



Columbus Digital Inclusion Problem Statement and Project Framing

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The COVID-19 pandemic has created a sudden, massive public need for trustworthy digital inclusion services. Millions of Americans need support from digital inclusion programs: to get connected with affordable home internet, find affordable computers and tablets, and learn basic digital skills.

The Census' most recent American Community Survey¹ found that 97,100 of Columbus' 366,000 households -- one out of four -- did not have a cable modem, DSL or fiber Internet accounts in 2018.

46,500 Columbus households -- almost 13% -- had no home broadband subscriptions of any kind in 2018, including a cellular data plan. About 41,700 households -- 11% of all households in the city -- had internet access **only** through a cellular data plan.

Columbus' unconnected households are disproportionately lower-income. Households with incomes below \$20,000 were about 17% of all Columbus households in 2018, but accounted for 39% of those with no broadband. 64% of Columbus households with no broadband had incomes below \$35,000, although these households were only a third of the city's total.

Older residents are especially likely to be unconnected. According to the ACS, about 11% of Columbus's "population in households" was 65 or older in 2018. About 37% of those 65+ residents (34,500 individuals) lived in households without computers, or with computers but without broadband subscriptions. Unconnected seniors accounted for more than a quarter of all Columbus residents without home computers and/or broadband.

In surveys, non-adopters of home internet cite multiple reasons for not adopting with the most common reason being cost of internet and a computing device.² The additional reasons are interrelated - lack of digital skills and privacy concerns.

Internet Access

Pre-COVID-19, community members without home internet could use free wifi at libraries, community-based organizations and businesses like McDonalds. But even in normal circumstances, reliance on public wifi had serious drawbacks: it was time-consuming, often difficult to arrange, sometimes expensive, and almost never private. During this pandemic, with libraries, community centers and McDonald's dining rooms closed, public wifi access has become

¹ U.S. Census, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Tables B28002, B28004, and B28005.

² Horrigan, John. *Measuring the Gap* (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, February 2020), <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/measuring-the-gap/>





a matter of sitting in parking lots. Home internet service is the only realistic way to stay connected -- to school, to employment, to health care, to financial services, to commercial and community services -- while also staying safe, and helping to flatten the curve.

When schools closed and stay at home orders were announced, parking lot wifi was a quick low-cost answer. Now that social distancing is a reality for the foreseeable future, connectivity solutions must focus resources on reliable in-home internet access and use.

Distribution of hotspot devices is a common solution. They are user friendly and require minimal staff time. But they tend to cost \$60 or more per month for unlimited data, which makes their utility as a long term solution, an expensive proposition. Devices with less than unlimited data are only useful if other sources of connectivity are also available.

To address the lack of home internet subscriptions, near term solutions utilize existing broadband infrastructure.

1. Increase awareness of AT&T and Charter Spectrum's existing low-cost home internet plans. Schools, libraries, government agencies and community-based organizations who already interact with low-income community members are particularly well placed to distribute information regarding how to sign up for the low-cost home internet plans.
2. Cover the cost of a wireline discounted subscription either through paying a bulk purchase of subscriptions (to be negotiated with the internet service provider) or by reimbursing eligible households.
3. Provide hotspot devices or internet enabled devices to community members who are housing in-secure.
4. Cover the cost of broadband service to all homeless shelters in addition to wifi routers sufficient to meet the usage demand in the shelter.

A potential long term solution for low-income neighborhoods would be a free public wifi. This service must be available in homes, with sufficient speed for multiple users to stream video.

Computers

Low-income households often rely upon a mobile phone as their only computing device. The lowest cost option to providing computers to households is to purchase refurbished devices. Desktops are the lowest priced but are more difficult to distribute and less convenient. Refurbished laptops tend to cost \$60-\$100 each.

To address the lack of computers in low-income households, near term solutions require soliciting donations of computers from local corporations. If the computers are not ready to be distributed, they should first go to a computer refurbisher.

Schools and local community-based organizations who already have relationships with low-income community members can facilitate computer distributions.





Digital Skills and Technical Support

Prior to social distancing, digital literacy training and technical support was provided by libraries and community-based organizations. New models for support not only must take into account social distancing but also the fact that more Columbus households are in need of support. If households in need receive home internet service and computers, they will also need digital literacy training and technical support. These services are labor intensive. Apps alone cannot solve the digital literacy divide. One-on-one support (via phone or virtual) can lead to a community member then being able to take advantage of online digital literacy classes and tutorials.

Now, more so than ever before, trust is essential to digital inclusion work. Digital navigators providing guidance must be from trusted organizations.

