Digital Inclusion

PRIMER

Developed for Edge by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance
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## About Edge

Edge is a management tool that helps libraries align their technology resources to community priorities. Edge provides libraries data and tools to set measurable, strategic goals for digital inclusion and to engage government and community leaders in meaningful discussion about technology needs and plans.
At a time when access to technology, knowledge of how to use it and adequate broadband service are required for success in life, digital inclusion programs are increasingly critical to ensure everyone is able to fully participate in the digital world.

Individuals of all ages are interacting with technology to seek out education, locate jobs, learn new skills, advance their careers, access entertainment and government services, communicate with friends and family and interact with health care providers. Although many people across the United States interact with the internet on a daily basis and often with several devices, many others lack access to the internet, devices and skills to use them in a meaningful and relevant way.

Libraries have long played an important part in addressing digital equity, and as technology continues to develop in innovative and critical ways, every community can benefit from the leading role libraries play in digital inclusion. In addition to offering digital literacy trainings ranging from basic skills to advanced applications, many libraries provide the only free and publicly accessible computers in their community, accessible Wi-Fi, device and hotspot check-out programs and connections to lower-cost, in-home broadband services as well as creative labs and makerspaces.

Libraries are known as trusted spaces where community members go to seek help finding a job, writing a resume, learning basic computer skills and accessing online government websites and social services while also accessing a wealth of online books and media. In addition to these well-known services and programs, libraries have become a place where community members seek out the latest devices as well as digital skills training for career advancement and higher-order information literacy.

Libraries have also taken on the role of super-connector in their communities by working with community partners, organizing outreach projects and taking on leading roles in local digital inclusion coalitions to reach community members who face barriers to accessing library resources and services.

Libraries are thought leaders and stimulate conversations around the social implications of technology, different uses of technology and the impact of technology on lifelong learning, privacy and trustworthy information.

“Libraries are becoming hubs for digital inclusion. This is part of the second digital transformation for libraries — where libraries become centers of digital inclusion in addition to providing online access. Digital inclusion refers not only to libraries providing internet connectivity to those who come to the library for that purpose — something libraries have been doing for more than a decade — it also extends to providing people the ability to upgrade their digital skills and to understand how to trust the online resources and information that are so critical today.”

— ULC’s white paper Libraries’ Second Digital Transformation1 (p. 3)

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1 https://www.urbanlibraries.org/whitepapers_digital_transformation.pdf
Salt Lake City Public Library

SLCPL serves a population of approximately 190,000 people. The library recognizes that digital literacies are critical and has a multi-pronged strategy to address barriers to digital inclusion in their community. SLCPL serves as a technology hub, providing access to the internet, mobile hotspots with laptops and a variety of programming to support the development of digital literacy skills. Further, SLCPL has taken a lead role in Salt Lake City’s Digital Inclusion Alliance and used their participation to broaden their services — using innovative technology to reach underserved groups.

SLCPL’s Main Library and its branches have computer labs available all hours the library is open, which includes extended evening hours. To answer the internet access needs of community members, SLCPL offers Laptop Discovery Kits, which include an internet hotspot, Chromebook, power cord, mouse and carrying case.

Each kit can be checked out for up to 21 days with a library card and are non-renewable but can be checked out again at another time. Due to the high demand by community members, Google Fiber donated additional funds to increase the number of kits available. In addition to providing access to the internet through the computer lab and the Laptop Discovery Kit program, the library has several tech kits (including the Tablet Kit, Chromebook Kit, App Music Kit, Virtual Reality Kit, Ozobot Kit and Stop-Motion Animation Kit) which rotate throughout the branches and various locations within the city.

The library serves as a makerspace in Salt Lake City, with its Creative Lab providing access to maker stations and tools for podcast recording, music and video production, 3-D printing, photography, sewing and more!

The library leverages its partnerships in the community to further expand their programs that address barriers to digital literacy. In partnership with an NTEN and Google Fiber Digital Inclusion Fellowship, SLCPL launched The Tech League for community members to receive one-on-one tech assistance.

This digital inclusion initiative uses community volunteers as Tech Mentors to build a more digitally inclusive community through workshops, events and classes. The Tech Mentor volunteer positions are co-sponsored through a partnership with the Applied Technology Foundation, Cotopaxi and SLCPL.

The Tech League is heavily focused on helping underrepresented groups learn and understand how to use technology to support their personal or professional goals and improve the quality of their lives. The library leverages its community partnerships to reach community members where they are, and customizes services to best meet their various technology needs.

Examples of programs supported through The Tech League include:

- **Supporting Refugee Families.** In partnership with the International Rescue Committee, Tech Mentors support refugee families recently resettled into the Salt Lake City area and empower them to understand the power of technology. They guide refugees in navigating their new community and create a safe space for families to learn and grow in their technology use and English language skills. Through the initiative, refugee families are able to receive a library card and connect to library...
resources to learn computer basics and how to safely navigate online. The volunteers also work with the IRC micro-business department to help clients with small business tech needs, such as setting up a Square credit card reader, QuickBooks and Etsy, as well as building out websites, etc.

- **Outreach to Underrepresented Groups.** Library staff and Tech League volunteers work with community partners to reach community members and ensure that underrepresented groups have opportunities to develop digital literacy skills. Community partners include youth resource centers, senior centers, drug rehab centers, homeless service providers, elementary schools and more. The library offers classes in English and Spanish and provides library staff and volunteers to assist patrons in numerous languages.

- **Digital Literacy Classes and Training.** An array of weekly classes are offered, ranging from beginner-level (basic computer skills) to advanced-level (Adobe Suite, 3-D printing, podcasting, composing music) topics.

In addition, SLCPL has led digital-inclusion training for library staff and other libraries statewide. Currently, the library is developing digital literacy competencies for staff and a digital-equity strategy to incorporate into the library’s strategic plan.

**Bossard Memorial Library**

Bossard Memorial Library serves Gallia County, Ohio, a rural community with a population of approximately 31,000 people, many of whom have limited internet access. The library offers a variety of digital inclusion programs and resources for community members to use and interact with technology so that they can fully participate online. Specifically, the library provides access to the internet, a mobile hotspot lending program and a variety of programs designed to support the development of digital literacy skills.

The library launched Wi-Fi To Go, a mobile hotspot program for community members to have internet access when and where they need it. The program is one of the library’s most popular and often has 250 people on the waitlist. To meet the high demand, the library increased the number of available hotspots and now has 100 hotspots with unlimited data usage in circulation. In 2018, hotspots were checked out 2,213 times.

The library also offers an extended Wi-Fi range, allowing people to access the internet outside of library hours. The library added a charging station in the parking lot — which is included in the library’s Wi-Fi range — so that community members can charge their devices, allowing them to complete homework, job applications and government forms and also connect with others online while the library is closed.

The library offers a Book-a-Librarian program titled Tech Tutor, through which community members can book a one-on-one technology training session with library staff and receive customized guidance and support. Appointments are educational in nature and cover a wide range of topics, including: computer basics, word processing, accessing the library’s online resources, using social media and more. Sessions are one hour long and community members can register for as many as they need. Prior to each session, community members read and sign a Tech Tutor Agreement, which states that a staff member will answer questions to the best of their ability during the session, but will not do the work for the community member.

Bossard Memorial Library provides more than 300 online classes that are accessible on demand, at any time. To support the community’s need for digital literacy and skill building, these courses cover all skill levels from beginner to advanced, and include: Introduction to Microsoft Office Suite, Database Management and Graphic and Multimedia Design. Additionally, Bossard Memorial Library has an MOU with local Ohio Means Jobs centers to coordinate and partner on workforce development programs, education and job resources. This partnership leverages the library’s role in aligning library technology services with the workforce development needs of the community.
DIGITAL SKILLS

Technology can be intimidating. Many of your community members need reassurance that they are capable of mastering unfamiliar digital tools and terminology.

Strategies for supporting the digital skills needs of community members may include one-on-one guidance and/or classes. If you do provide classes, questions you will want to think through include:

- How do you make the most of the instructor’s time? That is, how do you fill the seats?
  - How to determine an answer: Other than having a truly spectacular class that gains word-of-mouth buzz, you can develop partnerships with organizations that serve the populations who would benefit most from a given class.

- How do you determine the classes of most value to your community members?
  - How to determine an answer: Ask them. And ask your community partners.

- What day and time is best?
  - How to determine an answer: Ask your community members. Keep in mind, the schedule that is most convenient to your community members may not be the schedule most convenient to your instructors.

Teaching materials

There is no need to create teaching materials yourself. Excellent, publicly available materials already exist. However, you might choose to customize existing teaching materials to ensure they are relevant to your community members. If you are looking for digital skills teaching materials to use as is (or to customize), we recommend starting with the following resources.

- DigitalLearn.org (developed by the Gail Borden Public Library and PLA) is a “one-stop shop” for computer and technology training for computer basics, hardware, software and applications as well as job search resources.²
  - https://training.digitallearn.org/

- The Digital Literacy Pathway guide (created by WebJunction’s Project Compass) can help you decide how to plan and present your basic computer training offerings. It provides step-by-step guidance through identifying your community’s needs, finding suitable training materials and partnering with other organizations that may be able to help you succeed.³

- GCFLearnFree.org (developed by the Goodwill Community Foundation® and Goodwill Industries of Eastern NC Inc.®) offers free resources and tools for learners to acquire necessary skills for 21st-century life. The site provides learning tools for more than 180 topics — ranging from Microsoft Office and email to reading and math.⁴
  - https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/

- Mozilla.org offers free and open source tools and resources to teach learners how to read, write and participate on the web. Teaching materials are available for a range of topics, including web literacy basics, coding, protecting your data and more.⁵

² 3 4 5
• **Techboomers.com** is a free educational website that teaches basic computer skills about websites to older adults and inexperienced internet users. The site provides a vast array of articles and tutorials on 21st-century online platforms, tools and social media.⁶

• **Tech Goes Home (TGH)** is a nonprofit dedicated to helping communities bridge the digital divide. Their website (techgoeshome.org) offers a variety of digital tools, classes and programs geared toward learning for schools, communities, early childhood educators and small businesses.⁷

• **Denver Public Library** offers robust online resources for technology classes and workshops on a range of topics, ranging from 3-D printing to computer basics to JavaScript². Their website (denverlibrary.org) includes lesson plans, handouts and supplemental materials.⁸

Libraries are increasingly going beyond basic digital literacy training. To fully succeed today, everyone needs more than basic digital literacy. We need to be content providers and critical thinkers.

Library patrons in many communities can choose among classes covering a wide range of digital competencies and online subject matter: technical certifications, job search, small business and entrepreneurship, civic engagement, access to government sites and services, homework help, college applications, preparation for tests like the SAT and GRE, health care tools and much more. Many libraries are also increasing their role in adult literacy training including English as a Second Language (ESL), GED test preparation, online high school diploma qualification and basic literacy.

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**Basic digital literacy training generally covers at least:**

- Components of a computer
- Mouse and keyboard use
- Internet browser use
- Email account creation and use
- Word processing basics
- Privacy, security and data protection
- Trusted sources for additional learning (and how to find them)

⁶ https://techboomers.com/
⁷ https://www.techgoeshome.org/programs
⁸ https://www.denverlibrary.org/ctc-classes
According to the American Community Survey conducted by the U.S. Census, 21 million American households — more than 17 percent of all households — still had no home internet access of any kind in 2017. The survey also showed that about 54 million individuals still lived in households that lacked either a computing device (including a mobile device like a phone or tablet), an internet subscription or both.

The corresponding statistics are much worse for most inner-city neighborhoods, many rural communities and lower-income Americans in general. (For a visual representation of broadband and internet adoption by Census tract, see NDIA’s Home Internet Maps.9)

So, it’s not surprising that the Pew Research Center’s Libraries 201610 report found that:

29% of library-using Americans 16 and older said they had gone to libraries to use computers, the internet, or a public Wi-Fi network. (That amounts to 23% of all Americans ages 16 and above.) ... It is worth noting that 7% of all Americans age 16 and older have used libraries’ Wi-Fi signals outside when libraries are closed.

Internet-connected workstations — with lines of patrons waiting to use them — have been a fixture of American public libraries for 20 years or more. The IMLS Public Libraries Survey found that 294,319 public-access internet computers were available at U.S. public libraries in 2015, supporting 300 million user sessions.

In addition, by 2015, the ALA’s 2015 Digital Inclusion Survey reported that “Virtually all libraries (98 percent) offer free public Wi-Fi access.”11

So, libraries’ efforts to support digital inclusion include a massive amount of free internet access. But libraries are also trying, in various ways, to make that public access available beyond their walls and standard hours of operation.

“In today’s world, internet access is not a luxury, it’s a basic need. Yet there are many residents who can’t afford internet access at home and rely on public internet access to learn, participate in the economy and be engaged family and community members.

While the library provides a unique value in our civic landscape, offering public computing and extensive open hours across multiple locations, we know that there are still Salt Lake City residents who need after-hours access to broadband so they can apply for jobs, take online classes, work on their homework, stay in touch with family and friends and keep current on local and national events.

The library offers 24/7 access to broadband internet because we are committed to providing equitable access and opportunity for all Salt Lake City residents, and we recognize that for many community members the need for reliable internet access does not cease at 9 p.m.”

— Peter Bromberg, Executive Director, Salt Lake City Public Library
Library internet access strategies generally fall into five broad categories:

a. Public access computer workstations and labs

b. Public Wi-Fi access inside the library and ways to enhance its usefulness (e.g., laptop and tablet lending)

c. Public Wi-Fi access outside the library walls, whether deliberate or not

d. Short-term home circulation of mobile internet devices such as mobile hotspots

e. Helping patrons secure affordable home internet service from other sources, such as ISP discount programs or nonprofit 4G reseller services (this may also involve helping them acquire affordable computers, tablets, etc., to make use of the service)

Let’s take a look at each category.

**Public-access computer workstations and labs**

Nearly all public libraries feature internet workstations for public use. Most library systems have dozens (or hundreds) per branch — sometimes deployed in training labs or in special “centers” combined with other technologies (makerspaces, media production studios, etc.). They are often simply situated in any space that can be made available.

**Public Wi-Fi access inside the library and ways to enhance its usefulness**

Libraries typically have high-quality, high-speed Wi-Fi access available to patrons on the premises. This enables a variety of innovations to increase access for patrons who don’t have it elsewhere. Patrons in many libraries can now routinely check out laptops or tablets (sometimes from self-service “vending machines”) and use them at any available table or seat; they can also use their own mobile devices for hours without incurring data charges. A growing number of libraries (examples include Kansas City, Mo., and Ashtabula, Ohio) even have coffee shops on the premises for the convenience of library Wi-Fi users.

**Public Wi-Fi access outside the library walls (deliberate or not)**

Like traditional workstations, Wi-Fi access inside the library ends when the doors are locked for the night or weekend. But if the wireless network is left on, access is often possible outside the building, and community members who need it often take advantage of the Wi-Fi available beyond the library’s walls. This has created a controversy for many library leaders: Should they let the library building be an all-night-and-weekends public hotspot or turn off the routers at closing time?

The reasoning for limiting exterior Wi-Fi access to business hours is usually grounded in safety and security: The argument is that it can’t be good to have people, especially unsupervised young people, gathering on the steps or in the parking lot of your empty building late at night.

The reasoning for allowing after-hours access is based on need and public service: The argument is that people without home internet access, especially students, need to perform online tasks at times when the library isn’t open, and it’s appropriate and easy for the library to make that possible.

From the perspective of digital inclusion, library leaders need to weigh both sides of this issue seriously. Is there a true community need that the library isn’t meeting? Is there really a security or public-safety concern being created by after-hours Wi-Fi users?

“We know our Wi-Fi in the parking lot is an access point after we close for people who do not have internet access at home. We also have a charging station outside.”

— Debbie Saunders, Executive Director, Bossard Memorial Library
Could this concern be managed by limiting Wi-Fi hours (e.g., from closing time to midnight), by increasing lighting outside, deploying a security guard or even by providing regular seating and other amenities?

Or should the library consider options for extending its Wi-Fi service to some nearby public space, such as a public park?

**Short-term home circulation of mobile internet devices such as mobile hotspots**

Over the past five years, large and small library systems across the U.S. have launched hotspot lending programs that allow patrons to borrow (or sometimes rent) “live” 4G Wi-Fi devices for several weeks at no cost. More recently, some libraries have added computers to their circulating materials.

A great example is San Francisco Public Library’s Tech’d Out mobile wireless hotspot and laptop lending device program, which includes Mi-Fi or laptop/Mi-Fi bundles that can be checked out by community members. Standalone Mi-Fi devices have been added to the circulating laptop/Mi-Fi bundles. These neatly packaged devices allow patrons to connect up to 20 wireless devices to Verizon’s 4G LTE wireless data network. Each device comes packaged in a protective case, along with a charging block and power cord.

Laptop bundles circulate in a Tech’d Out laptop bag and include an HP laptop pre-loaded with Microsoft Office and internet browsers, a Verizon wireless internet hotspot device with unlimited data in a protective clamshell case, a USB Mouse, a laptop power cord, a Mi-Fi power cord and a laptop lending agreement/bundle contents invoice sheet. Devices can be checked out for up to three weeks at the Main Library and at select branches that serve underserved populations.

One of the original hotspot lending pilots started by New York Public Library has now grown into a 10,000-unit program, operated by NYPL along with Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Public Library, Sprint and the nonprofit Sprint reseller Mobile Beacon. The three public library systems lend the units at no cost, supported by major funding from Google.

At the other end of the urban/rural spectrum, the Bossard Memorial Library in rural southern Ohio has one hundred AT&T hotspots which they lend to patrons for two weeks at a time. In 2018 these units circulated over 2,200 times.

Digital device lending is an effective, scalable way for libraries to support home internet access, in the same way they have supported home access to books for more than a century. But like circulating books, circulating Wi-Fi devices is inherently a temporary solution to the problem of affordable broadband. Hotspot programs work well when there is reliable signal strength but that is not always the case, particularly in rural areas. Signal strength and location can vary when antennas are removed or shifted, resulting in strong internet signals one day and none the next.¹³

**Helping patrons secure affordable home internet service from Internet Service Provider discount programs or nonprofit reseller services**

Depending on where you are, lower-income residents may qualify for heavily discounted broadband service from the local cable or telecommunications ISP. (For a survey of these programs across the country, see the National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s Discount Internet Guidebook.¹⁴) They may also be able to get $10- to-$16-per-month Sprint fixed 4G service from PCs for People or a Mobile Citizen reseller.

¹² https://www.nypl.org/hotspot

¹³ http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may17/strover/05strover.html

¹⁴ https://www.discounts.digitalinclusion.org/

A library program can help patrons learn about these options and apply for one that makes sense for their needs. All these programs come with specific fine print and operational issues. The library may be able and willing to provide support for patrons in overcoming these issues, or the library may seek a community partner with more experience — e.g., local government, social service agencies, community-based organizations with low-cost home internet programs or even the ISPs themselves.

In addition, a new internet adopter may need to find an affordable computer or tablet to get online. Libraries can help these patrons find affordable devices by partnering with an experienced nonprofit or a local computer refurbisher. (See the next section, “Access to Internet-capable devices”.)

“Another issue with hotspots, just like circulating books — users may have to place a hold on a hotspot and wait until one is available for checkout. This situation would not work for a student who has an assignment due or someone who needs to create a resume for an interview or any other time-sensitive need.”

— Marian Christmon, Digital Inclusion Initiatives Manager, Nashville Public Library
A major component of digital disconnection for U.S. households is the lack of a computing device in the home. In 2017, according to the most recent American Community Survey, about 15 million American households — one out of eight — did not own home computers of any kind, including tablets or smartphones.

With new Chromebooks and larger-screen tablets available for less than $200, it’s tempting to think that “everyone can afford” some kind of computer. But the reality is that even $200 is too much for many families and individuals living on low fixed incomes. That’s why helping people find affordable home computers is a key digital inclusion goal in many communities.

In general, there are two “cheap to free” approaches for effective community digital inclusion programs. By far the most common is acquiring refurbished computer systems, refurbishing used computers in-house or arranging for clients to receive computers from partner refurbishers. The other, less common approach is to purchase new devices at wholesale prices in large quantities.

A number of U.S. communities are now home to one or more professional, nonprofit computer refurbishing organizations (or equivalent programs within organizations like Goodwill Industries). There are also local, for-profit refurbishers that may be willing to donate or heavily discount some ready-to-use computer systems for low-income households. Libraries can work with these organizations and companies — directly or through partners — to help patrons acquire very cheap or free refurbished PCs and laptops. For example:

**San Antonio Public Library** has partnered with the San Antonio Housing Authority to develop the Digital Literacy Passport, which provides a free, refurbished computer or laptop to residents when at least seven digital literacy classes are completed. The classes cover coursework in computer basics, internet basics, cyber security, email basics and Microsoft Word. Participants who complete seven classes, which must equate to seven hours of training, are eligible to receive refurbished computers provided by Goodwill Industries. The software for their devices is provided by SAPL and often installed by SAHA.

The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee received a large donation of computers to its digital inclusion fund which were traded to a commercial refurbishing firm, ER2, for working refurbished systems. The arrangement was negotiated in partnership with the city of Nashville, the city’s public housing authority, the school district and Nashville Public Library, which then distributed the refurbished systems to residents and students with a Library-designed software package. The library has also operated programs for seniors using donor-funded tablets, which seniors can keep upon completion.

**The Multnomah County Public Library** (Portland, Ore.) partners with local nonprofit refusisher Free Geek, which provides free laptops for adult learners graduating from the library’s basic computer literacy course, called “Welcome to Computers.” As a trade-off, the library sends its outdated computers to Free Geek.

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The Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (Charlotte, N.C.) works with a nonprofit refurbishing program, Eliminate the Digital Divide (E2D), and local schools to help distribute laptops to students who can also borrow hotspots from the library. Donors have provided funding to purchase the computers. The library also lends podcast kits free of charge for up to three weeks to all community members who have a library card. The kits include everything needed to create and post podcasts, including: microphones with stands, cables, a USB cord and an SD card. In addition, podcasting library resources are available in their online catalog for community members to create a professional podcast or podcast series.

A nonprofit digital inclusion program, Technology Goes Home (TGH), has been able to buy new Chromebooks and resell them to participating low-income families for $50. TGH’s independent spinoff in Chattanooga, Tenn., is closely associated with the Chattanooga Public Library and regularly offers “Tech Goes Home at the Library,” a 15-hour basic digital skills course whose graduates can buy a $50 Chromebook.

The Free Library of Philadelphia’s Techmobile17 brings wireless internet access, laptops, iPads, a printer, books, learning opportunities and an onboard digital resources specialist to neighborhoods for hands-on experience, digital literacy training, access to job-searching resources and more.

17 https://www.urbanlibraries.org/assets/ULC_Leadership_Brief_Building_Co...
True digital inclusion entails responding to a range of individual needs in ways that empower community members to become self-reliant technology users. Libraries may try to meet all these needs through their own efforts or seek to divide labor with others in the community.

Whether acting alone or with partners, it is important to plan and manage your library’s digital inclusion efforts on the basis of a full, accurate understanding of your community’s digital divides. As with any community needs assessment, there are both statistical and human sources that can help you gain this understanding.

Below is a list of questions that are commonly used to help define and measure the need for digital inclusion in a community. You may find they go beyond what are usually considered “library concerns.” Are there questions you would add? Are there questions you consider irrelevant for your purposes? Ultimately these decisions are up to you, but we urge you to make them in consultation with colleagues and others in the community, and with an open mind.

Some questions for a community digital inclusion needs assessment

- What share of households in your community lack broadband internet access at home?
- Of those households who have broadband access, how many have reasonably fast, fixed broadband (cable, DSL or fiber), and how many are limited to mobile devices with data limits?
- How do your community members who lack home broadband access, or have only mobile device access, break down demographically?
- By income and poverty?
- By age?
- By education?
- By employment status?
- By race or ethnic background?
- By primary language?
- By employment status?
- By neighborhood?
- How many households without home broadband access, or that only have mobile device access, include children? Is lack of home internet access a known problem for your community’s schools?
- How many adults with limited or no home internet access in your community are unemployed? Is lack of home internet access and/or digital literacy skills a known problem for your community’s workforce agencies, employers or adult education providers?
- How many adults with limited or no home internet access in your community are elderly? Is lack of home internet access a known problem for your community’s senior services providers, including health care providers?
- How many adults with limited or no home internet access in your community are disabled? Is lack of home internet access, appropriate equipment and/
Assessing Community Digital Inclusion Needs

or skills a known problem for your community’s disabled service providers and advocates?

- To what extent do community members with limited or no home internet access use the internet elsewhere?
  - At the public library?
  - At some other community site?
  - At a restaurant, coffeehouse, etc.
  - At work?
  - At school?
  - Somewhere else?
- To what extent would community members who now have limited or no home internet access prefer to have it? What are the major barriers?
  - Is cost of service a major reason why community residents lack home internet service?
  - Is non-availability of broadband service a major reason why community residents lack home internet service?
  - Is the cost of computers or other devices a major reason why community residents lack home internet service?
  - Are lack of digital skills, lack of confidence or fear of technology impacting adoption of home internet access by community residents?
- What digital tasks or opportunities are community residents who have limited or no internet access most concerned about missing out on?

Where to look for community data

Public Statistics: U.S. Census

To get an overall picture of the numbers, demographic characteristics and geographic distribution of your community members who have little or no internet access, you can now turn to the U.S. Census’ American Community Survey (ACS), which provides household computer and internet data for individual Census tracts. The Census’ American FactFinder Portal provides Census data for the specific tracts you need or for your whole city or county.

The ACS’ newly localized computer and internet data can be found in Tables B28002 through B28011 of the 2017 ACS 5-Year Estimates. (There are also summary tables, S2801 and S2802, which have much of the same information.) Topics covered include:

- The share of households with various types of home internet access (dial-up, wireline, cellphone, satellite, etc.) or no access at all (B20002).
- Overall computer ownership and internet subscriptions ... by households at various income levels (B28004), and by “persons in households” of various ... ages (B28005), race and ethnic groups (B28009), educational attainment (B28006), and labor force status (B28007).

Worth noting: ACS Table B28002 provides data on households with cable, DSL or fiber broadband accounts — i.e., conventional “wireline” connections — vs. households for whom mobile devices are the sole home internet service. This distinction is important because mobile subscriptions are far more likely to have strict data usage limits and the devices they connect, especially smartphones, also have serious limitations in important use categories like education.

► Quick Tip

To access the ACS Tables, visit the American FactFinder Portal (https://factfinder.census.gov), open the Download Center, select the American Community Survey program, select a dataset (2017 ACS 5- or 1-year estimates), select a geographic type and your location and then search for tables by word or number.
Public Statistics: Federal Communications Commission

Roughly twice a year, the FCC, through its Form 477 process, collects and publishes two sets of data from commercial internet providers that could be useful for your community assessment.

The FCC’s Fixed Broadband Deployment Data consists of very large, downloadable state data files that include the fixed (not mobile) broadband services offered by each regulated provider for each Census block, with the maximum advertised download and upload speed for each service offered to any address in the block. The data is summarized in a series of interactive national maps. Generally, these maps provide a bird’s-eye view of which kinds of broadband technology are being sold to residents by which companies, as well as the speeds they claim to offer for any Census block. The data files enable a more sophisticated user to analyze and map this data for a broader area. In either case you should be aware that there are serious, acknowledged reliability issues with this data.

▶ Quick Tip
To access the FCC Fixed Broadband Deployment Data maps, visit https://broadbandmap.fcc.gov and search by location.

The Residential Fixed Internet Access Connections data is simpler and probably more reliable. It consists of two codes for each Census tract in the U.S., one number (between zero and five) representing the number of households per thousand in the tract for which providers reported a broadband download connection at 10 Mbps or faster, and a second number representing the households per thousand with fixed broadband connections at any speed. The FCC provides national maps showing these codes, but they are fairly easy to map locally, which can make the patterns of home internet adoption in your community much clearer.

▶ Quick Tip
To access the FCC Residential Fixed Internet Access Connections map, visit https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/maps/residential-fixed-internet-access-service-connections-per-1000-households-by-census-tract/ and search by location.

Public Statistics: Other Sources

Local survey research on residential internet access and use is hard to come by in most communities. A handful of local governments and universities have performed their own local polls or surveys. Examples include the cities of Austin (Texas)19 and Seattle,20 as well as the Knight School of Communication21 at Queens College in Charlotte, N.C. Your library may have its own data, from operations (public-access and training usage statistics, etc.) and possibly from your own surveys of patrons and the public.

Conducting Your Own Digital Inclusion Survey Research

As the examples above demonstrate, locally tailored survey research can generate answers from community members to more of the questions that matter for a community needs assessment than just relying on Census or FCC data. In particular, a local research effort can create a window into local residents’ reasons for connecting or not, their experiences with local internet providers’ costs and availability, the alternative channels they find for getting online (including the library), the digital skills and opportunities that interest them the most and the specific ways that being online — or not — impacts their daily lives.

Should your community needs assessment include original survey research? Professional polling is expensive, as is good focus group research; however, there is no better way to take a hard empirical look at your community’s needs.

19 http://austintexas.gov/department/austin-digital-assessment
There may be situations (e.g., a library levy campaign) that provide a natural context for the library itself to gather this data. Or there may be partners — local government, a university, a foundation — who share your interest and could help share the cost. Sharing in the “ownership” of a community needs assessment is often a very effective way to create and strengthen a common commitment to digital inclusion among community leaders that can ultimately lead to program collaboration or formal, strategic coalition.

**Engaging Stakeholders**

Finally, your community digital inclusion needs assessment should engage with a wide variety of relevant players in other institutions, organizations and constituencies. Cast a wide net! Teachers, social service workers, workforce agency staff, health care professionals, public housing managers, bank branch managers, clergy and community activists may all have unique perspectives and insights — as may your mayor, business leaders and local tech gurus.

Consultation can take various forms, from one-on-one conversations or email exchanges to facilitated events. Remember that valuable participants may not all participate in the same ways. A community leader with a job may not be available for a weekday event. The leader of a non-English-speaking immigrant community may not be comfortable in a workshop dominated by English speakers. Email invitations may not reach some of the people who could tell you the most about unconnected groups because they don’t use email themselves. It’s important to be deliberate and thoughtful in your engagement process.

It is also important to keep a good record of the insights you receive and make sure they are reflected fairly in your ultimate needs assessment.

**Sharing your digital inclusion community needs assessment**

To be useful to the community at large, you will want your community digital inclusion needs assessment to be written up and published in a readable, accessible format, including both the data and feedback you’ve accumulated and the implications of what you’ve found for digital inclusion strategy and programs — whether for the library alone or for a wider community effort. If you have professional help for this task, great! Remember — the final report will be the assessment for most of the community and probably for many library staff and board as well. If it is clear and persuasive, it could be a seminal document for digital inclusion in your community.

When it’s ready to share, consider holding a public event to release and discuss what you found for the benefit of community members and the media. Make sure your partners are included, and everyone who took part is invited. Below are examples of digital inclusion needs assessments incorporated into community digital inclusion strategies. Note that only one of these was led directly by a library, though the local region’s library systems were highly involved in all of them.

- The Charlotte Digital Inclusion Alliance’s Digital Inclusion Playbook
- Brownsville’s Digital Access Needs (Brooklyn Public Library)
- City of San José Digital Inclusion Strategy
- Louisville Metro Digital Inclusion Plan
- Austin Digital Inclusion Strategy

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22 [http://www.charlottedigitalinclusionalliance.org/playbook.html](http://www.charlottedigitalinclusionalliance.org/playbook.html)


As trusted community anchor institutions, public libraries are uniquely qualified to bridge digital divides and ensure access to emerging technology for all. Libraries offer a broad array of digital skills and training through classes, tools and resources. They are even providing internet access through Wi-Fi device lending and hotspot checkout programs and helping low-income patrons acquire affordable home computers.

Libraries are increasingly taking the lead to quantify and scale up efforts to meet their communities’ digital inclusion needs through partnerships and collaborations to remove barriers to access. While these expanding roles create new demands and challenges for library staff and managers, they also create new opportunities for collaboration with other community organizations and partners that have their own commitments and approaches to promoting digital inclusion.

These organizations may include public housing authorities, school systems, local colleges, government agencies and other institutions that libraries can easily recognize as peers and prospective partners. But, sometimes they also include groups and leaders who aren’t ordinarily on the library’s radar — e.g., neighborhood technology centers, nonprofit computer refurbishers and local broadband innovators.

The following list provides seven reasons why libraries should consider partnerships and collaborations with other committed digital inclusion practitioners, of all sizes, in their community.

1. **Expand Library Resources and Services:** New partners may possess knowledge, skills or resources that will add value to the library’s efforts (and in return, the library’s resources and access to the community might add value for the partners).

2. **Maximize Economies of Scale:** Partners might offer digital inclusion services to patrons that complement the library’s services — for example, by providing affordable refurbished computers — at minimal cost to the library.

3. **Connect with New Audiences:** Libraries are among the most trusted local institutions, but that doesn’t mean their reach is universal or unaffected by language and cultural barriers. Community partners may have a demonstrated ability to engage and work with various community members who are not yet library users.

4. **Extend Reach Geographically:** One proven way that digital literacy training programs boost participation is by taking their training “outside the walls” to venues that are accessible and comfortable for community members, such as outdoor public spaces, church basements, senior centers, public housing community rooms and laundromats. This may be an especially useful option for libraries with limited branch access (or space for classes) in neighborhoods where digital inclusion is most needed.

5. **Support Capacity Building:** Libraries can greatly strengthen and expand their programs and services...
through partnerships. For example, libraries have long partnered with colleges and universities to access cutting-edge technology and thought leadership to build staff capacity.

6. **Build New Supporters and Generate More Opportunities:** Successful collaborations with new partners will create new friends and supporters for the library and a broader, more diverse circle of informed community participants for the library’s assessment and strategic-planning efforts.

7. **Incubate Innovative Technology:** As new technologies are developed and evolve, it’s important for libraries to continually update their resources and offerings to meet the needs of their community members. Partnering with tech leaders in your community will provide a natural fit for them to promote their tools and gather feedback while offering your library the opportunity to serve as an innovative tech hub.

Collaboration can take many forms, from simple cooperation around a single resource or event, to the establishment of a formal coalition or funded program partnership. Some local libraries have done all three in the cause of digital inclusion.

- **The word partnership** usually denotes a legal, contractual relationship involving close cooperation between two or more parties, with specified rights and responsibilities.

- **The word collaboration** more often refers to a working relationship in which the parties aren’t bound contractually, but have agreed to share information and resources to pursue a common objective.

- **The term coalition** refers to “an organization of organizations … operating in the public realm, with a reasonable degree of transparency about its activities, in its governance and finances … a formalized (though not necessarily incorporated) structure … open to growth by adding members that support its mission” (National Digital Inclusion Alliance’s *Digital Inclusion Guidebook*, 2018).\(^{27}\)

Here are examples of libraries collaborating or forming partnerships with other community organizations for one or more of the reasons listed above:

**Expand Resources and Services**

Through **Rochester Public Library’s (N.Y.) Rochester Navigators partnership**\(^{28}\) with the Literacy Volunteers of Rochester, LVR volunteers act as Digital Literacy Navigators at the library, providing free, on-site, drop-in service to community members who require assistance with technology. Navigators assist participants with a range of needs, from learning a new computer skill to completing important computer-related tasks.

By participating in the program, community members have developed their digital literacy skills and been able to create email accounts, access and surf the internet, conduct job searches, improve language skills and connect with friends and family.

**San Francisco Public Library Provides ADA Access.**\(^{29}\) through a comprehensive Accessibility Initiative covering virtual and physical programs. SFPL offers services and spaces to help support community members with disabilities access and use technology. Specialized adaptive software, hardware and assistive listening devices are available at the Main Library.

Through a grant, an Accessibility Toolkit was assembled with a variety of assistive equipment. Other tools developed include: a daily facility checklist with an ADA Standard Path Measure tool, iPad 2s with cameras for Deaf Service Center patrons and a download station at the Talking Books and Braille Center for new digital offerings from the National Library for the Blind. SFPL also stations Accessibility Liaisons in each branch library and on each floor of the Main Library.

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27 https://www.coalitions.digitalinclusion.org/index.html
29 https://sfpl.org/index.php?pg=2000002501
Maximize Economies of Scale

Multnomah County Library’s (Ore.) Welcome to Computers program\(^\text{30}\) teaches basic computer skills and provides participants with a free laptop and one year of technical support. The five-week program, available in English and Spanish, consists of weekly two-hour classes with lessons on using email, navigating online, downloading apps and accessing the resources available at the library. For some students, the program has helped them earn their GED or successfully conduct online job searches.\(^\text{31}\) The Welcome to Computers program is a partnership between the library, the technology nonprofit FreeGeek and the Rosewood Initiative.

Connect with New Audiences

Nashville Public Library’s Digital Inclusion Program\(^\text{32}\) provides digital literacy instruction, resources and access to the internet to their community members. The library brings digital literacy education programs directly to where people are in the community. NPL partners with the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency, Comcast and Google Fiber as part of the ConnectHome program to launch training sessions for families without internet access at home, where residents take classes to improve digital literacy, then receive free refurbished laptops. Comcast and Google Fiber provide free or low-cost internet service. NPL was the training partner for the Anytime Access for All pilot that provided low-cost computing devices, training, support and low-cost internet service to Metro Nashville Public School families who lacked computer and broadband access at home.

The library’s digital inclusion programs for seniors are designed to help them access critical health and government services, strengthen family and personal connections and increase their level of comfort using technology. To expand their outreach efforts promoting digital literacy training to seniors, NPL formed partnerships with agencies and organizations serving seniors, especially low-income seniors. They now have partnerships with United Way Family Resource Centers, Metropolitan Development and Housing, FiftyForward, Salvation Army, Metro Parks, National Council on Aging and others. The Senior Tech Academy programming has, also, been expanded to include customized implementations of CyberSeniors.org and GenerationsonLine.org programs. NPL’s digital literacy teams take mobile computer labs to communities across Davidson County, focusing on outreach to senior citizens and families in at-risk communities.

Extend Reach Geographically

When Detroit Public Library was faced with challenges in reaching more community members and having them successfully complete digital literacy training, they had to look at new ways of providing services. They looked at removing barriers such as transportation to the library, accommodating those with inconsistent work schedules by providing flexible class schedules and addressing community members’ discomfort in learning new skills by bringing library programs to where people were already gathering — in safe places such as the local laundromat.

Libraries Without Borders partnered with the Parkman Branch of DPL to create the Wash & Learn Initiative.\(^\text{33}\) The program provides laptops and a Wi-Fi hotspot, as well as customized resources, to meet the needs of people at each laundromat. When the library met people in their own neighborhood at a place they visit weekly, they saw increased class enrollment, participant retention and high rates of digital literacy training course completion.

The Wash & Learn Initiative pilot was sponsored by the Knight Foundation and developed in partnership with the United Way of Southeastern Michigan, Brilliant Detroit, the Coin Laundry Association and Too Small to Fail.\(^\text{34}\)

\(^{30}\) https://multcolib.org/events/computer-basics  
^{31}\) https://multcolib.org/user/506/blogs  
^{32}\) https://library.nashville.org/blog/2017/03/do-you-know-what-your-libraries-these-days  
^{33}\) https://www.librarieswithoutborders.org/wash_and_learn_detroit/  
^{34}\) https://www.benton.org/blog/availability-accessibility-why-detroit-public-library-began-partnering-coin-laundromats
**Support Capacity Building**

**Brooklyn Public Library’s Teacher Lab**[^35] is an online information literacy and research skills course designed to help K-12 educators feel more confident accessing and using library resources to support classroom work and strengthen their lesson plans. Course topics include navigating the library collection and online resources, finding primary sources in an archive, searching databases, using Google and Wikipedia as research tools and evaluating resources from journal articles. Video lectures, discussion boards and independent work keep the learning varied and interactive.

To pass the course, participants create an annotated bibliography as their final assignment. Teacher Lab provides a valuable learning opportunity that teachers can complete independently, at no cost and at their own pace. Course graduates can earn state-certified credit toward their teaching license requirements.

**Build New Supporters and Generate More Opportunities**

**Cuyahoga County Public Library operates a service point at MetroHealth Medical Center**[^36] in Cleveland to provide patients, employees, visitors and the public with access to a small collection of materials in the Patient Activity Center. The library includes a collection of consumer health materials, fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, DVDs, four public internet computers, a book drop for returns, a convenient express check-out machine and a combination printer, fax and copy machine. Through a Library Services and Technology Act grant, the library offers a self-service Media Box kiosk for customers to borrow and return DVDs using their library cards.

The library is staffed by a Health & Science Specialist who, as an extension of the medical team, provides books and DVDs to help patients learn more about their health and illness or cope with their recovery. In addition, a bilingual library clerk staffs the service point to further assist community members.

**Incubate Innovative Technology**

**Kansas City Public Library’s (Mo.) Learning Circles**[^37] program, developed in partnership with Peer 2 Peer University (P2PU), engages adult learners through peer-supported study groups that meet weekly in person to take free online courses together. These differ from the traditional student/teacher format and provide a facilitated opportunity for all participants to learn from each other’s experiences, sometimes with content shared by a subject matter expert. Librarians serve as facilitators rather than content experts and help guide a group of five to 15 adults through a preselected course on a topic of interest. This new learning format promotes the library as a supportive, social environment for participants who may be uncomfortable in a traditional classroom setting, have minimal to no digital skills and/or no computer access.

The library provides access to free, online digital literacy courses for beginners through DigitalLearn.org. Additional open-source courses have been assembled to empower small business owners and nonprofit leaders in building their online presence with a website and social media, as well as using graphic design programs. Learning circles also create a sense of community, since participants meet in person for four to eight weeks, collaborating on projects and discussing content as they progress through the course.

By offering an alternative to typical learning formats, the library has experienced an increased number of community members served, increased participant retention rates and improved self-reported rates of applying newfound digital literacy skills. Learning circles have also clearly fostered more social connections among community members by building camaraderie through the experience.

**The Toronto Public Library’s Digital Innovation Hubs**[^38] provide a space to connect innovators, entrepreneurs

[^35]: https://www.bklynlibrary.org/teacherlab
[^36]: https://www.cuyahogalibrary.org/Branches/MetroHealth.aspx
[^38]: https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/using-the-library/computer-services/innovation-spaces/
and community members with technology, tools, support and training to learn and collaborate in an evolving digital environment. These digital-learning workspaces have access to the latest technology, including 3-D printers, Arduino kits (a microcontroller used to build digital devices and interactive objects), web design tools, audio/video production equipment, fabrication and recording studios and photography and coding tools.

The library offers a variety of programs to support their efforts in incubating new technologies, encouraging innovation and providing free, open spaces for community members to build their digital literacy skills. Programs for children 12 years and younger are geared toward building technology skills and unleashing creativity — including LEGO, Scratch coding and Makey Makey (a two-sided circuit board that uses everyday objects as a replacement for keyboards and mice).

Programs for adults focus on developing basic digital literacy skills and increasing their confidence online. Classes include basic computer skills, digital design, email and social networking, internet and library research and more.

The Hubs have also been used to foster innovation in the community by partnering with other groups on Maker Faires and attracting new community members and partners who want to use their creativity to build new ideas, businesses and tools.

Effective collaborations and partnerships

To build effective partnerships and collaborations some considerations are obvious: a common goal, clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, transparency and trust. In addition to these considerations, libraries seeking to work with other digital inclusion partners should:

- **Foster mutual understanding.** Good partners look out for each other’s interests. Do you know what your partner needs, and is hoping to gain, from working with you? Does your partner understand what the library needs and hopes to gain? Openness and reciprocity is the foundation of a solid working relationship.

- **Empower your staff to be good partners.** The day-to-day implementation of a collaborative effort is often the responsibility of someone below the top of your organization chart. Whether that person has an executive-sounding title (“Digital Inclusion Manager”) or is a training program staff person or branch librarian, they are the library’s face in your relationship with the partner. The more the library’s point person has enough information and authority to make day-to-day decisions, answer questions and build personal credibility, the better that relationship will be.

- **Share credit!** You need public credit and recognition for your efforts. So do your partners. When the time comes to talk to the media, top community leaders or funders, all institutions — including libraries — face a temptation to hog the limelight, especially when their partner organizations are relatively small and obscure. Resist that temptation! Recognizing the leadership of others in your efforts will never diminish the library’s public image, but slighting them definitely will.

Digital inclusion coalitions

In a few U.S. cities and regions, leaders of public institutions, community nonprofits and businesses have created “digital inclusion coalitions” to advocate, plan and promote broad digital inclusion strategies for their communities. Public libraries are always important participants in these coalitions. City governments, housing authorities, social service agencies and community-based nonprofits are also frequent coalition leaders and partners.

Sometimes the library is the driving force for local digital inclusion coalitions such as in Kansas City, Salt Lake City and the Finger Lakes region of New York. San Francisco Public Library leads a coalition around the region’s annual “Connect with Tech” Week.
In 2018 NDIA published the *Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook*, based on interviews and discussions with a range of coalition organizers and leaders. We encourage library leaders who think a community-wide coalition might help their digital inclusion efforts to consult the *Guidebook* and to reach out for advice to your peers and others who contributed to it.

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**Excerpt from the *Digital Inclusion Coalition Guidebook***

**Why Digital Inclusion Coalitions Matters**

There are many communities across the country where digital inclusion efforts take the form of collaborations and partnerships as well as free-standing programs. But at the moment, there are just a handful of cities with community-wide digital inclusion coalitions as defined above. Most of these coalitions are fairly new. They vary significantly in their leadership, objectives and strategies. None can yet claim to have “won” a major new commitment of resources or caused a dramatic change in the lives of community residents.

But NDIA believes that the coalitions whose leaders we interviewed, and others like them, represent something new and important for the digital inclusion movement because of three effects they create (deliberately or not) for their participants and communities:

1) **The advocacy effect**
Coalitions focus local attention on the issue of digital inclusion as a specific area for public policy and community action. Whether or not their organizers intend it, broad-based digital inclusion coalitions have an “advocacy effect” that raises the profile of digital inclusion for their communities’ media, opinion leaders and the general public.

3) **The network effect**
Simply by bringing this range of parties together in one room, coalitions set the stage for their participants to better understand each other’s perspectives, share information and strategic insights and discover opportunities for new working relationships – including two- or three-way collaborations and program partnerships.

A local digital inclusion coalition that can manage to keep operating openly, with a structure that encourages participant engagement and new participants, has the potential to keep generating these advocacy, alignment and networking effects. In fact, the potential is also to grow them over time – i.e., to increase its participants’ influence and impact – no matter what specific projects it chooses to undertake.

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[39](https://www.coalitions.digitalinclusion.org/pdfs/NDIA%20Coalition%20Guidebook%20V1.2%20%28Web%29.pdf)
The *Guidebook* describes examples of local digital inclusion coalitions in which libraries have taken leading roles. Here are two more:

To complement the library’s role in ensuring access to all, the **Salt Lake City Public Library** is a member of **Utah Communities Connect** (Utah CC): Utah’s Digital Alliance and provides staff time and resources to support the partnership. Utah Communities Connect’s mission is to address digital inequities by bringing awareness and action to communities throughout Utah around digital access and readiness. SLCPL’s participation ensures cross collaboration and coordination of the library’s role in offering resources and information to address barriers to digital literacy.

Utah CC is an alliance created to bring awareness and action to Utah’s communities around digital access, devices and education. Alliance members collaborate to create a digital inclusion network of organizations and individuals and to coordinate local solutions that address digital inequities through cross-sector collaboration and coordination of resources and information. As a voice for digital equity, Utah CC identifies opportunities for access to broadband, devices and digital literacy training. They also support digital inclusion community programs, share resources and best practices and bring awareness to community members and stakeholders to become digital inclusion advocates and changemakers.

The **San Francisco Public Library** spearheaded the first citywide Connect with Tech Week in collaboration with more than 20 partners to promote online access and technology skill building in efforts to bridge the digital divide. The week was so successful that it has become an annual citywide event for the library and its partners to promote resources, training and services in support of digital inclusion for all.

Throughout the week-long event, library staff, tech workers and industry professionals partner together to hold free tech-training programs, from basic computer skills to advanced coding classes, throughout the library system and at partner locations. A tech expo is held for community members to learn about resources; join with policy makers, nonprofits and ISPs to discuss digital equity; and attend a tech fair to fix broken devices.

Programs are provided in multiple languages so that diverse groups of community members can participate. The week also serves as an open house for library services and brings in new community members and volunteers. The library scheduled Connect with Tech Week to take place during International Digital Inclusion Week.

[40](https://utahcc.org/)