Connecting Communities: A Library Approach to Digital Readiness and Adoption

This playbook is not a one-size-fits-all guide for libraries looking to meet patrons' technology needs with trained staff, print and digital resources, combined services, or device and tech support. Its main goal is to help you start creating a digital readiness plan, put a digital adoption strategy into action, and adapt your services as technology changes and patron needs evolve.

What to Keep in Mind as You Read

1. What's motivating you to start a digital access program?
    a. Why is now the right time, and how will it benefit your library?
2. What digital exclusion challenges are you hoping to address?
    a. Why is your library the right one to lead this effort? What will make your approach stand out and succeed?
3. Who will your program impact?
    a. How will their lives improve because of your work, and how will you keep the program going long term?

Ideas to Explore:

- **Don't** rush the process. Take time to build relationships with your patrons and plan thoughtful solutions.
- **Avoid** jargon and acronyms. Use plain, clear language - and communicate in the languages your community speaks.
- **Don't** overlook your staff. Provide "train-the-trainer" opportunities and keep finding new professional development resources.
- **Remember** that your patrons' needs go beyond digital inclusion. Approach them as a whole person when designing and delivering your programs.

Digital Equity and Inclusion Made Simple:

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).

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.

How do Libraries Support Technology Access?

- A **digital access program** is a series of planned activities designed to meet one or more of the following needs:
  - Digital skills instruction
  - Appropriate device access
  - Health and wellness support (telehealth)
  - Pairing resources that intersect with tech access (civil justice, distance learning, workforce development, etc.)
- **Digital access events** are one-time or recurring activities that provide immediate digital inclusion services and raise awareness, such as community conversations, device distributions, or a single training session.
- A **digital access ecosystem** is a network of programs and policies designed to meet the unique needs of a community. Coordinating organizations work together to address all aspects of the digital divide, including affordable broadband, devices, and digital skills.
  - Signs of a Healthy Digital Access Ecosystem
    - Programs and policies covering all aspects of the digital divide
    - Affordable broadband and device options
    - Multilingual digital skills and literacy training
    - Tech support for hardware and software
    - Hardware and software technical support
    - Digital navigation to connect residents with services

▪ Collaborative solutions with community partners

Learning About Your Library Community's Digital Access

Understanding your library community through data and stories is essential for grants, program planning, and partnerships. Show a clear picture of digital access, including internet availability, device ownership, and who could benefit from digital skills training. Be transparent and respectful.

Example: [Digital Skills - Borderplex Connect](#)

Mapping the People and Places That Make Digital Adoption Possible

Asset mapping is an important step when planning a library-based digital access program. It helps you gather information, build connections, and understand the local technology access landscape.

In this context, asset mapping means identifying the resources in your community that already exist or could be developed to support digital access and equity goals. You do not need specialized software or complex visuals to do it.

By mapping these assets, your library can see the full network of organizations, programs, spaces, and other resources available. An asset inventory helps you understand who is offering which services, identify gaps in access, and uncover opportunities for partnerships and collaboration.

Kickstarting Your Asset Mapping

- Make your first list: Begin with an informal list of organizations already involved in digital inclusion in your community. Add more resources over time.
- Organize Your Information: Choose software, consistent data fields, and a clear process for gathering data.
  - Example: [New Mexico State Library Data Portal](#)

- Decide What to Track: Determine which details are required for all assets and which are optional.
- Bring in Partners: Work with others to collect data and consider using a survey to reach more organizations.

Working With Your Community

For librarians, it's important to involve your community from the very beginning and keep engaging them throughout your program. Doing this on purpose helps you understand what your patrons need, build trust, and create programs and services that really help. Staying connected with your community makes your work more effective and meaningful.

Communicate - When sharing information about new or changing digital inclusion programs, treat it as a two-way conversation. Give people space to ask questions, share concerns, and provide input. Trust grows when community members feel they are kept informed.

Engage - Being engaged means actively seeking feedback on your plans. Use listening to sessions, surveys, feedback forms, or other ways to hear directly from community members and understand their needs.

Join Forces - By the time you work with community members to co-create your program, they should already know about it. It's hard for people to contribute ideas, feedback, or inspiration if they don't understand what the program is about.

Strengthen - By the time community members are involved in co-creating your program, they should already know about it. This helps them feel confident sharing ideas, giving feedback, and taking an active role in shaping the program.

When planning community engagement, seek out trusted community leaders. They can advise you on community needs and help invite others to participate in your program's planning and development.

Some best practices include:

- Communicate regularly and keep your commitment
- Be clear about what information you collect, how you store it, and how it will be used.

- Share the results from community surveys or feedback sessions to keep everyone informed.
- Work with community partners to make sure you can reach all members of the community.

Partnering for Progress

At some point, every program will need new funding or support to keep growing and serving the community, no matter how it started or who funded it first. Even well-established institutions like libraries and community colleges often find themselves seeking outside resources and building new partnerships. For smaller nonprofits, this is often the case from day one. Building relationships and collaborating with organizations that share your commitment to digital inclusion should be a natural and ongoing part of your library's work.

Expanding Your Network

In addition to building relationships within your local digital access network, look for ways to create formal partnerships with other organizations. This could include co-developing programs, sharing your services with their participants, or applying for funding together. You might also invite community partners to join an advisory committee, contribute to program evaluation, or serve on your board of directors.

Building strong partnerships helps expand your network, highlights your impact to a broader audience, and brings in diverse skills, perspectives, and experiences. It also shows your commitment to working collaboratively and transparently, which can create new opportunities for meaningful program growth and long-term success.

Creating Your Community Tech Strategy

As you begin developing your plan for technological access and equity initiatives, refer to the recommendations and checklist below (page 10) to guide your work. Engaging the community early and often is key, regular conversations help you understand their needs

and priorities. This stage is also a great opportunity to reach out to other organizations, explore potential partnerships, and share your plans for the program.

Pinpointing Your Program Priorities

It can be tempting to try to solve the entire technology access gap in your community at once, but choosing one or a few specific areas to focus on, while leaving room to expand later, will help you grow and adapt your efforts. Align your work with your strengths and resources and keep your community's needs at the center.

Know Your Capabilities and Tools

Once you've mapped the assets in your community, turn your attention inward to your organization or immediate circle. Take stock of the resources, skills, and expertise you have in plenty. Concentrate on the areas where you are strongest and can contribute the most.

Let Community Insights Guide You

After talking with your community, doing surveys, mapping resources, and looking at some basic data, you can start to see where your library's digital access network has gaps. Look at how other libraries run similar programs and think about whether your library can fill these gaps in a way that is fair and sustainable for your community.

Who Will Your Library Serve?

As you decide the focus of your library's digital access program, you can begin to identify the audience you want to serve. This may become clear by looking at gaps in your community's current digital equity network, guidance from other organizations, communities that already trust your library, or the areas where your library excels.

Hearing from Your Library Users

Talking with community partners in your area, including organizations that offer digital access programs, can help your library decide on a program focus. Sharing your plans with organizations you've worked with before may also provide guidance and direction. Most importantly, make sure your library invites community members to be part of these conversations.

Digital Access Programs in Action

Every community has its own needs and priorities when it comes to technology access, so there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The examples below showcase a variety of library digital access programs that have worked well, offering ideas and inspiration rather than a complete list of possibilities.

Determining the approach that will most effectively support your community, and library depends on several considerations, such as:

- Insights gathered from talking with community members and reviewing local data,
- Available resources and funding constraints,
- The goals, strengths, and abilities of your library and any partner organizations,
- Skills, knowledge, and availability of staff and volunteers.

Consider the following:

- Walk-In Support
- Open Technology Labs
- Programs for All Ages
- Structured Workshops (Basic Computing, Job Skills, AI, and More)
- Virtual Health Access
- Online Learning Support
- Programs for Children and Teens
- Private or Secure Spaces for Users

Digital navigators in libraries serve as knowledgeable supporters, helping patrons access affordable internet, devices, and digital skills. They provide ongoing, personal support either on-demand or by appointment, addressing both immediate needs and long-term goals. Navigators work closely with community members to understand their priorities, goals, and resources, then connect them to the right tools and offer step-by-step guidance when needed.

Example: Digital Navigator Model - National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Teaching and Assisting Library Users

Investing in ongoing training and professional growth shows your library's commitment to its staff. Offering development opportunities on topics like trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, and skills tailored to individual staff helps build a strong foundation for your technology access programs. Budgeting for professional development from the start ensures staff have chances to keep learning and improving.

Staff supporting digital access may not fit traditional library roles, but they require the same guidance, supervision, and support as any other team member. When supervisors understand the unique challenges and responsibilities of these roles, it can help prevent burnout and turnover. A dedicated and proactive manager is essential for keeping staff motivated and successful.

For rural librarians in New Mexico, we see many of the same challenges as metro libraries, but there are some different challenges we see in a rural area. First, in many rural areas, our citizens are economically depressed, senior citizen heavy demographics, and technology challenged. Many of our seniors find navigating computers and required items online to be outside their skill level, such as jury duty or medical portals. Many come in looking for help in printing, resetting passwords, end of life documents such as wills, power of attorney for medical or financial purposes, social security items and more. With our new telemedicine booth, we are taking classes to better understand how to best help our patrons. We are planning to offer GETSETUP classes in-house as many of our seniors don't have Wi-Fi and find the internet and computer world challenging on their own. We think that offering group classes with a facilitator to answer their questions or clarify issues from the lesson will best serve this demographic. We utilize our Facebook, local newspaper, and flyers in our library and in businesses around town to promote these services to the community at large. We can see the visible stress on patrons who are intimidated by technology. It can be frustrating for us and multiply that exponentially for our senior patrons. Our local Business Professionals of America chapter from the local high school has reached out to us. One of their community service mandates is helping seniors and those needing technology help with a student to help them learn how to get more comfortable with technology, whether that be a cell phone or computer. As always, the most important thing we can do is help our patrons and community succeed, in every

way we possibly can. With more things becoming an online only service, digital inclusion technology and training for staff becomes more and more critical in our community.

<p style="text-align:center">- The Fort Sumner Public Library Team</p>

Expanding Resources for Technology Access

Libraries can secure funding for technology access programs through a wide range of grants aimed at education, community growth, and innovation. Start by reviewing your community research and talking with local partners to understand who needs support and where. Use that information to target funding opportunities that focus on specific populations, areas, or collaborative partnerships, helping your program reach the people who will benefit most.

Funding for digital access programs has come from many different sources, supporting a range of initiatives such as:

- Strengthening rural areas and local communities
- Educational programs for all ages, including adult learning and library workshops
- Access to telehealth, civil justice support, and more
- Workforce development
- Promoting civic participation, including census involvement
- Supporting older adults and senior services

Consider looking beyond the usual funding sources and think about all the people and groups who could benefit from increased digital access. This approach can help you discover new partners, backers, and strategies to keep your programs growing and sustainable. Before dedicated digital access funding existed, early programs were supported through a mix of general grants and community resources. Today, there are more opportunities than ever, but also more programs competing for them. Stay creative, explore unconventional partnerships, and let your program evolve in new directions.

Putting it All Together & Looking Forward

Achieving strong results in your library is possible. The New Mexico State Library supports you with resources and information. The digital equity landing page includes materials, training, reports, and data that show the impact of digital inclusion across the state.

Library Digital Access Planning Checklist:

Clarifying Roles:

- ✓ We know who is involved in the program: program manager, funder, designer, staff, or other contributors.

Gathering Insights

- ✓ We have reviewed data and information about our community.
- ✓ We understand the different ways to engage with the community and have used appropriate methods.
- ✓ We asked community members for input and set up ways to gather feedback regularly.
- ✓ We have identified key community members to check in with again.

Mapping Resources and Partnerships

- ✓ We conducted asset mapping to identify existing programs and potential partners.
- ✓ We discovered organizations and groups we can collaborate with.
- ✓ We've connected with other organizations working in digital access and understand where our library fits within the broader ecosystem.

Planning

- ✓ We have a plan to continue research, gather feedback, and engage with the community over time.

We determined our area of focus, and it is:

- ✓ Digital Skills Training (Computer Basics, Resume Building, AI, and More)

- ✓ Access to Devices
- ✓ Technical Support
- ✓ Programs for all Ages
- ✓ Privacy and Confidential Spaces
- ✓ Telehealth and Online Services Support

Designing a Digital Readiness and Adoption Plan

If you're designing a digital access plan for your library, here are the main things you'll want to consider:

1. **Assessing Community Needs**
   a. Engage residents to understand barriers like cost, devices, skills, language, and accessibility. Use surveys, feedback sessions, and data on demographics and broadband availability.
   b. Understand barriers: some may not have internet at home, some may not own a device, others may not feel confident using technology.

2. **Improve Access & Infrastructure**
   a. Expand reliable broadband and Wi-Fi, support device lending and maintenance, and ensure accessibility for people with disabilities and multilingual communities.
   b. Provide public computers, tablets, laptops, or hotspots for lending.

3. **Build Digital Skills**
   a. Offer training that meets people where they are, from basic computer use to telehealth and workforce skills, while preparing staff and volunteers to support learners.
   b. Train library staff and volunteers so they feel confident helping community members.

4. **Partner for Impact**
   a. Collaborate with Tribal governments, schools, nonprofits, healthcare providers, and state agencies to share resources, build trust, and respect cultural priorities.

b. Use partnerships to bring in extra expertise, trainers, or equipment the library may not have.

5. **Plan for Sustainability & Evaluation**
   a. Track success with numbers (Wi-Fi sessions, devices loaned, people trained) and stories (personal experiences and community impact).
   b. Create a long-term plan for staffing, training, and replacing equipment so the program lasts beyond initial funding.

You can reach out to the New Mexico State Library's Digital Inclusion Program Manager for more information and guidance. The State Library offers a variety of resources to support libraries in digital access efforts. You can also participate in the Connect New Mexico Digital Readiness and Adoption monthly calls, as well as the Digital Inclusion Champion Club monthly calls, both of which provide opportunities to share best practices, ask questions, and connect with peers. For additional guidance, check out the complete Digital Inclusion Program Manual created by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.

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