

Findings from a Landscape Mapping Survey of Digital Inclusion Practitioners

Needs and Opportunities Within and Post-Pandemic



Digitunity, in cooperation with Collective + Mind

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The Onset of the Pandemic and the Impact on Digital Inclusion

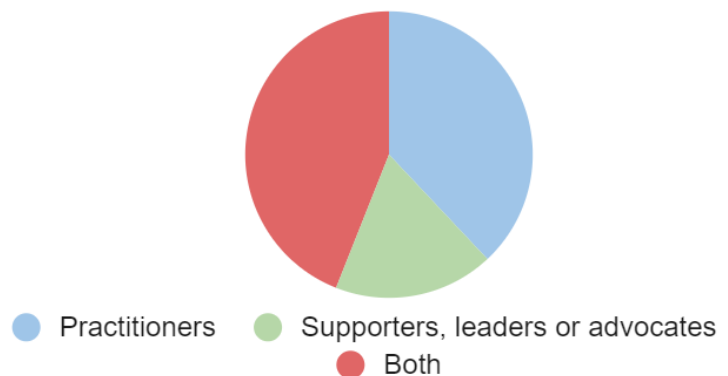
From November 2019 to April 2020, National Cristina Foundation (NCF) now known by its new initiative, [Digitunity](#), and [Collective+Mind](#), experts who believe that the way to solve the world's most complex problems is through collective action, engaged over 100 practitioners and partners across the digital inclusion space to reflect on their needs, trends, and opportunities. While the onset of the pandemic added an extra layer of complexity and consideration to the process, it also revealed an opportunity to understand the most salient digital inclusion needs, as well as the longer-term opportunities and challenges.

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Data from this landscape mapping survey showed that there is no common profile of individuals who are seeking digital inclusion support and services, and reinforces that digital inclusion affects the vast majority of people, across all geographies, in every sector, for a variety of reasons, with unequal access and impact. Digital exclusion is a common, concurrent, and cross-cutting problem for individuals and groups that also face any host of other social and economic barriers.

Feedback confirmed that people are driven to access digital inclusion services for an array of reasons: the opportunity for improved life and lifestyle outcomes; to navigate and participate in the modern world; to gain skills or become more employable; to meet a requirement to access other services; to resolve solutions to technology or access issues; to give children a better future; and more. Within the broad tent of digital inclusion, the issues people face include insufficient digital literacy skills, slow or no access to broadband, knowledge and confidence gaps, high internet and device costs, scam and security issues, unaffordable services and products, and inadequate, old or broken technology, software and devices. The COVID crisis has significantly affected people's dependence on digital devices and demand for skills and services and has exacerbated the existing barriers and challenges faced by individuals and service organizations.

Types of Respondents to Landscape Survey



Key Concerns of Practitioners Regarding Digital Inclusion

Over 100 respondents, most of whom were digital inclusion practitioners, expressed a variety of concerns about who is not being served or is underserved and why, who might be most vulnerable and emerging issues related to the digital divide.

The following list of concerns is not exhaustive:

- Non-English-speaking audiences may be underserved, as language inclusion is difficult to accommodate and language affects effective client outreach
- Security, including cybersecurity and scams for older adults are prevalent
- The ability of staff and community members to keep up with changing technologies, interfaces and platforms is challenging
- Reaching homeless and marginalized clients with virtual services is difficult
- Mobile technology is an inadequate substitute for devices
- Providing services and outreach before the COVID crisis was already a challenge and it is even more of a need and difficulty now

Participants had substantial input regarding the impact of geography, rural vs. urban, on digital inclusion. They noted that the burden of rural access and outreach goes two ways: urban organizations do not have the capacity, knowledge, connections, staff, time, infrastructure, resources, or even mandate to bring their services to rural and remote areas. For rural and remote individuals, traveling to major hubs to access services is complicated, costly, and taxing. Many rural and low-income people do not have broadband access or appropriate devices. Native communities are among the rural populations with particular barriers to access, infrastructure, and support. There are a few organizations who target the needs of rural, remote, and Native communities, but digital inclusion is not their exclusive focus or the only issue they need to respond to; it is rare that these organizations have what they need to address digital inclusion adequately or comprehensively.

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In all geographic settings, even where high quality services are available, it cannot be assumed that people are being adequately reached or served. For example, many individuals access free digital skills and literacy training to improve their employability and life skills. However, there is no available data to demonstrate how many more people - in communities nationwide - would desire, need, or access such services should other barriers not be a factor, such as childcare, transportation, finances, timing, fear, or availability of services. Furthermore, practitioners reported gaps in their own capacity, technology, and resources and in the overall availability of services to address every facet of digital inclusion and all who require support. Practitioners find it difficult to be effective or coordinate without local leaders understanding and engaging with the issues around digital inclusion and creating appropriate policies and programs.

Given the vast profiles of individuals who seek digital inclusion support, we can ascertain that the need for comprehensive interventions is ongoing, pervasive, and widespread, particularly among populations that are generally underserved and marginalized. As cited by the majority of research participants, we also see that the concurrency of challenges like inadequate housing, or underemployment with digital inclusion and this does not receive widespread public discourse and awareness, let alone sufficient, coordinated, or government mandated means of addressing digital inclusion alongside other social programs.

Voices from the Field: What's Working and Isn't Working

As a first step in establishing a framework for our research, digital inclusion practitioners provided insight on what they felt 'was and was not working' in the current digital inclusion space. It was frequently noted that there is more awareness around issues of broadband and internet than there is on device distribution gaps, as low-cost internet can be tied to other urban programs like free lunches.

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All practitioners cited important issues around technology. For technology and device providers, donated technology is core to their ability to operate and meet the needs of their beneficiaries. However, these nonprofit organizations reported that they struggle with unpredictable and inconsistent flows of donated devices, and that they require higher volumes of donations to meet community demand. Poor quality and older device donations often lead to greater expenses and stress for the practitioners, as they must pay for replacement parts and repairs. This signals that affordable technical support for these nonprofits is lacking in many communities and highlights the need for more and better device donors to allow practitioners to be more selective and discerning about donations. Targeting and engaging more high-yield partners and donors could allow for strategic partnerships to help facilitate efforts for raising broader awareness of digital inclusion.

Technology also presented an internal challenge for many practitioners. Many nonprofits that provide access to computers, internet, and training as part of their programming lack their own technical staff or technical capacity on staff, the capacity to provide technical skills training, virtual training skills, proper tech infrastructure, quality equipment, and, most simply, the time to devote to tech over their regular work. In the beginning of the COVID crisis, these gaps became more pronounced as teams attempted to move to remote work and provide in-person programming virtually. Nonprofits expressed difficulty in transitioning to remote programming for themselves and their clients, especially economically disadvantaged families and older adults. This indicates a significant shift in the immediate and longer-term needs of these types of practitioners, in terms of technology, training, and funding needs.



These are particular problems for smaller nonprofits and organizations with limited funding and staff, that both do digital inclusion as part of their work or rely on devices to do their own work.

Some organizations can turn to volunteers for technical support, but these ad hoc efforts are not sustainable solutions for organizations or communities. Some national programs exist to support these needs, such as NTEN's digital inclusion fellowship which trains nonprofit staff on digital inclusion and IT. However, practitioners struggling with digital inclusion themselves is a community-wide oversight and fundamental operational flaw and is a commonly discounted burden faced by service providers supporting marginalized populations.

Funding was cited as a major obstacle across all practitioner groups. A dearth of city, state and federal funding for digital inclusion organizations and initiatives means that organizations must search for private and alternative funding to support their work. Practitioners highlighted funding sustainability as a problem as well as inconsistency in how funding, investments and attention to digital inclusion look across states. Libraries that are funded by the city or state often have stable programming, but many lack investment for digital inclusion programs and face internal bureaucratic challenges. Nonprofits perennially struggle to get and compete for grants, donations, and funding for operating costs, programs, and growth.

The COVID crisis has brought the issue of digital inclusion to the fore and many practitioners hope the national attention will inspire more and eager funders and partners. However, the ongoing push to go digital has made the gaping digital divide even more stark, raising an important question: How to stop the digital divide from becoming even wider? In example, according to a [2021 report by Common Sense Media](#) and the Boston Consulting Group, more than 75% of state and local student digital divide efforts will expire in the next one to three years(1). Many practitioners hope the national attention will inspire more and eager funders and partners. Nonprofits need effective messaging and support to create an enabling environment for and inspire action from funders to make long term, sustainable investments in digital inclusion.

Practitioners point to awareness of digital equity as another common challenge. Communities, individuals, media, and industries have inconsistent awareness of digital inclusion as a concept, let alone as a multifaceted barrier. It's important for the public, policymakers, donor community and allies to receive clear messages and calls to action. .

Obstacles to Achieving Impact - Reported by Digital Inclusion Practitioners



(1) Ali, T., Chandra, S., Cherukumilli, S., Fazlullah, A., Hill, H., McAlpine, N., McBride, L., Vaduganathan, N., Weiss, D., Wu, M. (2021). Looking back, looking forward: What it will take to permanently close the K-12 digital divide. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

Informational awareness was also expressed as a gap. Most cities lack centralized, coordinated information for and among practitioners and community organizations about refurbished devices, broadband needs, training resources, and other areas. Similarly, there is a desire amongst practitioners for information on best practices, successful case studies, and lessons learned from other cities and organizations.



Nonprofit technology refurbishers and recyclers are an important part of Digitunity’s network, collectively known as the Alliance for Technology Refurbishing and Reuse (AFTRR). Their role in the digital inclusion value-chain is significant given the wide range of clients they serve and the environmental impact of refurbishing and recycling devices. Refurbishers take in donations from companies and individuals, provide refurbished equipment directly to communities and other practitioners, and provide technical support and training.

Refurbishers face similar struggles to other practitioners, namely around quantity and quality of device donations. Other practitioners often thrive on the availability of refurbishers. Yet, refurbishers noted that many practitioners aren’t aware of refurbishers and their services, including training and support. There is also a lack of capacity and consistency between refurbishers, and in some parts of the country, there are no nonprofit refurbishers in operation. Refurbishers also face policy and contractual challenges when trying to engage with corporations and government for device donations.

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As a result of COVID, all practitioners noted increased pressures and challenges around staff capacity and retention, operating and payroll funds, maintaining programs and operations, adapting to new skills and roles, and capacity to respond to client needs.

Digital Inclusion Success = Partnerships, Collaborations and Coalitions

The survey found that many practitioners credit their success to effective local collaborations and partnerships. Coordination among local practitioners, formally and informally, helps identify and anticipate gaps in services and creates more holistic support to the community.

When technology nonprofit refurbishers partner with community organizations with a similar mission but different skill set and focus, each entity is able to bring their unique value-add to enhance services to the same population. For example, a technology refurbisher leverages partnerships with community organizations to deliver digital literacy skills programming to that organization's staff and clients, and the community nonprofit's staff also become empowered with new skills to provide greater value to their beneficiaries. This cross-pollination between practitioners reduces the burden on community members to seek out different organizations themselves. Practitioners point to awareness of digital equity as another common challenge. Communities, individuals, media, and industries have inconsistent awareness of digital inclusion as a concept, let alone a multifaceted barrier.

Digital inclusion coalitions have a distinct organizational structure and exist in service of digital inclusion practitioners; as such, they have unique challenges and needs. Their member organizations may include nonprofits, local government, libraries, educational institutions, housing authorities, refurbishers and training providers, other social service and civic organizations. Coalitions within Digitunity's extended network seek to convene, mobilize, coordinate efforts, share knowledge, increase awareness of digital inclusion issues and needs, and advocate on behalf of practitioners. Practitioners cited the "hub structure" as one effective way for coalitions to bring information, resources, and content in and disseminate them out to community actors. Strategic partnerships between community actors and among city coalitions helps circulate and generate new ideas and information to benefit all.

"For those groups not providing digital inclusion services, such as education or community development organizations, their ability to achieve their mission is heavily reliant on the availability and quality of devices and technical support."

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Like technology refurbishers, digital inclusion coalitions are strategically and operationally significant in the digital inclusion ecosystem. Cities and states vary in their coordination and organizing efforts to address digital inclusion. In some areas, informal coalitions have formed to begin to address digital equity issues in their cities and states. In others, city and nonprofit leaders work together formally on targeted initiatives and agendas to foster better communication and partnership among organizations. Whether a given city has a strong local network seems dependent on the visibility and quality of practitioners, public education, and having an agenda and investment from the city on

digital inclusion. Their ability to strategically and meaningfully partner is largely affected by issues similar to other practitioners around funding, capacity, and awareness. Many are small, local, startup groups with limited resources. Their efficacy is also shaped by the visibility and quality of practitioners and the presence of an agenda and investment from cities. There are tools and models for starting coalitions, produced by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), but buy-in and coordination are still a challenge.

Digital inclusion within communities can be a sensitive and insular issue. Thriving coalitions have widespread community buy-in, momentum, and engagement. Other coalitions struggle to engage "outsider" organizations that don't feel directly connected to digital inclusion; likewise, outsiders are often under-engaged and under-prioritized by coalitions and digital inclusion practitioners. Many research respondents felt that the insular nature of digital inclusion networks is a missed opportunity for fostering strong networks and collective action. In general, most cities and regions do not appear to have digital inclusion coalitions, or at least ones that are active, adequate, and effective. Further research, outreach, and mapping could help identify more coalitions and organizing champions.



About Digitunity. The mission of Digitunity is to eliminate the technology gap, through and with a network of stakeholders and solutions, so that everyone can thrive in a digitally connected society. We are leading a national strategy to eliminate the technology gap at scale through promoting greater public awareness, activating a response through equipment and financial donations, and supporting the work of digital inclusion practitioners.

Digitunity, an initiative of the National Cristina Foundation, has worked in the digital inclusion space since the 1980s, connecting donors of technology with organizations serving marginalized individuals in need. Hundreds of thousands of people have benefitted since the organization's inception. Our long history as a pioneer in digital inclusion has well positioned Digitunity to make meaningful progress on this critical national issue.

Core to Digitunity's work is the Digital Opportunity Network, a national collective of nearly 1,500 frontline, community-level organizations. The Network is a constellation of practitioners with specialized skills in serving and supporting marginalized populations, such as those with disabilities, economically disadvantaged individuals, older adults, veterans, children, people without homes, and more.

For more information or to support our work, visit <https://www.digitunity.org/>

COLLECTIVE+MIND

About Collective Mind. Collective Mind believes in the power of networks to foster collective action. Our mission is to support networks and the people that work for and with networks to improve their effectiveness and impact. We provide direct support to networks through consulting, advisory, and tools such as our network capacity assessment.

We also provide learning and professional development opportunities to network practitioners through a range of offerings and resources via our learning community. As we build the field of networks practice, we provide frameworks for understanding and analyzing networks and thought leadership to address the challenges that networks face.

Learn more at <https://www.collectivemindglobal.org>