State Recovery Now

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

COVID-19 has highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide — the gulf between those with access to and ability to use affordable, reliable broadband and those without. This persistent divide is a barrier to equitable access to necessary services and economic prosperity, with a disproportionate impact on low-income Americans, communities of color, and rural Americans.

WHY USE ARP FUNDS?

A one-time investment can fund development of an asset map, showing technology and resource gaps, as well as implementation of a pilot Digital Navigator program. This can serve as a catalyst for more widespread Digital Navigator programs.

WHY DO THIS NOW?

The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the negative impacts of the digital divide, causing significant disruptions to student learning, access to healthcare and vital services, and economic opportunity.

Digital Navigators

What are we trying to accomplish? Advancing digital inclusion by expanding access to affordable broadband, necessary devices, and digital literacy skills, so that all residents can benefit from critical online resources, from education and employment to healthcare and government benefits.

Problem we're addressing: Millions of Americans lack access to broadband and the ability to use online services, which impacts access to education, economic opportunity, healthcare, and more. The impact is even more severe on low-income Americans, communities of color, and rural communities.

Why does this matter? Access to affordable, reliable broadband and ability to navigate online resources is essential to full participation in our modern society, economy, and democracy. Full digital inclusion requires more than just access to broadband; it also requires access to devices and necessary digital literacy skills. Digital Navigators can help residents attain these critical components, building trust and relationships through repeated interactions.

What is the policy intervention? Through a one-time investment of American Rescue Plan funds, state and local governments can implement Digital Navigator programs through two steps:

1. Create an initial asset map, showing community-wide technology and resource gaps.
2. Partnering with community-based organizations, recruit and train Digital Navigators, individuals embedded in their communities, who will guide residents in accessing necessary resources and skills through relationship-building and repeated one-on-one interactions.

Cost: Costs will vary, but will include: asset map development; roughly $10,000 for training; and Digital Navigator salaries, between $15 to $30 per hour.

ROI: May lead to increased access to public services provided online, increased access to social safety net benefits, and increased resident satisfaction with government services.

Why now? The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the negative impacts of the digital divide, causing significant disruptions to student learning, access to healthcare and vital services, and economic opportunity.

What does success look like?

- Attaining a more accurate understanding of residents who lack digital technology, resources, and skills, allowing policymakers to target resources to the right places.
- Leveling inequities in digital inclusion by focusing support on communities most in need.
- Ensuring that residents have access to affordable, reliable broadband, devices necessary to connect to the internet, and digital literacy skills to navigate online resources.
- Expanding access to online learning, online work opportunities, telemedicine services, and other critical support services like food, rent, employment, or child care assistance.

Why ARP funds? A one-time investment of ARP funds can cover asset map development and implementation of a pilot program — this has a low marginal cost, and can provide policymakers with information to guide future policy interventions and data necessary to scale up the program.

Additional benefits

- Greater resident satisfaction with local government services
- Stronger relationships with community-based organizations, integrating government services with organizations that have built trust and relationships in target communities
- Increased resident participation in the digital economy
- Better and more equitable uptake of critical government support services

About the Authors

National Digital Inclusion Alliance

https://www.digitalinclusion.org/

info@digitalinclusion.org

TAKEAWAYS

Outcomes	Equity	ROI
Expanded access to broadband, technology, and digital skills, leading to greater digital inclusion and equity in access to online services.	Addresses inequities in who has access to and an ability to use the internet, closing gaps in access to online learning, employment, healthcare, government services, and more.	For a low marginal cost, this policy could lead to an increase in access to public services and social safety net benefits, in addition to increased resident satisfaction with local government services.