

Digital Equity in the Public Library

4 Strategies to Support
Digital Equity in Your Community

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For decades, libraries have been striving to close the digital divide, creating lifelines for disconnected communities. Yet year after year, the problem persists. It is time for a new approach. These 4 ideas are not the only possible strategies for digital inclusion but provide concrete examples that inspire innovative local responses—see what works for your library!



1

CREATE A DIGITAL NAVIGATORS PROGRAM

NDIA defines Digital Navigators as “trusted guides who assist community members in internet adoption and the use of computing devices” (Balboa et al. 2021). Digital Navigators provide reference interviews, information, and resources to help across a variety of issues. And Digital Navigators programs pair neatly with other digital literacy programs or technology services already offered by the library by helping patrons learn about and access library-provided resources.

2

BUILD COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Community networks are cooperatives owned and managed by neighborhood residents, able to provide high-speed internet at low cost in otherwise neglected communities. What is the role of a library in a community network? While most libraries would likely not start a community network program on their own, they can be invaluable partners in efforts led by others. Often, the most important asset is the building itself—providing roof access and a connection to existing electricity or data lines—or the library can support the creation and delivery of digital literacy classes and information for network users.



3

FACILITATED ACCESS

In some cases, the library can lower the barrier to entry for complex technologies. Librarians can minimize the need for the patron to interact with the technology, allowing the patron to engage directly with the content.

For example, a library could stream an online program or class into a meeting room, with staff managing the technology, while inviting patrons to attend in person. Since the 2020 PLA Public Library Technology Survey found that approximately half of libraries offered streaming programs that year, this type of hybrid programming could provide a low-barrier way for libraries to begin offering facilitated access.

4

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY

The word “advocacy” may concern librarians who are aware of restrictions on political activity in a public workplace. Yet at the same time, advocacy resonates with librarians’ professional values of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The goal of advocacy in this context is not to influence a particular ballot measure or candidate, but to advocate for the voice of the community and the inclusion of the library in community-based efforts. The library can participate by sharing information, offering space, providing project management expertise, making connections between community groups, and more.



Conclusion

Digital equity envisions a future where all people have the digital skills and access they need to accomplish their goals. Libraries are well positioned to engage in digital inclusion work because of their long history of combating the digital divide through technology access and digital literacy training. Ultimately, libraries have an essential role to play in community-wide digital equity ecosystems.

Does your library support digital inclusion in your community?

Read the complete white paper by Dr. Audrey Barbakoff:

Digital Equity in the Public Library: 4 Unique and Emerging Strategies for Supporting Digital Inclusion in Your Community

VIEW

