance to support their goals and impact.

Over the 10-month service period, one of the two Digital Navigators exited the program early, citing factors such as low compensation, emerging career opportunities in their field of study, and a lack of clear direction and support.

Each service member was tasked with supporting all nineteen public library branches in the City of Albuquerque. Their responsibilities included building relationships with branch managers and establishing a consistent presence, particularly within high-need library locations.

Barriers to Digital Equity Access and Implementation

As outlined in the New Mexico State Library's (NMSL) Digital Needs Plan (https://nmstatelibrary.org/wp-content/uploads/NMSL_Digital-Needs-Plan-Final-Draft.pdf), key barriers to technology access in libraries include: limited broadband availability; affordability challenges faced by low-income households in securing broadband, devices, and technical support; the need for digital literacy support among individuals from covered populations; and a lack of resources and expertise to address digital needs within Tribal and rural communities.

To address these challenges and bridge the digital divide, NMSL is:

- Supporting E-Rate applications to improve broadband access,

- Promoting fair and equitable access to technology through both library initiatives and community outreach,

- Leveraging partnerships with AARP's Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) and GetSetUp to strengthen staff training and direct-to-patron support, and

- Piloting a Digital Navigator program while using existing resources to train library staff across the state.

Since November 2023, the New Mexico State Library's (NMSL) Digital Equity Program Manager has visited over 90 libraries across the state, with a goal of reaching up to 132, including Tribal libraries and Navajo Chapters. During these visits, one of the biggest needs identified was the lack of digital navigation support—staff who can help people with unique tech questions and digital skills.

When Comcast Communications learned about this need, they saw an opportunity to support it in areas where they already serve or are expanding broadband needs. Because of limited funding and staff capacity, NMSL focused initial efforts on a pilot program to the City of Albuquerque, with the goal of learning as much as possible towards implementation of statewide or regional digital navigators.

Rolling Up Our Sleeves

 On Monday, September 16, 2024, the Digital Navigator Pilot Program officially launched at the Albuquerque Main Public Library. Two AmeriCorps members joined the New Mexico State Library's Digital Equity Program Manager at 10 AM to kick off the initiative. Together,

they defined early success metrics and facilitated onboarding and orientation activities. The first week included an overview of digital equity and inclusion, identification of relevant training resources, and initial assignments across the city's public library branches.

From Friday, October 11 through Monday, December 30, 2024, the AmeriCorps members met with all 19 branch managers within the Albuquerque Public Library System, which spans 188 square miles. Over this period, the digital navigators completed multiple train-the-trainer certifications, including:

- NorthStar Digital Literacy

- AARP's Digital Skills Ready@50+

- Digital Lift (formerly Community Tech Network)

- World Education Digital US

> *Community Tech Network has been an invaluable resource in starting my digital equity journey. Their Digital Navigator Overview helped me to better understand my place in this field and the true value of the work that I do. All of the classes and webinars put out by CTN are crafted with care and will elevate your service tenfold no matter if you are a trainer or a manager of trainers, not to mention the devices they provide to older adults which can totally change their entire lives and outlooks. I can't recommend learning and growing with CTN enough. – Olivia Lockley, Digital Navigator*

Outreach materials, including flyers, were created and distributed at select libraries, with extras kept on-hand for walk-ins and passive engagement.

The AmeriCorps members began with no prior experience in digital inclusion work. While they showed great initiative and dedication in navigating a steep learning curve, they also encountered several challenges. Including fear of public speaking, hesitation in teaching foundational digital literacy skills, and logistical barriers such as the cost of gas and difficulty visiting multiple locations in a single day.

Meetings with branch managers were largely productive and cooperative. However, many expressed reservations about dedicating space or time for the navigators due to the program's lack of defined structure, low anticipated foot traffic, limited meeting room availability, and unclear alignment with the library's immediate needs. This uncertainty slowed implementation in some locations.

These structural barriers exist against a backdrop of statewide digital challenges. New Mexico currently ranks 43rd nationally in broadband access, with approximately 22% of the population still unserved. Source
Albuquerque's "Wi-Fi in Neighborhoods" program is one local solution, offering free internet in community hubs, including libraries and community centers. Source
Additionally, the city continues to address a growing housing crisis. As of January 29, 2024, 2,740 people were experiencing homelessness in Albuquerque. Source

Despite early obstacles, the AmeriCorps members identified several champion library branches that showed enthusiasm and openness to hosting digital inclusion efforts. These included:

- Erna Ferguson Library
- International District Library
- North Valley Library
- Tony Hillerman Library
- Cherry Hills Library
- Central and Unser Library
- San Pedro Library
- Juan Tabo Library
- Albuquerque Main Library

The navigators also participated in three significant events during their service:

- The 2nd Annual Connect New Mexico Council Digital Equity Summit
- The 2024 New Mexico Broadband Summit
- The 2024 AmeriCorps Winter Institute

These events provided meaningful opportunities to network with other digital equity practitioners at both the state and national levels, strengthening their understanding and commitment to the work.

Unfortunately, on October 31, 2024, one of the two digital navigators exited the program unexpectedly due to personal reasons. As a result, the pilot was narrowed to serve five key libraries: Albuquerque Main, Erna Ferguson, International District, Central and Unser, and Cherry Hills.

Time spent at these libraries revealed valuable insights into the realities faced by staff. Barriers included limited physical space, small teams, time constraints, competing priorities, and a general lack of digital literacy training among library staff. Still, Albuquerque Main, Central and Unser, and the International District branches emerged as high-potential sites for deeper residency and pilot growth.

The digital navigator's work shifted toward supporting library staff by introducing and demonstrating resources such as:

- NorthStar Digital Literacy

- Goodwill Community Foundation (GCF) LearnFree.org

- New Mexico State Library's Digital Equity Program tools

- AARP OATS (Older Adults Technology Services)

In total, 11 City of Albuquerque library staff members received training in one or more of these platforms, including the city's Broadband Program Manager and the New Mexico State Library's Digital Equity Program Manager.

The pilot's success was bolstered by strong institutional partnerships. The City of Albuquerque's Associate Director played a key role in coordinating with branch managers, especially during a transitional period without a Public Library Director. The city's Broadband Program Manager also facilitated several high-value introductions with local civic leaders and nonprofit organizations.

Patron Support

We kept Fridays open for administrative work and visits with current or potential library branch sites. On Mondays and Tuesdays, we offered one-on-one help to patrons at the International District. Wednesdays were spent at Albuquerque Main Library, which became our main hub. On Thursdays, our digital navigator was available for walk-in help at the Central and Unser Library.

Since we only had one navigator and they could only be supervised once a week, a few managers had concerns. Common questions included: What will the navigator be doing? How much space will they need? And how long should they stay to help patrons?

In locations where we were already established, we used workstations near the public computers.

We posted a sign that said, "Tech Support – First Come, First Served." This helped set the navigator apart from library staff working at the checkout desk and made it easier for patrons to understand their role.

Erna Ferguson Public Library is a leader when it comes to offering tech support for patrons. They offer virtual classes every week and provide in-person help for tech questions. These classes are often full, and the manager has created a strong tech-friendly culture among the staff.

> *This positive environment gave our navigator more confidence to handle tech questions and become known as the "tech person" at other libraries. As their role grew, the navigator began helping patrons with things like Veteran Affairs claims, Social Security applications, health and food assistance forms, disability paperwork, and basic training on iPads, iPhones, tablets, and general tech skills.*

Our digital navigator worked in the role for five months and helped over 80 patrons while visiting more than 10 libraries across Albuquerque. It's clear that there's a strong need for more coverage. The hands-on experience from the role helped the navigator get a permanent job at the International District Library. This work may continue there through one-on-one support and possibly classes, using the AARP OATS cybersecurity training program.

Many interactions required a Spanish-speaking translator. In these situations, our navigator used tools like Google Translate and iTranslate to help communicate. With 49.2% of the population identifying as Hispanic or Latino, it's important to note that 72.9% of households reported speaking only English, while 20.6% reported speaking only Spanish. - https://www.areavibes.com/albuquerque-nm/demographics/. It was clear throughout the program that bilingual navigators are needed.

The Need

The need for digital inclusion services goes beyond Albuquerque. Cities and communities across New Mexico have different needs. Since launching the Digital Equity Program in October 2023, the New Mexico State Library has visited over 90 of the state's 136 libraries. It's clear that a Digital Navigator Program is truly needed.

As of 2025, New Mexico has approximately 60 rural and tribal libraries. These libraries are primarily located in small towns, unincorporated areas, and tribal communities across the state. Many of them operate with limited funding and rely heavily on volunteers or a single paid staff member. https://abiquiunews.com/news-and-features/new-mexico-rural-library-initiative?utm_source. In total, New Mexico has 136 public libraries, including municipal, nonprofit, and tribal institutions. The rural libraries serve smaller populations - often fewer than 3,000 residents - and play a vital role in providing access to books, technology, internet, and community programs in areas where such services are otherwise scarce. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/rural-libraries-endowment-invests-in-new-mexicos-small-communities?utm_source.

Absent from other free public options, many library patrons come to the library looking for help with technology problems. If a library is equipped through staff time, training, and adequate space and equipment, it can significantly improve access to social services and job skills, reduce social isolation, and even increase positive health impacts.

> ***Access to technology and digital skills is more important than ever for health, work, and social connection. Without reliable internet, devices, and someone to help navigate technology, many people struggle to use telehealth services, apply for jobs, take online classes, or access important benefits.***

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services calls digital access a "super determinant of health" because it affects almost every part of our lives, including healthcare, education, and employment (https://www.samhsa.gov/blog/digital-access-super-determinant-health?utm_source). Studies show that people who have digital support are better able to manage their health, stay connected with others, and find opportunities for growth (https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2022.811959/full?utm_source).

Digital Navigators bridge the gap by providing one-on-one support - whether it's helping someone set up an email account, use telehealth, or apply for a job online. Research shows that socially disadvantaged groups, especially older adults, face bigger challenges without this kind of help (https://bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12877-024-05612-y?utm_source).

Digital Navigators don't just teach skills - they connect people to services that improve health, create economic opportunities, and reduce social isolation. Building this workforce in communities is an important step to help every New Mexican thrive in today's fast-paced digital world.

Towards Statewide Digital Navigators

Based on lessons learned from this pilot, a statewide digital navigator program would need an estimated 21 staff.

A digital navigator program featuring a team of 21 staffed employees, including administrative staff, would cost roughly $1,260,000, figuring each staff member would be compensated at $60,000 minimum.

As of April 2025, the average salary for a Digital Navigator in the United States is approximately $67,806 per year, which equates to about $32.60 per hour (https://www.ziprecruiter.com/Salaries/Digital-Navigator-Salary?utm_source). Resources are freely available, especially on the National Digital Inclusion Alliance website. They offer helpful materials like a Digital Navigator toolkit, job descriptions, and a digital skills toolkit for diverse users. (https://www.digitalinclusion.org/resource/dn-job-description/).

Conclusions

With the cancellation of New Mexico's Promoting Internet Needs program, which was part of the Digital Equity Act and was planning on awarding over 8 million dollars to projects statewide, the need for action is even greater. It is important to make sure New Mexico does not get left behind because of digital gaps like lack of broadband access, devices, or trained staff. Closing these gaps is essential for the health, education, and economic well-being of all New Mexicans.

Drafted by Bo Ford

Digital Equity Program Manager

New Mexico State Library

Reviewed by Eli Guinnee

State Librarian

New Mexico State Library