# State Recovery Now

## Enhancing Access to the Digital Economy:
## Digital Navigators

A guide to helping communities advance digital inclusion

# Executive Summary

Access to affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband is essential to full participation in modern American society. But the United States faces a persistent and growing "digital divide" — a gulf between those with access to and ability to use affordable, reliable broadband and those without. This persistent and growing divide is a barrier to equitable access to critical services and economic prosperity, with a disproportionate impact on low-income Americans, communities of color, and rural communities.

As state and local governments consider their options for spending American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds, they should consider an investment in a Digital Navigator program to help close the digital divide. Digital Navigator programs have been adopted in many U.S. cities, proven to be effective in advancing digital inclusion and equity.

Through a one-time investment of ARP funds, state and local governments can launch Digital Navigator programs through two steps:

1. Create an initial asset map, showing community-wide technology and resource gaps; and

2. Partnering with community-based organizations, recruit and train Digital Navigators, who will guide residents in accessing necessary resources and skills through relationship-building and repeated one-on-one interactions.

The Digital Navigator model reaches communities in need by training individuals already embedded in those communities, equipping them with the necessary tools to support residents with navigating critical online services. This model is predicated on building relationships and trust, which is proven to be more effective than purely information-based outreach programs.

ARP funds can cover asset map creation, planning, and implementation costs, serving as a catalyst for the launch of more widespread Digital Navigator programs in the future.

Estimated costs vary by jurisdiction, but will include asset map creation, roughly $10,000 for Digital Navigator training, and between $15 to $30 per hour for Digital Navigator salaries. With this low marginal cost, policymakers can expect to see a substantial impact on residents' access to public services, social safety net benefits, online learning and economic opportunities, and increased resident satisfaction with local government services.

# Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated the digital divide; from crucial telemedicine services to distance learning and remote work, access to quality broadband is more vital now than ever. Yet, millions of American students in rural and low-income communities have fallen behind on essential learning, while millions of adults have been forced to skip essential health services or have missed out on digital economic opportunities. In May 2020, the Federal Communications Commission estimated that at least 21 million Americans — six percent of the population — lived in areas with no broadband infrastructure, while an estimated 162 million Americans — almost half the country — live in areas with service, but either don't have a broadband subscription or are only able to connect to the internet at low speeds.

This persistent digital 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 Americans living in rural areas. Digital inclusion will only be possible if all barriers are addressed. This involves five elements: (1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; (2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; (3) access to digital literacy training; (4) quality technical support; and (5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

Most broadband expansion plans focus mostly on broadband infrastructure and internet access, setting aside the need to support residents' use of the tools and resources the internet can provide them with. Achieving true digital inclusion, however, requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional, and structural barriers to access and use technology. It is therefore crucial that decision-makers crafting policy to expand broadband access put digital inclusion front and center, to ensure that all Americans are able to access, afford, and use broadband to participate in the digital economy.

# Digital Navigators

The Digital Navigators program is designed to address the first three elements necessary to digital inclusion: (1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; (2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; and (3) access to digital literacy training. Through a model grounded in

relationship-building and repeated connections, jurisdiction can cross-train workers in community-based organizations, or hire new staff or volunteers, to serve as Digital Navigators who support residents in need with navigating critical, locally-relevant online resources. Through these trusted partnerships, Digital Navigators can support residents in accessing fast and affordable broadband, obtaining necessary devices, and gaining critical digital skills, helping to close the digital divide and ensure equitable access to the benefits of a digital economy.

# Policy Overview

To overcome challenges associated with closing the digital divide, state and local governments should consider allocating a portion of American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funds to a community-based Digital Navigator program that helps residents in need access the skills and resources necessary to fully participate in the digital economy.

Digital Navigators are individuals trained to address a range of elements necessary to digital inclusion — home connectivity, devices, and digital skills — with community members in need, through sustained relationships and repeated interactions. Once trained, these individuals are able to guide residents to resources and support services that help gain access to reliable, affordable home internet, necessary devices, and training for critical digital skills.

Digital Navigators can be volunteers, newly hired staff, or cross-trained staff who already work in social service agencies, public libraries, health services, and other community-based organizations. Often based in established, trusted community-based organizations, Navigators tend to be familiar with resources that relate to digital equity. Through this existing knowledge and dedicated cross-training, they can be equipped to help residents learn to use online tools to access critical services, such as food support, rent support, education, employment resources, childcare, government benefits, and more. These interactions could occur in-person or over the phone, making the policy well-suited to adapt to changes in public health guidelines around COVID-19.

State and local governments can consider using ARP funds for a Digital Navigator program in two steps:

1. Creating an initial asset map, to locate which residents lack access to home internet, digital devices, or skills.

2.  Conducting training for new staff, volunteers, or community-based organization staff (e.g., social service agencies, public libraries, health services) on how to establish relationships through repeated interactions and guide residents in accessing necessary resources and skills.

This policy intervention has been implemented in several U.S. cities, including Philadelphia and Salt Lake City, where early results point to a positive impact on residents' access to, ability to use, and confidence in navigating the internet and essential online services

## Outcomes

The digital divide disproportionately impacts low-income Americans, communities of color, and Americans living in rural areas. The negative impacts of this divide compound and exacerbate existing inequities, affecting access to education, jobs, health services, critical public goods, and government support services. Through the Digital Navigator policy intervention, communities will be able to obtain a more accurate picture of residents who lack access to digital resources and skills, allowing them to target training and resources in the right places. Using this data can inform where to deploy trained Digital Navigators, ensuring an equitable distribution of support in communities most in need.

Through relationship-building repeated interactions, Digital Navigators can help ensure that residents not only have access to affordable, reliable broadband, but also to the devices and skills necessary to benefit from the digital economy. With higher rates of digital inclusion, communities should see expanded and more equitable access to online learning, online work opportunities, telemedicine services, and other critical support services like food, rent, employment, or child care assistance.

## Associated Costs

The average cost of this intervention will vary slightly based on the community and proportion of residents lacking access to digital resources and skills. Policymakers should factor in the following components when estimating total costs:

- Development of an initial asset map, showing which residents lack access to home broadband connectivity, digital devices, and digital skills. This can be completed by a city or state employee trained to navigate American Census Bureau data. In Philadelphia, for example, estimates for asset mapping ranged between $120,000 to $350,000,

depending on the number of survey respondents, length of survey, expertise of researchers, and languages included.

- Approximately $10,000 for Digital Navigator recruitment and training, including:

  - Curriculum development, administrative costs, materials, data collection, and metrics

- Digital Navigator salaries. Each Digital Navigator should be paid per hour of service. Salaries could range from $15 an hour to $30 an hour, depending on the jurisdiction and commensurate salaries. In Salt Lake City, for example, Digital Navigators are paid $19.23 per hour. Another program in Cleveland offers $17 per hour, while the Connect Arizona program pays $20 per hour.

## Assessing the Return on Investment

The benefits of digital inclusion are far-reaching, although measuring specific returns on investment may be difficult to achieve with specificity. As more residents are able to access, afford, and use the internet, the more they are able to fully participate in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital inclusion allows for expanded civic participation, learning, employment, and access to essential services. With an intentional emphasis on equity, a Digital Navigators policy intervention has great potential to level disparities in who has access to these services, creating a more inclusive society and a more competitive economy.

In particular, Digital Navigator programs may demonstrate the following benefits:

- Increased access to public services provided online (measured by percent of the population accessing services).

- Increased access to social safety net benefits (measured by benefits coverage, portion of funds being used).

- Resident satisfaction with local government services (measured through surveys).

# Evidence of Action

Digital Navigator programs have been developed and implemented in at least 50 U.S. cities, including Salt Lake City, Cleveland, Seattle, Philadelphia, Nashville, Austin, Portland, Denver, and Providence.

In Salt Lake City, the public library launched a Digital Navigator pilot designed to address the amplified need for emergency access to information communications technologies as a result of the pandemic. To begin, the team started with asset mapping, using census data, state data, and local media to understand the rates and concentrations of internet access, adoption, device access, and ownership across the city.

After identifying the neighborhoods most in need, the library worked with community partners to launch a Digital Navigator program designed to support unconnected residents. Six  individuals have so far been trained as Digital Navigators; three are full-time workers in community-based organizations, and three are part-time employees at the public library. Residents call into a designated phone line to speak with an operator, who then connects them to a Digital Navigator best-suited to help with their needs.

After the first two months of direct service, Digital Navigator in Salt Lake City distributed 138 Chromebooks, 24 Wi-Fi hotspots, 10 tablets, and six refurbished desktops and laptops. Throughout 10 months, the program reached a total of 585 individuals, exceeding the program goal of 450. One-third of these interactions took place in two zip codes prioritized at the onset, suggesting that targeted outreach and international partnerships were effective in directing services to those most in need. Over 21 percent of these interactions were conducted in Spanish, supported by three Digital Navigators who are fluent in Spanish. The program's success was attributed to the public library's intentional outreach to specific neighborhoods most affected by the pandemic, and its partnerships with community-based organizations serving those neighborhoods.

Pre- and post-intervention survey assessments point to promising results in Salt Lake City, particularly with regard to digital skills. The number of residents who reported that they know how to keep their information safe and secure online jumped from 75.35 percent pre-intervention to 84.44 percent post-intervention. The survey was conducted at least one month after initial contact.

These jumps in measured outcomes demonstrate a relationship between program participation

and community member self-assessment of their confidence and understanding of navigating online. By supporting access and skill development, with steady and continuous guidance from a Digital Navigator, the program has so far yielded positive impacts on the communities it set out to serve.

In Philadelphia, the city's Office of Innovation and Technology has partnered with six non-profit and community-based organizations to deploy a Digital Navigator model, with some targeting outreach to expand access to K-12 learning, and others focusing on helping residents with disabilities. Each of these organizations has (1) established a helpline, (2) created a ticketing system to track calls and follow up with callers, and (3) hired designated staff and interns trained to support residents in getting connected to and using the internet.

## How is this a compelling use of one-time funding that can drive long term-impact and avoid unsustainable funding?

ARP funds are well-suited for a Digital Navigator program due to the far-reaching impacts of a one-time investment. One-time funds can be used for:

1. Development of an asset map showing a jurisdiction's current technology resources and gaps, and

2. Implementation of a pilot program that trains a small group of volunteers or staff and tracks their impact on target communities.

These investments have a low marginal cost and provide policymakers with information that can be used to impact future policy decisions. An asset map can serve as a resource to guide decision-making around other digital inclusion policies, and can be updated easily in the future. Through a one-time investment in a pilot program, jurisdictions can gather data and evidence of impact to scale up the program or determine policy alternatives to meet their goals.

*Authority for ARP Spending:* States and Local Governments may implement this policy using funds under Services to Disproportionately Impacted Communities (EC3) and under Water, Sewer, and Broadband Infrastructure (EC5).

# Implementation

To ensure effective implementation, state and local governments should assess readiness and engage relevant partners early on.

## Assessing Readiness

State and local governments already have experience managing grant programs to non-profit and community-based organizations. In order to deploy an effective Digital Navigator program, they must also have a deep understanding of the technology resources and needs in their communities. Policymakers at all levels are encouraged to use the guiding questions below to reflect on their capacity to implement this program successfully:

- What services are currently offered online? Which have lower penetration or adoption than expected? Which have successful rates of penetration or adoption?

- Which residents are accessing online government services? Which are not?

- How can these residents in need of support best be reached? Which local community-based organizations already serve these residents?

- How many people can we estimate are in need of support?

- How many Digital Navigators are necessary to reach this number of residents?

## Essential partners for successful implementation

The primary actors driving implementation should be a state, city, or county agency focused on technology, such as an Office of Digital Inclusion, an Office of Broadband, or an Office of Innovation and Technology. In addition to core leadership commitment, jurisdictions should partner with relevant agencies, organizations, community partners, and state or local government counterparts for successful program implementation. For digital inclusion, this includes the following critical stakeholders:

- State legislature: The state legislature is responsible for approving and allocating funds.

- State executive agency, or city or local agency, with jurisdiction over technology or broadband: State, city, or local agencies with jurisdiction over technology, innovation, or broadband connectivity should be the primary drivers of implementation. These agencies

should lead program development, asset mapping, recruitment and training, and data gathering to measure impact.

- **Telecommunications utilities:** A successful program should engage local telecommunications utilities, which are responsible for deploying high-speed broadband services. Partnerships with telecommunications utilities will be necessary to assist in asset mapping, and to ensure that home connectivity services are affordable to residents in need of assistance.

- **Community-based organizations and social service providers:** Digital Navigator programs are encouraged to leverage existing community services to cross-train staff who are already embedded in their communities and aware of necessary social service resources. In addition to recruiting and training new volunteers or staff, state and local governments should develop partnerships with public libraries, health services, local nonprofits, and social service agencies to embed Digital Navigator services within their organizations. The Salt Lake City Public Library determined the following qualifiers for a community-based organization to form a mutually beneficial partnership:

  - A trusted organization with deep roots in targeted neighborhoods;

  - Organizations currently offering bilingual or multilingual programs with a lens on digital equity;

  - Capacity to support a full-time digital navigator position; and

  - A commitment to work remotely or in-person with community members during the pandemic

- **Libraries** are uniquely positioned to host Digital Navigator programs due to their ubiquity, relevance, and long-term investments in bridging the digital divide through access to computers, internet, electronic resources, and digital skills. They are also strategic community partners, engaging organizations to work collaboratively to enhance the quality of life for all residents.

## *Engaging Stakeholders and Beneficiaries*

Transparency in decision-making is essential to achieving digital inclusion. All affected stakeholders should have an opportunity to provide input to inform program design and ensure services are targeted to reach residents most in need. Government officials should inform and

consult with local telecommunications utilities, convene town hall meetings with residents, and respond to the input of community members, neighborhood organizations, churches, non-profits, and business leaders. Stakeholder buy-in is needed from the following groups:

- **Local/County/State Social Service agencies**: Responsible for ensuring that critical social services are accessible to residents online.

- **Neighborhood associations, churches, and other groups representing affected residents**: Community members should have an opportunity to provide input and feedback on efforts to improve access to digital resources and skills. Using churches and neighborhood groups to expedite discussions with community members is essential.

Other implementation partners may include:

- Local community colleges and technical colleges

- Workforce development organizations or business associations

- Religious groups

- Adult digital literacy organizations

- Local agencies, including parks and recreation and the housing authority

- Immigrant and refugee services

- Local community foundations

### *Hiring and training Digital Navigators*

In the spring of 2020, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) convened a working group of digital literacy practitioners, researchers, and advocates to develop the Digital Navigator model. The group put together a model job description for Digital Navigators, emphasizing the following skills and qualities necessary for the role:

- Empathy, cultural sensitivity, and strong interpersonal skills

- Comfort and familiarity with conducting internet research on behalf of a community member

- Multilingual skills reflective of the target communities

In Salt Lake City, Digital Navigator training was co-delivered by the Public Library and NDIA over the course of four, one-hour online training sessions. The training covered four topics: (1) an introduction to digital inclusion and equity, (2) understanding learner needs, (3) data collection and analysis, and (4) resource and skill-sharing. The training emphasized the role of Digital Navigators as members of their own community, individuals best-suited to address community needs and build foundational trust.

## Project management

Existing Digital Navigator models have informed the following project management best practices:

- Determine organizational responsibility at the onset to streamline the flow of responsibilities and information between multiple organizations.

- Determine the project completion timeline and workflow.

- Plan the client flow, using the following questions:

  - How will a client gain access to the program?

  - What does the whole process look like from a client's point of view?

  - What barriers might get in the way of helping people, and how can we reduce them?

  - What criteria will determine the type of help a client might receive?

- Create processes for Digital Navigator payments, invoices, and reimbursements

- Select project management software that meets all needs of the Digital Navigator model.

- To ensure effective outreach and community awareness of the program, use a combination of hard copy materials (e.g., yard signs, bookmarks, or door hangers), social media, and word of mouth.

## Risk Mitigation

*What could go wrong?*

- **Costs:** Potentially low ROI per individual Digital Navigator. Recurring costs might be too high if support is not being regularly requested.

- **Engagement:** Policymakers must plan for creative ways to publicize the program, especially considering that target residents likely cannot access information online.

- **Capacity:** (1) Because the program is built on the relationships between Digital Navigators and residents through repeated interactions, each Digital Navigator may not be able to take on a large group of residents; (2) Some jurisdictions may not have an agency dedicated to this work.

*How can we mitigate the biggest risks?*

- To ensure investments match the level of community needs, policymakers should begin with asset mapping to determine the optimal number of Digital Navigators needed.

- The best way to spread awareness of the program is to get out in the community and speak with residents in person. This could include door-to-door canvassing, attending community events, and partnering with community-based organizations that conduct outreach.

- Digital Navigator models are designed to be flexible and adaptable to the local context. If a jurisdiction does not have an agency dedicated to this work, programs can be housed in the public library system, in social service agencies, or in community-based organizations that focus on digital literacy.

# Data and Learning Strategy

*Baseline Systems: Necessary inputs to implement the policy effectively*

The primary goal for a Digital Navigator program is to increase the percentage of residents with access, resources, and necessary skills to benefit from broadband. To begin, jurisdictions should undergo an asset mapping initiative to establish baseline metrics, in order to accurately measure

the impact of the intervention. These metrics should include:

- Number and location of residents not currently reached by existing broadband infrastructure

- Number and location of residents reached by existing broadband infrastructure, but without home connectivity

- Number of residents without necessary devices to connect to high-speed internet

- Number of residents without necessary skills to use high-speed internet

- Number of residents who can navigate essential online services (e.g., food, rent, education, employment, or childcare support, other government services)

- Use of these essential services, measured by dollars spent

## *Measuring Progress: How can progress toward the desired outcomes be measured — both to assess progress and inform improvement along the way?*

For process data, policymakers can track the number of Digital Navigators who have undergone training and the number of residents who have interacted with Digital Navigators or who have received services. The program will rely heavily on partner organizations that are staffing the Digital Navigators program to track and report this data; common systems and expectations of data management should be established across all partner organizations.

For outcome data, governments can track access to public services provided online (% of population accessing services), access to social safety net benefits (benefits coverage, funds being used and resident satisfaction with local government services (e.g., through surveys).

In Salt Lake City, the program measured residents' personal connectivity and digital adoption goals by surveying participants on the following questions:

Was the participant able to:

- Get a home internet connection, if needed?

- Carry out schoolwork online?

- Submit unemployment compensation reports?

- Schedule and complete an online healthcare appointment?

- Bank online?

- Attend a live-streamed church service?

The program conducted an intake survey and skills assessment to gauge needs, an exit survey to assess changes in skills, and a follow-up survey to measure any growth in digital skills as a result of program participation.

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## Best Practices: Lessons Learned from Salt Lake City

**Ongoing support and relationships matter.** When recruiting Digital Navigators, it is important to seek people who have strong relationship skills and can build trust, communicate with empathy, and listen actively to identify solutions to problems that may not be clearly expressed.

**Block time for appointments.** With the data showing that 75.12 percent of interactions take 15 minutes or more, there is evidence that learners are in need of direct, sustained, and repeated one-on-one interactions.

**Digital literacy skills required for using a smartphone are different from those needed when using a laptop or desktop computer.** Residents who have and are able to use a smartphone may still need assistance developing the necessary skills to navigate the internet and complete tasks on a computer, including seeking employment, online banking, engaging in online learning, or accessing government benefits.

**Remote services reach individuals who are not able to access in-person services.** Even after pandemic-related in-person gathering restrictions are lifted, Digital Navigator programs should consider continuing an option for remote services. This will help ensure access for residents who may face barriers due to transportation, non-traditional work schedules, or availability of childcare.

**There is a high need for devices and affordable home broadband service.** One of the most common challenges residents face is a lack of devices that meet their personal needs.

76.25 percent of individuals in the Salt Lake City program requested a device on their intake form.

**There was expanded awareness of library services and library card sign-ups when collaborating with community-based organizations.** Partnerships with existing community-based organizations allow these organizations to educate their clients about the resources available through public libraries.

**Get out in the community!** The best way to spread awareness about services is to talk with residents in person. Canvassing, participating in community events, and partnership with other community-based organizations are some of the best practices for successful outreach.

## Additional Resources

Digital Navigators Toolkit (2021), National Digital Inclusion Alliance, Urban Libraries Council, Institute of Museum and Library Services, and The Salt Lake City Public Library System

## Playbook Authors

Developed with support from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance.