KANSAS CITY DIGITAL INCLUSION FUNDING LANDSCAPE

KC DIGITAL*DRIVE*

Digital Inclusion

Making Kansas City a Digital Leader

Our mission is to improve the quality of life for Kansas City area residents through digital leadership with a focus on maximizing technology use by diverse communities, and spurring the development of technology solutions for vexing public problems.

ABOUT US

KC Digital Drive is the regional civic organization that supports the ecosystems for broadband, connectivity and digital equity, and emerging tech innovation, and helps to steward the region's digital transformation in helping communities prepare for the future.

The organization was founded by the cities of Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas based on recommendations from the 2012 bi-state Mayor's Innovation Team commissioned to consider how best to mobilize diverse community partners around collective action in digital inclusion and digital innovation.

Our community and network partners are foundational to how we build programs, launch projects, spread impact, and scale resources.

We organize our work into (3) lines:

- Community Building - engaging directly in the community as a convener and thought leader
- Project Delivery - deploying and managing a project through its launch and operations
- Solutions Lab - our methodology to connect ideas to issues, co-designing solutions to tricky problems facing our communities

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Kansas City Digital Inclusion Funding Landscape Analysis

Introduction

This paper presents a landscape analysis of the current digital inclusion funding ecosystem in Kansas City in order to highlight the kinds of programs that are currently funded and where there are gaps at a program and system level as a way to provide funders and community organizations with a clear picture of the digital inclusion needs and funding apparatus in our community.

This information may prove useful to other stakeholders evaluating potential investment or program support in the digital inclusion space, particularly in the context of upcoming state and federal funding opportunities for building digital inclusion programming and capacity.

Based on years of work in this space, KC Digital Drive has developed a framework to help guide digital transformation efforts across the metro. This framework consists of five dimensions, integrating questions of broadband, digital inclusion, and economic development to provide a common vocabulary for advancing digital equity at a systems level. By supplementing the traditional "three legs of the stool" for digital inclusion, this framework helps to highlight the full diversity of barriers that contribute to the digital divide in Kansas City. Not all of the dimensions will be equally relevant to the specific work of the DIF, but together they form a broader framework that can help contextualize the investment and impact of the fund.

1. **Network Capacity** - The first requirement of digital inclusion is that internet providers must be able to deliver internet service to every household. Robust physical infrastructure is a foundational requirement for a connected community. This includes not only wireline and wireless networks, but also assets like dark fiber and data center resources.
2. **Access to the Network** - Ensuring the availability of broadband infrastructure is only the first step in connecting a household. Technology users must also be able to connect to the network in order to take advantage of that infrastructure. This access is dependent on the affordability of broadband options, the ability of residents to select and sign up for an internet plan, and the availability of public computing resources like computer labs and public wi-fi for those who need them.
3. **Quality of Network Access** - Once a household has access to the internet, members of that household should be able to get online without service quality being a barrier. Service quality can be affected by home networking setups, the internal wiring of a building, and the type and quality of the devices being used.

4. **Participation in Digital Life** - In order to take advantage of access to digital devices and a high-quality network, individuals must have the skills and comfort to confidently navigate the internet and engage in digital life. Some individuals may need instruction in basic digital skills in order to begin participating in digital life. This assistance may come in the form of digital literacy classes or through the aid of a digital navigator. Others may need more advanced instruction in workplace skills or resources to help them understand how to navigate specific digital services like online banking, telehealth, or remote education.
5. **Excellence, Innovation, and Growth** - Finally, the metro must have a robust innovation ecosystem that provides economic opportunity to residents and an engine for driving the improvement of city services. The city must ensure that the benefits and opportunities provided by technology are shared by all residents across Kansas City.

Each of these five dimensions contains an array of issues that could be addressed through the DIF. Within each dimension, we have divided these issues into three categories to help highlight how each connects to the current digital inclusion ecosystem in Kansas City:

- **Foundational** issues represent areas like device access, affordability, and skills training that have been a traditional focus of digital inclusion practitioners and where Kansas City has an existing track record of engagement and community capacity.
- **Gaps** represent issues that have not traditionally been included in digital inclusion efforts but which we think are critical to overcome in order to promote equitable digital transformation.
- **Systemic** issues represent community needs that go beyond the programmatic and instead speak to the question of how the Kansas City metro develops the institutional capacity to coordinate the digital inclusion ecosystem, track progress toward digital inclusion goals, and advocate for change at the policy level. These may not be areas of emphasis for DIF funding but may help guide the investment and impact of the DIF in the future if undertaken by other actors within the ecosystem.

The backdrop for all of this work is an awareness that over the next five years, federal funding through the Digital Equity Act will provide a major source of funds for digital inclusion practitioners. Despite the coming availability of these funding sources, however, setting up the DIF now will help the ecosystem in several ways:

- Digital equity funding, which will be administered both through state broadband offices and a nationally competitive solicitation, will likely not flow until 2025, meaning there will still be a need to support this work in the interim.
- Projects with a track record of success will be better positioned for future funding. Completing a DIF grant cycle in advance of DEA grant application windows will better position local orgs to attract those dollars and help to grow KC's leadership position across both KS and MO.
- The DIF itself will be a possible candidate for the nationally competitive portion of DEA dollars but will be more competitive if it has an existing track record.

Network Capacity

Robust physical infrastructure needs to be in place as a baseline condition for an inclusive digital economy and society. Without adequate physical infrastructure, the ongoing accessibility of quality, affordable service is limited. Community infrastructure is a complex collection of private and public networks, wireline and wireless networks, and other types of assets that are not always considered in digital equity work, like dark fiber and data center resources.

According to the FCC's most recent broadband maps, of just over 690,000 households in the Kansas City Metro, 16,142 (2.3%) are unserved, meaning that no provider reports that they provide internet to that location at speeds of at least 25/3 Mbps. A further 14,232 locations (2.1%) are underserved, meaning that no provider reports that they provide internet to that location at speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps. This is consistent with statewide survey findings from Kansas and Missouri, which have found that 4% and 7%, respectively, of surveyed households reported that internet was not available at their location.

Much of this need will be addressed through the federal Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program, which will provide grants to broadband providers to build new broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas. Because of this, we do not believe the DIF is the most appropriate mechanism for funding the build out of broadband infrastructure in the metro. However, there may still be pockets of need that can be served through more targeted interventions.

Foundational Work

- Fund the purchase of hotspots for households without internet access

During the pandemic, a widely-used strategy for addressing connectivity needs was distributing mobile hotspots to households that lacked internet access. While hotspots are not a replacement for high-speed wired internet, they can play an important role in meeting the short-term needs of families who are struggling to get connected, particularly in rural areas. The DIF could fund efforts to provide mobile hotspots to households in need by supporting partner institutions like schools or libraries that serve as hubs for identifying connectivity needs and providing hotspots to families.

- Fund efforts to extend existing networks

While the DIF is not the right vehicle to fund large-scale network expansion projects, the fund may be able to play a role in supporting efforts to extend last-mile service to places that suffer from a lack of access or extremely poor internet quality. For example, projects using mesh networks, CBRS, and point-to-point connections could help extend internet services within urban neighborhoods without requiring the construction of new and costly infrastructure. This could be particularly impactful for apartment residents for whom substandard building wiring is the primary barrier to improved access. Examples of existing efforts in this space include PCs for People's fixed wireless service offerings and aSTEAM Village's point-to-point network.

Gaps

Overall, Kansas City has excellent network infrastructure, with multiple fiber providers offering high-quality service and affordable plans. While there are some gaps in capacity across the region, these will likely be addressed through the upcoming BEAD program. We do not believe there are any major unrecognized needs beyond those addressed above that the DIF would be an appropriate funding mechanism for.

Systemic Issues

- Investigate the coverage and capacity of cellular networks in the metro to ensure equitable access

Cellular networks are an important component of network infrastructure not only for individuals who use a cell phone as their primary way of getting online, but also for households who rely on hot spots for residential internet. Research into the coverage and capacity of these networks at different points in the metro area could reveal if certain neighborhoods may be consistently experiencing sub-par

service, allowing the city to raise the issue with mobile providers to alleviate any bottlenecks or blind spots.

- ■ Research the return on investment for dedicated hot spots as opposed to other connectivity solutions

To our knowledge, there has not yet been any analysis evaluating the return on investment for hot spots compared to other wireless internet technologies. In particular, the value of dedicated hot spots is uncertain when most modern smartphones have the capacity to act as a hotspot for their household. A better understanding of this value could help digital inclusion practitioners better prioritize different strategies for addressing gaps in network capacity.

Access to the Network

Even after broadband infrastructure is built, technology users must connect to the network in order to take advantage of the access it provides. A holistic community approach must consider both the barriers to public access (e.g., computer labs, public Wi-Fi) and private access (e.g., signing up for residential and commercial internet plans).

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that over 170,000 (20.6%) of all households in the KC metro have no wired broadband subscription. This is far more than the number of households that lack physical access to a network, indicating that factors beyond availability are impacting internet usage. For many households, the primary barrier is cost. Missouri's 2023 Internet Survey found that 70% of urban households without an internet subscription chose not to purchase broadband because it was too expensive. In Kansas, a study by Wichita State University found that a quarter of households without internet lacked access because they could not afford it.

In Missouri, the average price of a broadband plan is $71 per month. In Kansas, the median price was similarly found to be between $70 and $80 per month. According to MOBroadband, 12% of Kansas City households would be broadband-cost burdened (spending more than 5% of their household income on internet) at a cost of $75 per month, while 8% would still be burdened even at a price of $50 per month.

Even when households can afford internet, they may not understand how to sign up and may have trouble understanding their bills. This can lead to confusion, to hesitancy in signing up for an internet plan, and ultimately to poor financial

decision-making as households sign up for plans that do not align with their actual needs. This has been observed in [national-level studies](#), but KC Digital Drive has also observed this while managing our Internet Access Fund. Many of our clients have ended up subscribing to internet plans that are more expensive than what they really need, plans with stringent data caps and overage fees, or plans that are bundled with pricey TV packages and redundant phone lines.

Foundational Work

- ■ Provide internet subsidies to low-income households

The federal government also provides an internet subsidy to low-income households through the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). Most internet service providers offer broadband plans at this price point, meaning the price of internet is effectively free for qualifying households. However, under current projections the subsidy is set to expire in late spring/early summer 2024, and it is uncertain whether the program will be extended by Congress. Given this, the DIF could consider ways to support organizations that already provide utility assistance or similar wrap-around support to add broadband subscription assistance to their offerings. The DIF should also explore how rental and utility assistance programs can be adapted as avenues to provide support for internet service as part of their offering.

During the pandemic, KC Digital Drive stood up a local home internet subsidy program with funding from Johnson County CARES Act dollars and the KC Covid Fund. The [Internet Access Support Program](#) (IASP)'s households with assistance in establishing new internet service, restoring internet access, and understanding their bills. The IASP's Internet Access Fund also offers qualifying low-income households up to $75 per month for six months to pay for their internet bill, as well as up to $275 in arrears fees. This program could serve as a model for a future subsidy program undertaken locally for the KC region.

- ■ Fund community-wide computer resources

Community resources like computer labs, community centers, library lending programs, and mobile labs can be an important resource for households that lack a device. The DIF could play a role in establishing, maintaining, or expanding these resources to improve access for individuals who lack a device and access at home.

Gaps

- Support programming focused on broadband customer education

Grant funding could be used to support programs that assist Kansas City residents in interpreting and navigating the elements on their internet bills. This bill navigation would help households realize if they may be paying for higher bandwidth than they are really using, identify when they may be paying for phone or TV through a bundled package that they do not really want, and avoid being trapped by sudden increases in monthly payments due to the expiration of promotional pricing schemes. While consumer choice is an important value to preserve, customers should have a source of information other than the ISPs to help them make informed decisions about their broadband spending.

Systemic Issues

- Measuring broadband affordability in the KC metro

We currently do not have good metrics for understanding the extent of the broadband affordability problem in the metro. While existing survey data gives some shape to the burden households feel, we do not have a clear definition of what affordability should mean in the context of broadband. With the ACP potentially predicted to run out as early as the end of April 2024, it will be important to have a firm handle on what type of local subsidy program may be able to fill the gap, how best to use federal funds as part of a subsidy program, and what parameters of need should be used to determine eligibility.

Quality of Network Access

The quality of network access should match the expectations promised by network providers and allow participation in digital life without service quality being a barrier. There are many factors that affect user experience even when the underlying network is strong. These factors might include whether you access the network from a phone or computer, the age or model of computer, the home networking set-up and router placement, and the internal wiring of a home. Service quality is difficult to assess and largely underrepresented in digital inclusion planning and action.

Poor quality internet is often assumed to be a primarily rural problem, but many households in urban areas still face challenges getting access to reliable

high-speed broadband. Residents of apartment buildings and other multiple dwelling units (MDUs) are at particularly high risk of being unable to access high-quality broadband infrastructure. Many older apartment buildings have substandard wiring inside their walls, limiting the speed and quality of internet that residents can access even when the building itself has access to a high speed connection. A study of MDUs in Colorado and Delaware conducted by the nonprofit EducationSuperHighway found that 15-20% of MDUs lack access to high-speed internet. This points to a substantial need to evaluate and rectify the network quality issues that face apartment residents.

Broadband quality is also an issue outside of MDUs. Missouri's 2023 Internet Survey found that 40% of respondents reported reliability challenges with their home internet. In Kansas, Wichita State University found that over a quarter of households were unsatisfied with the internet speeds they received at home. These network quality issues can have many causes, from sub-standard service by a household's ISP to a poor home network setup. These issues are difficult to diagnose remotely or in bulk, and usually require 1:1 engagement to identify and fix.

The quality of network access also depends on the devices being used to access the internet. Individuals who only have access to a smartphone will be limited in the types of activities they can engage in while online. And individuals with older devices may experience slow speeds or unexpected crashes that make it difficult to maintain consistent access to the internet.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2022 American Community Survey (ACS), almost 150,000 households in the KC metro have no desktop or laptop. This accounts for 17.5% of all the households in the region. Over 75,000 households (9%) have only a smartphone, and almost 30,000 (3.4%) have no device at all. Device need is particularly concentrated among low-income populations. Missouri's 2023 Internet Survey found that only 78% of low-income (<$35,000/year) households had a desktop or laptop at home, compared to 88% of all households.

KC Digital Drive has also observed this need among the groups we serve. Of participants in KCDD's Internet Access Support Program, 20% reported not having a computer at home. And among students taking classes through Missouri Goes Tech partner agencies, only 21% reported that a laptop or desktop was their primary means of accessing the internet.

The primary barrier to device access is cost. Missouri's 2023 Internet Survey found that low-income households were only willing to pay an average of $300 to

purchase or replace a laptop, desktop, or tablet, compared to $460 for all households. In total, 33% of households reported that they would not be able or willing to pay more than $250 for a new device.

Importantly, while the goal of having a desktop or laptop in every household is usually taken as the default aim of device programs, the DIF has the opportunity to also consider longer-term questions of device access. This includes how to manage the tech lifecycle for community low-income households, how to assist households who need more than a single device in their home, and how differences in access to devices like fitness trackers, wearables, and AR/VR devices may eventually contribute to the digital divide.

Foundational Work

- ■ Support organizations that specialize in providing low-cost devices to households

Organizations like PCs for People, Human-I-T, Digitunity, and Compudopt specialize in providing affordable devices to low-income households. Usually these organizations source their devices from organizational partners donating old equipment. These devices are then refurbished and provided at low cost to households that lack a device in the home. Currently, PCs for People is the only major provider of refurbished devices in the metro.

In addition to direct funding through the DIF, there may be opportunities for a retail-level donation campaign where individual donors would contribute $25-$200 toward providing a device for a household. This campaign could be supported with impact storytelling to help highlight the work of partners, the digital inclusion need in the community, and the DIF brand.

- ■ Support organizations who provide devices to clients as part of a larger benefit package

Some organizations may provide devices to their clients as part of a larger package of services delivered to households. For instance, an organization like Goodwill providing digital skills training may provide its students with a device upon completion of their program. KC Digital Drive's KC Goes Tech and Missouri Goes Tech programs have demonstrated the effectiveness of this model, which was first pioneered by Tech Goes Home. Two-thirds of students receiving digital skills training through KCGT and MOGT partners took advantage of the opportunity to receive a discounted device upon completion of their class. The

DIF could support these types of programs that allow organizations to provide their clients with devices as part of a broader service package.

Based on KC Digital Drive's engagement with community organizations, we believe that many groups would only require relatively modest levels of investment (5-25 devices, costing $1,000 - $10,000 in total) in order to add digital programming or a device component to their services. The recent round of KC Covid Fund grants included many awards for device provision. Outcomes and lessons from these awards could be used to inform DIF device grants.

Gaps

- Provide rewiring grants for MDUs

In order to assist MDU residents who may be unable to access high-speed internet due to substandard wiring in their buildings, the DIF could provide grants to MDU owners to fund renovations focused on replacing the wiring in their buildings. For affordable housing units in particular, these grants could supplement other funding sources for building improvements, allowing building managers to undertake rewiring upgrades at the same time as they are investing in broader innovations. These grants could be tied to a cost-per-unit expectation to ensure effective use of the funds.

- Fund IT technical support services to help households navigate device setup, perform technical troubleshooting, and provide consultations on home networking setups

Grants could support the creation of IT support resources that could provide 1:1, preferably in-home or on-site support for households in the digital divide. Services provided by these programs could include help setting up home Wi-Fi, troubleshooting slow internet speeds, and assistance in setting up a new device. This could take many forms, including options for concierge service, at-home appointments, or virtual consultations. This service could also be connected to digital navigation programs, described in more depth in the following section.

Funding could go toward recruiting staff to perform these functions or cross-training existing staff members to be able to play this role for residents. In this way, technical support programs could also double as workforce development programs, supporting individuals in studying to receive industry recognized credentials like CompTIA A+ while training to serve the digital connectivity needs of their community.

Systemic Issues

■   Collect information about the causes of poor network quality in the metro

Households in the metro frequently report they are unsatisfied with the quality of their internet service, but we do not have high-quality information about what causes this problem. In some cases the household may not be subscribed to an appropriately fast speed tier. In others, the internet provider may be failing to provide the advertised level of service. In still others, the primary culprit may be the household's Wi-Fi setup or the quality of the devices they are using to get online. Having a methodology for collecting this information in a robust way across the metro would help the KC digital inclusion ecosystem prioritize future programming to address the primary challenges facing households.

Participation in Digital Life

For some households, the primary barrier to getting online is not network access or affordability, but rather not knowing how to use a digital device or navigate the internet. Wichita State University's survey of Kansas residents found that 13% of those without internet subscriptions lacked access because they didn't know how to get online. Skills barriers are particularly prevalent among seniors and some formerly incarcerated individuals who may lack exposure to digital technologies.

The demand for digital skills training is substantial. Missouri's 2023 Internet Survey found that over half of respondents would be interested in at least one area of internet training or assistance. Of participants in KC Digital Drive's Missouri Goes Tech Program, only 58% indicated they were very or extremely confident as an internet user, indicating a significant population who may benefit from greater training opportunities.

KC Digital Drive's engagement with regional library systems and other community organizations has also indicated a persistent need for skills training. Classes in the metro continue to draw attendance, and skills gaps among clients are regularly identified by partner organizations across the digital inclusion ecosystem.

Notably, while many digital inclusion efforts focus on providing training in basic digital skills, there is also a significant need for classes teaching the intermediate-level skills needed to succeed in a modern workplace. A recent study by the National Skills Coalition and the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta

found that 92% of jobs in the U.S. labor market require digital skills, but only two-thirds of U.S. workers have the skills necessary for the workplace.

Beyond workplace skills, there is also significant demand for learning opportunities that focus on specific digital tools and services. For example, a quarter of both Kansas and Missouri residents would be interested in assistance with utilizing telehealth resources. Eighteen percent of Kansas residents would be interested in training on how to manage their state or federal benefits online. And 20% of Missouri residents would be interested in how to manage and pay their bills using their computer.

In addition to classes and other training opportunities, digital inclusion practitioners can also help bridge gaps in knowledge or confidence by connecting individuals in the digital divide with digital navigators who can provide personalized, one-on-one support to residents. Wichita State University's 2023 survey found that almost one-third of Kansas residents have nowhere to go for help when they encounter problems with using digital technologies. Digital navigators can help fill this need by providing residents with a centralized entrypoint for asking questions about devices, internet service, and digital inclusion resources. Digital navigators may be staff or volunteers trained to provide 1:1 assistance to residents over multiple sessions, giving community members a trusted resource for digital inclusion support.

Digital skills classes and digital navigation will be well-suited for upcoming Digital Equity Act funding programs. DIF funding could help metro organizations establish and strengthen their digital training and navigation programs before these grant programs open, helping to maximize their chances of successfully being awarded funds through state and federal applications.

Foundational Work

■ Support and extend existing digital skills training offerings

A number of organizations in the KC metro area offer some form of digital skills training. However, many of these offerings are grant funded, and their sustainability may be at risk without other sources of funding to support them. The DIF could play a role in helping to support and extend existing digital skills classes with a proven track record. This could include basic digital literacy classes teaching computer and internet fundamentals, as well as more advanced courses offering training in office tools, coding, or other skills that could serve as a bridge to employment or other job-training programs. Funding could also help organizations promote the availability of existing programming to increase

awareness and enrollment. Examples of existing digital skills programming in the KC metro area include [Literacy KC](#), Goodwill's [Artemis Institute](#), [Urban TEC](#)'s STEM programming, and Carol Meyers' [Digital Services & Support Center](#) at the LAMP Campus.

- Support the development of new digital skills training offerings

The DIF could also support organizations in standing up new digital skills classes. For example, a refugee-serving organization may apply for funding to add digital skills training to their portfolio of services. Funding could also be directed toward sustaining train-the-trainer programs that help build an ecosystem of digital skills trainers spread out among different partner organizations wanting to add digital skills classes or expand their current offerings. Alternatively, an existing digital training provider may seek funding to develop and pilot a new curriculum focusing on an emerging area of need, such as developing a course to help parents understand how to navigate their childrens' school portal.

- Support and extend digital navigation services

The DIF could also be used to help organizations bring on staff to serve as digital navigators and support community members in accessing digital resources. Alternatively, funding could go towards cross-training existing staff members to serve as navigators, or towards the recruitment and training of community volunteers who could serve as navigators for their neighbors.
The Kansas City Public Library's [Digital Corps](#) is an example of existing digital navigation services in the KC metro. There also may be opportunities to leverage the United Way 2-1-1 service as a routing path for digital divide support. Outcomes from recently funded digital navigator programs supported through ACP Outreach and MARC Covid Fund grants should be taken into consideration when considering how to further support the development of digital navigation services in the metro.

Gaps

- Promote awareness of digital skills training and digital navigation resources

Organizations may seek funding to conduct marketing and outreach to raise awareness for digital inclusion resources they offer. This could include funding for advertising and outreach materials, as well as staff time for creating mailing lists, developing a marketing strategy, and creating communications materials.

- Build capacity for program evaluation across the digital inclusion ecosystem

The DIF could fund individuals or organizations to develop or implement an evaluation program to measure the effectiveness of digital inclusion programming within the metro. This would provide the ecosystem with valuable information about how to adapt their programming approach and prioritize future funding in order to maximize impact. Organizations receiving evaluation would receive valuable feedback about how to improve their programs, and could use the evaluation process as a way to legitimize their work in the eyes of funders and other ecosystem actors. The target of this evaluation would not necessarily have to be a digital skills class or digital navigation program, but could include any digital inclusion programming undertaken across the metro.

Systemic Issues

- Build a coordinated outreach strategy for promoting digital inclusion resources from across the ecosystem to metro residents

In addition to organization-specific outreach, we believe there is an opportunity for a more systematic approach to promoting digital inclusion resources within the metro. By bringing together information about different digital skills classes under a united digital inclusion brand, it would be easier to communicate to residents the diversity of resources available to them. This would help to drive enrollment for programs and could provide a way for different digital inclusion practitioners to see how their offerings may overlap or complement others.

- Support capacity-building for digital skills delivery and navigation

As more organizations develop offerings in the digital skills training and digital navigation space, it will be important for those organizations to quickly integrate the best practices, tools, and curricula that have been developed elsewhere. This will require a critical mass of trusted expertise within the metro that can aid other digital inclusion practitioners, as well as a general degree of trust, sharing, and coordination across organizations in the ecosystem.

- Build a more holistic model of what digital participation means for households in the digital divide

Most conversations about closing the digital divide focus on achieving equity in a relatively narrow slice of digital life. While there are good reasons for digital

inclusion practitioners' focus on ensuring equal access to workforce training, telehealth, and remote education, this view of digital opportunity leaves out the question of how households in the digital divide are able to access more mundane features of digital life, like digital and social media, entertainment, online shopping, communications with friends and family, news, and civic engagement. It is not clear what role these aspects of digital life should play in setting goals around digital access or the content of digital inclusion programming. Developing a more robust model of digital participation would allow for a most holistic approach to ensuring that beneficiaries of digital inclusion activities are able to achieve full participation in digital life.

- Understand how equity may be impacted by differential access to tech-free spaces and services

There is a built-in assumption at the heart of digital inclusion that greater access to and use of technology is an axiomatically good outcome for households in the digital divide. But increasingly we see that extremely wealthy, tech-capable communities are foregoing the use of technology in their homes and schools. It is possible that this will result in a new form of inequality where low-income households must rely on virtually-mediated services, chatbots, and AI tools while the wealthy are able to access higher-quality, more personalized services due to their ability to forgo the efficiency and convenience of digital technologies. Digital inclusion practitioners need a better model to understand when greater access to technologically-mediated solutions may not actually be the best way to uplift underserved communities.

Excellence, Innovation, and Growth

This final dimension is the most aspirational as it inherently represents a subset of the total ecosystem. Innovation outcomes overlap with where many other civic sectors or institutions already have goals and objectives–STEM workforce, tech startups, VC funding growth, research grant investment, and deployment of new innovative infrastructure. A holistic approach to a broadband, connectivity, and digital equity agenda ought to include some consideration of what the end state looks like in these areas in absolute terms and also how we want to consider equity in their pursuit.

Foundational Work

Most of the work in this priority area will not be a priority for the DIF. While it is important at the ecosystem level to have a thriving economy in the KC region and

city officials who are actively leveraging technology to improve public services, little of this work falls into the traditional territory of digital inclusion practitioners.

Systemic Issues

- Support individuals within the digital divide to grow into advanced digital skills training programs

The ultimate goal of digital inclusion efforts in the context of innovation is to raise individuals from within the digital divide to the point where they have the skills and confidence to contribute to a digital economy by building new products and services that serve their community and that spur economic development for the city. While there are a number of STEM, computer science, and entrepreneurship programs that target low-income and minority communities, few are explicitly tied to the mission of identifying and serving individuals who have benefited from foundational digital inclusion work. A long-term goal for the ecosystem should be to take existing programs like Goodwill's Artemis Institute, Urban TEC's work with drones and AR/VR, and the work of PCs for People, the Usher Garage, and No-Where Consulting on providing digital literacy skills to low-income entrepreneurs.

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