Digital Equity

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Achieving digital equity in the United States would mean that all the nation's individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services and is considered a long-term challenge.

The internet has made it possible to start a business from home, communicate with loved ones across oceans and time zones, work and learn remotely, receive health care services even if you live hours from a medical provider, and engage in any other of the thousands of opportunities. Yet, many U.S. residents continue to be disconnected from the internet and the opportunities it provides access to and has accentuated disparities where they exist.

As part of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the federal government is directing responsibility for digital equity plans to the states, citing their knowledge, coordination, convening abilities and expertise, their relationships with local communities, municipalities, and residents.

Digital equity involves broadband availability; broadband adoption; and digital inclusion.

Broadband availability refers to the ability of a household to subscribe to broadband service at a speed, quality, and capacity needed to accomplish everyday online tasks.

Broadband adoption refers to a household's active subscription to broadband service at a speed, quality, and capacity needed to accomplish every day and critical online tasks, possession of the digital skills necessary to accomplish such tasks and ability to do so on a personal device and secure convenient network.

Digital inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies. It must evolve as technology advances by requiring intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional, and structural barriers to access and use technology.

The groups most affected by the digital divide are many of the same that were most severely impacted by the pandemic and have consistently experienced social inequities over time. According to the American Community Survey (ACS), 14.5 million households — 12 percent of all households in the country — had internet access only through a cellular data plan, and 16.7 million households (14 percent of all households) had no home broadband subscriptions of any kind in 2019, including a cellular data plan.

However, low-income households, older adults, and certain racial and ethnic groups lack broadband and computer access at higher rates than the general population. Among low-income households (making less than $35,000 per year), 30 percent lack a home internet subscription. Among persons 65 years of age and older, 22 percent lack broadband or a computer in their household.

Efforts to bridge the digital divide and work toward digital equity began in the early- to mid-1990s, primarily as grassroots efforts focused on improving digital skills through class training and public computer labs. In the 2000s community-based organizations and anchor institutions began investing in and creating what is now called digital equity programs, focused on addressing one or more of the five elements of digital inclusion:

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.
5. Applications and online content are designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

At its core, digital equity work requires trust to succeed. The community members who would benefit most from support services often experience disenfranchisement and have seen their communities and neighbors overlooked by institutions. An inherent distrust of technology, borne from a lack of confidence or past negative experiences, can make people hesitant to engage with online resources. Moreover, logistically, those lacking broadband access are inherently harder to reach as outreach tools are increasingly digital.

For these reasons, trusted community-based organizations are fundamental to developing impactful digital inclusion programs. They have known entities with existing relationships and a history of providing services to the community, and digital inclusion programs are often a logical extension of their work. The types of organizations that develop digital inclusion programs can vary greatly depending on the character and needs of the community. However, some of the most common include small community-based organizations, libraries, public housing authorities, local governments, senior centers, schools and academic institutions, faith-based organizations, and social service organizations.

As the U.S. continues on the path toward digital equity, individuals will experience real, tangible outcomes. They'll enjoy improved and remote education for lifelong learning, more options to receive care to stay healthy, and expanded job opportunities. More job opportunities, which leads to meaningful employment, is the key that will continue to unlock other opportunities for this generation and the next.

The availability of broadband, along with the digital skills to take advantage of it, opens the door for all individuals to be active, productive members of the workforce. With access to high-speed internet, they can search for open job postings and do online research to help them get the job. With digital literacy, they can thrive in those jobs and help advance themselves and their families economically, as well as the country as whole.

By investing in digital equity efforts, the U.S. is investing in a 21st century workforce – one that leads to real outcomes of families enjoying richer, fuller and healthier lives.

(Information derived from National Telecommunications and Information Association, Nov. 28, 2022)