



700 Raymond Avenue, Suite 180
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55114
651-645-2277
literacymn.org

Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Report

for the Minnesota Department of Education

December 2020

Questions may be directed to Joseph Janik Miller

Direct: +1 651-251-9097

Email: jmiller@literacymn.org

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Executive Summary

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) selected Literacy Minnesota to create a Community Needs Assessment Report (the Report) that identifies and assesses actions taken to close the digital divide across the state since March 2020. The Report was funded by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and completed in December 2020.

The Report draws on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, extensive outreach, an original Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment survey (Survey) and Literacy Minnesota's nearly 50 years of work in Adult Basic Education. The Report answers the following questions:

I. What counties have high digital access, economic, education and English language learning needs?

II. How have organizations adapted to the pandemic and addressed digital access needs in their communities, who do they serve, and which counties are served?

III. How would a statewide Digital Navigator Program complement available resources and sustainably solve persistent problems?

The Report documents:

- A ranking of Minnesota's 87 counties with respect to high-priority access, economic, education and language needs identified by MDE; a county map can be found [here](#).
- Nobles County, a nonmetro county located in southwest Minnesota, is the only county in Minnesota where all high-priority needs are present, an additional 35 counties have at least three of six high-priority needs and 84 counties have at least one high-priority need.
- A Survey sent to broadband providers, community organizations, government agencies, libraries, nonprofits and schools with 294 responses found that most service providers saw a decrease in participants due to digital equity issues despite adding services.
- Although rural counties face barriers to digital equity not found in urban counties, more organizations address the digital divide per capita in nonmetro counties than metro counties in Minnesota, and more digitally disenfranchised people live metro counties.
- A statewide Digital Navigator Program in Minnesota would require an estimated 200 digital navigators hosted at community-based organizations, libraries and other trusted organizations, and would serve an estimated 80,000 participants in need of navigation.
- The role of the digital navigator is to empower participants in the Digital Navigation Program by connecting them to available community resources, providing them one-on-one digital literacy instruction and helping participants set and achieve their goals.
- Evaluating the efficacy of the statewide Digital Navigator Program would require an equity lens, survey Program participants, track progress using Northstar Digital Literacy assessments and utilize third-party analysts when possible.

The Report finds that a statewide Digital Navigator Program represents one way to address the digital divide in Minnesota. The Report recommends a Digital Equity Initiative that would connect people in need to a device, the internet and digital literacy skills. The Initiative would reduce civic, economic, and educational disparities across the state. The only office in the state of Minnesota capable of bringing the necessary stakeholders together to facilitate and coordinate Digital Equity Initiative is the Office of the Governor. The Governor's Office has the capacity to bring broadband providers, community-based organizations, corporations, libraries and schools into dialogue with local government officials about solving problems in their communities — including the problem of digital disenfranchisement, which the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession have aggravated, exacerbated and expanded.

Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Report

Introduction: COVID-19 and Digital Disparities in Minnesota

Disparities in digital equity have exacerbated opportunity gaps in Minnesota. The public health crisis in the United States caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic has exposed the need for access to a computer, the internet and digital literacy skills to safely access civic life, education, health care and employment. People without digital access cannot to safely access public spaces, or they may have been forced to make precarious choices to participate in civic life, reach education centers or secure a paycheck. Digital disenfranchisement most severely impacts people experiencing poverty.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all aspects of American life, of utmost importance is how the problems caused by living in poverty have been aggravated and compounded by digital inequities. To name some examples, unemployed adults without a computer cannot be able to apply for jobs or unemployment insurance, families who lack reliable access to the internet for their K-12 students cannot access education and seniors without digital literacy skills cannot connect with their loved ones. Further, the pandemic has pushed millions more people into poverty. [The Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) recently reported that 9.8 million fewer people are on employer payrolls in November than February 2020.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) selected Literacy Minnesota to create a Community Needs Assessment Report (this Report) that identifies and assesses actions taken to increase digital equity across Minnesota since March 2020. This Report was funded by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act, the \$2.2 trillion economic stimulus bill passed by the 116th U.S. Congress in response to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and recession.

Literacy Minnesota is an internationally recognized nonprofit leader and a driving force behind the latest developments in literacy learning — including developments in digital literacy learning. Northstar Digital Literacy, a program of Literacy Minnesota, helps people master skills needed to work, learn and participate more fully in their lives. Northstar launched in 2012, and is now used by more than 1,140 Adult Basic Education programs, businesses, colleges, government agencies, libraries and nonprofits around

WHAT IS DIGITAL EQUITY?



The National Digital Inclusion Alliance defines digital equity as a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.¹

THE THREE PRONGS TO ACHIEVING DIGITAL EQUITY



Internet Access

Getting online is essential for the demands of daily life. Internet Access refers to affordable and reliable high-speed broadband. By 2022, Minnesota aims to be in the top five states for broadband speed universally accessible to residents and businesses.²



Devices

One cannot access the internet without first obtaining access to a device, such as a laptop, tablet or smartphone.



Digital Literacy Skills

Devices and internet are still inaccessible without the knowledge of how to use them. Digital literacy skills refer to the basic skills needed to use a computer and the internet in daily life, employment, and higher education.

¹ <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>
² <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/2018/cite/237.012>



the world as of December 2020. Northstar has been rated highly in recent reports by the [Seattle Digital Equity Initiative](#), the [Markle Foundation](#), [JFFLabs](#) and [DigitalUS](#).

Literacy Minnesota shares the power of learning through education, community building, and advocacy. The agency envisions a world where life-changing learning is within everyone's reach. This vision is shared by Neel Kashkari, President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and Alan Page, retired Minnesota Supreme Court justice. Kashkari and Page have proposed an amendment to Minnesota's Constitution to make quality education a right to "[break the cycle of poverty and create a society in which everyone can fully participate.](#)" Digital disenfranchisement represents another barrier to full participation in society.

The right to a quality education has become a national conversation. In April 2020, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit ruled that literacy is a fundamental right protected by the U.S. Constitution because "[every meaningful interaction between a citizen and the state is predicated on a minimum level of literacy, meaning that access to literacy is necessary to access our political process.](#)" Although the plaintiffs' right to literacy was reprieved, the Sixth Circuit's decision was later annulled. Nonetheless, the reasoning for literacy as a fundamental right holds for an argument that digital literacy is also a basic right.

Inequities in education and digital access in Minnesota align with unequal outcomes. Unequal outcomes are both patterned — along geographic, racial, and socioeconomic distinctions — as well as preventable. While educational inequities exist across these lines in all of the U.S., [educational achievement gaps in Minnesota are among the largest in the country](#). Physical distancing mandates and school closures have no doubt expanded gaps in educational achievement, as [most households in Minnesota do not have a computer, a fixed broadband subscription and a cellular data plan to access distance learning](#).

This Report shows where a coordinated effort to close the digital divide should start. The digital divide — the divide between those who can access and use digital technology and those who cannot — is one of the greatest challenges facing Minnesota. This Report also identifies stakeholders who could rise to the great challenge of closing the digital divide and increase digital equity in Minnesota, creating better outcomes for all. It achieves these goals by identifying counties with high-priority digital access needs as well as organizations that have helped digitally disenfranchised people access a computer, the internet or digital literacy skills since March 2020. It then recommends how a statewide Digital Navigation Program could complement current efforts to close the digital divide and increase digital equity. A Digital Navigation Program should serve as one piece of a Digital Equity Initiative, led by the Governor of Minnesota.

The Report draws on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, extensive outreach, an original survey, and Literacy Minnesota's nearly 50 years of work in Adult Basic Education (ABE). We find that the Office of the Governor is the actor that should coordinate a Digital Equity Initiative, include relevant stakeholders from the whole of society and play the leading role in increasing digital equity in Minnesota. The cost of digital disenfranchisement is too high to bear.

Key Questions & Answers

In September 2020 MDE requested that Literacy Minnesota gather data to investigate underserved needs and to identify counties with high priority underserved needs. MDE tasked Literacy Minnesota to create a Report that assess actions taken since the beginning of the pandemic to address the digital divide, explains digital inclusion gaps, and recommends paths for

sustainability. This Report achieves these goals by answering the questions below. An Advisory Group at MDE consulted seven times between September and December, offering advice regarding data collection, methods and procedures. The Group helped form the following questions:

- I. What counties have high digital access, economic, education and English language learning needs?*
- II. How have organizations adapted to the pandemic and addressed digital access needs in their communities, who do they serve, and which counties are served?*
- III. How would a statewide Digital Navigator Program complement available resources and sustainably solve persistent problems?*

The Report first ranks counties by high-priority needs. Consultation with MDE prioritized economic development and educational attainment, English language services and digital access as high-priority needs. All high-priority needs are present in Nobles County. Nobles is the only county in Minnesota where: residents have lower educational attainment, higher rates of unemployment and lower yearly earning than the state average; both a higher percent of residents were born outside the U.S. and fewer residents speak English fluently than the state averages; and less households have access to a computer, fixed broadband subscription and cellular data plan than the state average. Carver, Dodge and Washington counties are the only counties in Minnesota with no high-priority needs.

Next, the Report identifies local organizations that have addressed digital access issues in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The identification of organizations relies on both outreach and survey data. In October, November and December 2020, Literacy Minnesota gathered information by engaging more than 30 organizations across the state to discuss their responses to the pandemic, and its Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment survey received 294 individual responses in November. Copies of the survey, its responses and the following supporting materials can be found at <https://www.literacymn.org/mdedigitalequityproject>.

- [Survey information](#), a [sample](#) and a [spreadsheet of responses](#);
- Copies of all data created to write the Report (e.g., [spreadsheet used to rank counties](#));
- A [report written in November 2020](#) that analyzes and describes available data regarding libraries and digital access, written by Library Strategies Consulting Group, a service of the Friends of the St. Paul Public Library; and
- 17 reports on digital equity, at least one page in length, written by organizations in Minnesota, and [five 7-10 minute videos](#) recorded by organizations that have connected people to a computer, the internet and digital literacy skills since March 2020.

Then, the Report describes the required components for a statewide Digital Navigator Program. It recommends a participant-centered model that connects people in need to a device, the internet and digital literacy skills, while focusing on a one-on-one relationship between a Digital Navigator Program participant and digital navigator, digital literacy skill-building using the Northstar program and technological goal setting. The Program would complement available resources by allowing organizations that hold public trust, such as community-based organizations and libraries, to host trained professionals or volunteers. Estimates for both potential Program participants as well as full-time equivalents of digital navigators are included and explained.

Last, the Report advocates for a Digital Equity Initiative led by the Office of Governor Tim Walz & Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan to close the digital divide. A statewide Digital Navigator Program is one element of the wider Digital Equity Initiative, which addresses each of the three prongs of digital equity. The Initiative should engage all stakeholders required to close the digital

divide. Stakeholders include broadband providers and corporations in the private sector as well as ABE centers, community-based organizations, county and local governments, libraries, schools and philanthropic groups. The Governor’s Office is the best positioned actor to bring relevant stakeholders into dialogue, promote the project to close the digital divide and spur action — including executive or legislative action — if necessary.

I. What counties have high digital access, economic, education, and English learning needs?

The list below shows the 36 Minnesota counties with high digital access, economic, education and English learning needs, as determined by consultation with MDE. A full ranking of Minnesota’s 87 counties is linked on the spreadsheet and can also be found on pages [16-18](#).

List 1: Counties & digital access, economic, education, and English learning needs

COUNTY	HIGH PRIORITY NEEDS (0-6)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code (1-9)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code Description
Nobles	6	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Watonwan	5	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Lake of the Woods	4	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Aitkin	4	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Wadena	4	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Beltrami	4	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Pine	4	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Mahnomen	4	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Mower	4	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Kandiyohi	4	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Ramsey	4	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Mille Lacs	4	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Traverse	3	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Grant	3	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Cass	3	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Renville	3	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Pope	3	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Swift	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Roseau	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Redwood	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area

Freeborn	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Wilkin	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Todd	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Otter Tail	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Morrison	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Lake	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Koochiching	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Kanabec	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Rice	3	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Stearns	3	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Blue Earth	3	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Benton	3	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Carlton	3	2	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
St. Louis	3	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Sibley	3	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Hennepin	3	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more

When reading the six-point scale assessing high priority needs, a county with six points represents the presence of each high-priority need in that county; a county with three points represents the presence of three high-priority needs. Each of Minnesota’s 87 counties was contrasted against the state average with respect to six variables to create the six-point scale. If a county was better-off than the state average in one variable, then that county would lose one point on the six-point scale. For example, Carver, Dodge and Washington counties are better-off than the state average in each of the six variables and have no high priority needs as indicated by the MDE Advisory Group. Nobles County, listed first in dark red, has the highest priority needs. Nobles is the only county in Minnesota where each of the six high-priority needs are present. The state averages of the variables and their sources are:

- (i) 47.65% of households have access to a computer, a fixed broadband subscription and a cellular data plan, a 2019 estimate from the [Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics \(LEHD\) Program](#) of the [Center for Economic Studies](#) and the [U.S. Census Bureau](#);
- (ii) 8.4% percent residents were born outside of the U.S., the [2014-18 American Community Survey \(ACS\) 5-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau](#);
- (iii) 16.4% percent of residents speak English at a level less than “very well,” an estimate from the 2014-18 ACS;
- (iv) 31.9% of residents have not attended some college or attained an associate’s degree by age 25, an estimate from the 2014-18 ACS;
- (v) 51.6% of residents earn less than \$40,000, a 2017 estimate from the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics Program; and
- (vi) 3.8% is the 2014-18 ACS estimate of the unemployment rate.

Data were accessed from [Minnesota Compass](#) and in consultation with research scientists at [Wilder Research](#) of [the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation](#), the nonprofit community organization in St. Paul, MN that hosts Minnesota Compass. Data were accessed in November 2020.

Residents in rural and urban counties face distinct barriers to digital equity. In rural counties, broadband infrastructure and delayed development block people from accessing a computer, the internet and the digital literacy skills to use them. [This map from Minnesota Compass](#) shows access to broadband services by Minnesota county; it uses the term “access to broadband services,” which does not consider the problem of affordable adoption of broadband services. This Report highlights barriers to broadband services in both urban and rural counties, and it includes the 2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes to highlight distinct barriers. The USDA writes that the Codes “[form a classification scheme that distinguishes metropolitan counties by the population size of their metro area, and nonmetropolitan counties by degree of urbanization and adjacency to a metro area.](#)” The lists and graph below include the USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes to communicate brief descriptions of counties. While more rural counties have high-priority needs, this Report shows that more people live in metro counties in Minnesota.

Delays in development and persistent poverty are also present in urban counties. Barriers to broadband, economic and education disparities and other aspects of digital equity often occur along geographic and racial lines at the neighborhood level. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) makes this phenomena clear in a June 2020 study that called rural broadband investment “[structurally racist, discriminating against unconnected Black Americans and other communities of color](#)” due to adoption and affordability barriers to internet access in urban areas. The 2019 LEHD estimate shows that 77.95% of Minnesotans, 4.4 million of 5.6 million residents, live in the 27 counties that the 2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes calls “metro,” and although only two of the 12 counties with greatest needs are metro counties, there is more digital disenfranchisement per capita in metro counties than in nonmetro counties in Minnesota. A Digital Navigator Program as well as a Digital Equity Initiative should employ an equity lens in all aspects of its operations and strategy, and the unique issues facing both urban and rural areas must be discussed with reference to the data identified in this Report.

The following three lists show where high-priority needs are present. They consider needs for digital access, language services and economic and educational development, respectively. The first list shows the 43 counties in Minnesota where the LEHD estimates that less than 47.65% of households have access to a computer, a fixed broadband subscription and a cellular data plan in 2019. The second list shows the 11 counties that have more than 8.4% percent foreign-born residents, have more than 16.4% percent of residents who speak English less than fluently or have both more than 8.4% percent foreign-born residents and more than 6.4% percent of residents who speak English less fluently, as estimated by the 2014-18 ACS. The third list shows the 81 counties in Minnesota that have at least one high priority development need when considering earnings, educational attainment and unemployment estimates from the 2017 LEHD or the 2014-18 ACS. Rural-Urban Continuum Codes and Descriptions are included in each list.

List 2: Counties & digital access needs

COUNTY	DIGITAL ACCESS NEEDS (0-1)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code (1-9)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code Description
Big Stone	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Cass	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Cook	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Grant	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Kittson	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Lac qui Parle	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Lake of the Woods	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Lincoln	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Traverse	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Aitkin	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Marshall	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Martin	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Norman	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Pope	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Renville	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Beltrami	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Chippewa	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Freeborn	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Nobles	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Redwood	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Roseau	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Swift	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Wadena	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Brown	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Douglas	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Faribault	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Kanabec	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area

Koochiching	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Lake	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Mahnomen	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Meeker	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Morrison	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Otter Tail	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Pine	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Todd	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Watonwan	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Wilkin	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Kandiyohi	1	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Blue Earth	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Fillmore	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Carlton	1	2	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
Mille Lacs	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Sibley	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more

The next list shows counties that have high needs for English language services. Eight counties in Minnesota have both more foreign-born residents and fewer residents who speak English fluently than the state average, as estimated by the 2014-18 ACS. The eight counties receive two points on the two-point scale. It also shows the three counties in Minnesota that have either more foreign-born residents or fewer fluent English-speaking residents than the state average, receiving one point on the two-point scale. Of the three, Anoka and Scott Counties have more foreign-born residents as well as more fluent English-speaking residents than the state average, while Rice County has fewer foreign-born residents as well as fewer fluent English-speaking residents than the state average. The nonmetro counties that have high-priority needs for English language services below also are home to USDA food processing plants, which employ migrant workers at [high rates in Minnesota as well as around the U.S.](#)

List 3: Counties & English language services needs

COUNTY	ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES NEEDS (0-2)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code (1-9)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code Description
Nobles	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Watonwan	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Kandiyohi	2	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Mower	2	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Olmsted	2	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Dakota	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Hennepin	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Ramsey	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Rice	1	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Scott	1	2	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
Anoka	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more

The next list below shows the 81 counties in Minnesota that have high needs in economic development or educational attainment. The high-priority needs include counties with residents with lower earnings or educational attainment than the state average and higher unemployment rates as estimated by the 2017 LEHD or 2014-18 ACS. Only six counties do not have any high priority economic or educational needs, all of which are metro counties: Carver, Dakota, Dodge, Olmsted, Scott and Washington Counties. Aitkin, Beltrami, Lake of the Woods, Mahnomon, Pine, and Wadena Counties are nonmetro counties that demonstrate greater high-priority needs than the state average in all three economic variables. However, these nonmetro counties have fewer foreign-born residents and more fluent English-speaking residents than the state average. Notably, Nobles County is a nonmetro county with high priority needs in economic development and educational attainment as well as English language and immigration services. Mille Lacs and St. Louis Counties are the only metro counties with all high-priority economic development and educational attainment needs. An additional 70 counties in Minnesota record at least one high priority economic or educational need, and they are all listed below.

List 4: Counties & economic and educational attainment needs

COUNTY	ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT NEEDS (0-3)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code (1-9)	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code Description
Lake of the Woods	3	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Aitkin	3	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Beltrami	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Nobles	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Wadena	3	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Mahnomen	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Pine	3	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Benton	3	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Stearns	3	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Mille Lacs	3	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
St. Louis	3	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Cass	2	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Grant	2	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Traverse	2	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Yellow Medicine	2	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Clearwater	2	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Pope	2	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Red Lake	2	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Renville	2	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Cottonwood	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Freeborn	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Redwood	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Roseau	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Stevens	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Swift	2	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Becker	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Itasca	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area

Kanabec	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Koochiching	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Lake	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Morrison	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Otter Tail	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Pennington	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Pipestone	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Rock	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Todd	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Waseca	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Watonwan	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Wilkin	2	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Steele	2	5	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, not adjacent to a metro area
Mower	2	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Rice	2	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Winona	2	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Blue Earth	2	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Polk	2	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Wabasha	2	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Carlton	2	2	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 250,000 to 1 million population
Isanti	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Ramsey	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Sibley	2	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Big Stone	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Cook	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Kittson	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Lac qui Parle	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Lincoln	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Murray	1	9	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, not adjacent to a metro area
Marshall	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Martin	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area

Norman	1	8	Nonmetro - Completely rural or less than 2,500 urban population, adjacent to a metro area
Chippewa	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Hubbard	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Jackson	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Lyon	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
McLeod	1	7	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, not adjacent to a metro area
Brown	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Douglas	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Faribault	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Meeker	1	6	Nonmetro - Urban population of 2,500 to 19,999, adjacent to a metro area
Crow Wing	1	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Goodhue	1	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Kandiyohi	1	4	Nonmetro - Urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area
Clay	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Fillmore	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Houston	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Nicollet	1	3	Metro - Counties in metro areas of fewer than 250,000 population
Anoka	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Chisago	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Hennepin	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Le Sueur	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Sherburne	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more
Wright	1	1	Metro - Counties in metro areas of 1 million population or more

The four lists above show high-priority needs present in Minnesota as estimated by various programs of the Census Bureau. The estimates are as recent as 2019, and they do not account for the economic recession that the U.S. economy entered in the first quarter of 2020. Migration and English-language needs may have also changed since data were collected. While both the pandemic and earlier trends may influence the rankings above, this section outlines counties with high-priority needs and identifies which high-priority impact certain counties. The following section draws on survey data, describes organizations' efforts to ameliorate the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession, and shows where organizations operate.

II. How have organizations adapted to the pandemic and addressed digital access needs in their communities, who do they serve, and which counties are served?

The majority of organizations that responded to Literacy Minnesota's Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment survey shifted to remote programming and services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 80% of responses to Literacy Minnesota's Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Survey reported that their organization had shifted to distanced or virtual platforms, while about 20% of organizations shut down services. About 40% of organizations made new partnerships and 50% of organizations added services. Among services added, more than 60% distributed devices, 56% helped people access the internet and 47% offered digital literacy services. The Survey was sent to about 700 ABE organizations, broadband providers, CareerForce centers, community organizations, government officials, libraries, nonprofits and schools on November 1, 2020. By November 22, 294 organizations had responded to the Survey — a response rate greater than 42%. The average completion time was 90 minutes.

Certain organizations indicated an interest in following-up with Literacy Minnesota, and 17 organizations wrote reports on digital equity, [hosted on this site](#) to articulate resources that support digital inclusion. The following organizations that have helped people access each prong of the digital access model also submitted 7-10-minute videos in addition to writing a report: [East Central Minnesota Education Cable Cooperative](#) (ECMECC), Braham; [Great River Regional Library](#), St. Cloud; [International Mutual Aid Association](#) (IMAA), Rochester; [Literacy Minnesota's TechPak Program with Ramsey County](#), St. Paul; [Red Lake Nation College](#), Red Lake.

Most organizations saw a decrease in participants despite adding services since the pandemic started. Organizations confirmed that digital access was a steep barrier for their participants. While nearly 70% of organizations reported that access to a device was a moderate or significant barrier for participation in their programming, more than 80% reported that both access to the internet and digital literacy skills were moderate or significant barriers to participation. Nearly 70% of organizations also noted that lack of childcare was a moderate or significant barrier for their participants. More than half of organizations also reported that participants' low English skills as well as instructors' limited skills in digital instruction were moderate or significant barriers to participation in programming. Of the 44 organizations that host volunteers, one-third of them have found that pairing volunteers with participants in one-to-one sessions helpful to achieve goals.

Several organizations explained how listening to their communities helped them customize their processes and curricula to match the communities' needs. Of the organizations who shifted to distanced or virtual platforms, several shared that they were hesitant to make the change, fearing that virtual programming would be a hassle for both community members and staff, and would not have the same effectiveness as in-person programming. Project FINE explained:

prior to COVID-19, we did not have any virtual programming and were somewhat resistant to the format because so much of our work is deeply rooted in face-to-face contact and relationships. When the pandemic forced us to explore virtual options, we learned that we can still create connections in that format, and even though it is different it can still be effective.

Many organizations, including Project FINE, anticipate that they will be maintaining these virtual options after the pandemic ends. Other successful practices since March 2020 that organizations cited are working one-on-one with individuals to build trust and relationships, exploring online programs and software that best fit the organization's services, introducing digital literacy



curricula, increasing digital literacy curricula for ESL and immigrant learners, hybrid learning and staggered in-person meetings including curbside pick-up of devices, developing self-paced curricula, doing outreach to raise awareness of services and focusing on digital literacy skills for seniors.

Organizations also described how the various barriers and dislocations caused by the pandemic brought underlying equity issues to the forefront of participants' lives. Racial, geographic and economic disparities as well as educational and economic opportunities that were always present were made now worse. Further, organizations reevaluated their operations, and began conversations about the underlying inequities in present in their community. In a follow-up report submitted by the Lake Agassiz Regional Library, Executive Director Liz Lynch wrote, "[n]ever before have we had an opportunity to slow down, evaluate and rebuild as we have over the last ten months." Similarly, in their survey response, Amador Adult Education answered that the sudden change "accelerated our shift to look at our community with a lens of equity to provide technology and to understand the digital divide which exists in our community." Discourse about disparities in digital equity represents one step on the road to achieving digital equity.

Organizations were also asked to identify demographic and geographic information about their participants. The most common demographic served by respondents was people in poverty, with more than 78% of organizations indicating that they work with this group of people. Other groups included white people, 76.7%; African American or Black people, 72.6%; Hispanic or Latinx people, 72.6%; English learners, 68.6%; people experiencing homelessness, 63.2%; native English speakers, 60.8%; immigrants and/or refugees, 60.1%; Asian American or Pacific Islanders, 58.1%; and Native American or indigenous peoples, 55.4%. The following list shows counties ranked by high-priority needs with information about the location and number of organizations who responded to the Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Survey. The state average for organizations per 3,000 people is .47, with population estimates from the 2019 LEHD. Rural counties have more organizations per capita than metro counties. The USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Codes are listed below but descriptions are omitted due to space constrictions.

List 5: Counties, needs, and organizations overview

COUNTY	HIGH PRIORITY NEEDS (0-6)	DIGITAL ACCESS NEEDS (0-1)	ENGLISH LANGUAGE SERVICES NEEDS (0-2)	ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT NEEDS (0-3)	ORGANIZATIONS PER 3,000 PEOPLE	2013 USDA Rural-Urban Continuum Code (1-9)
Nobles	6	1	2	3	0.83	7
Watonwan	5	1	2	2	2.75	6
Lake of the Woods	4	1	0	3	5.61	9
Aitkin	4	1	0	3	1.88	8
Beltrami	4	1	0	3	0.5	7
Wadena	4	1	0	3	1.75	7
Mahnomen	4	1	0	3	3.79	6
Pine	4	1	0	3	1.01	6
Kandiyohi	4	1	2	1	0.55	4
Mower	4	0	2	2	0.52	4
Mille Lacs	4	1	0	3	0.91	1
Ramsey	4	0	2	2	0.17	1
Cass	3	1	0	2	1.1	9
Grant	3	1	0	2	4.52	9
Traverse	3	1	0	2	8.28	9
Pope	3	1	0	2	2.4	8
Renville	3	1	0	2	1.85	8
Freeborn	3	1	0	2	0.79	7
Redwood	3	1	0	2	1.58	7
Roseau	3	1	0	2	1.18	7
Swift	3	1	0	2	2.26	7
Kanabec	3	1	0	2	1.46	6
Koochiching	3	1	0	2	2.2	6
Lake	3	1	0	2	2.81	6
Morrison	3	1	0	2	1.07	6
Otter Tail	3	1	0	2	0.71	6
Todd	3	1	0	2	1.09	6
Wilkin	3	1	0	2	4.83	6

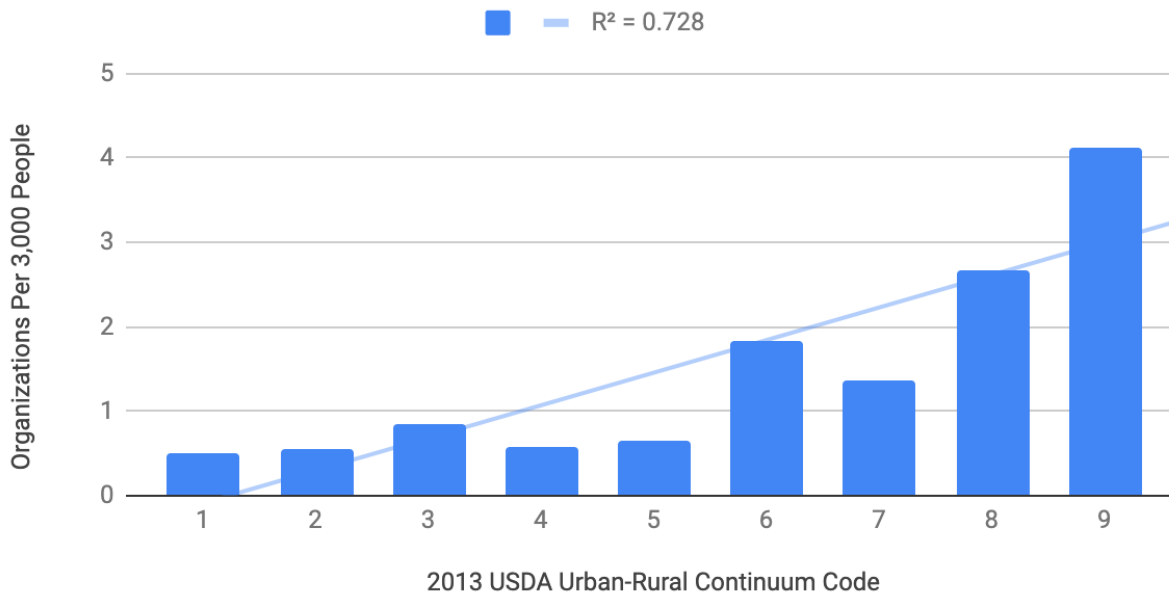
Rice	3	0	1	2	0.44	4
Benton	3	0	0	3	0.88	3
Blue Earth	3	1	0	2	0.39	3
Stearns	3	0	0	3	0.29	3
Carlton	3	1	0	2	0.83	2
Hennepin	3	0	2	1	0.1	1
Sibley	3	1	0	2	1.81	1
St. Louis	3	0	0	3	0.31	1
Big Stone	2	1	0	1	4.2	9
Cook	2	1	0	1	4.94	9
Kittson	2	1	0	1	4.88	9
Lac qui Parle	2	1	0	1	2.71	9
Lincoln	2	1	0	1	4.78	9
Yellow Medicine	2	0	0	2	2.16	9
Clearwater	2	0	0	2	2.72	8
Marshall	2	1	0	1	2.57	8
Martin	2	1	0	1	1.37	8
Norman	2	1	0	1	3.29	8
Red Lake	2	0	0	2	5.17	8
Chippewa	2	1	0	1	1.52	7
Cottonwood	2	0	0	2	1.6	7
Stevens	2	0	0	2	2.44	7
Becker	2	0	0	2	0.87	6
Brown	2	1	0	1	1.31	6
Douglas	2	1	0	1	0.78	6
Faribault	2	1	0	1	2.19	6
Itasca	2	0	0	2	0.99	6
Meeke	2	1	0	1	1.42	6
Pennington	2	0	0	2	1.27	6
Pipestone	2	0	0	2	2.62	6
Rock	2	0	0	2	1.93	6
Waseca	2	0	0	2	1.45	6

Steele	2	0	0	2	0.65	5
Winona	2	0	0	2	0.65	4
Fillmore	2	1	0	1	1.42	3
Olmsted	2	0	2	0	0.22	3
Polk	2	0	0	2	0.76	3
Wabasha	2	0	0	2	0.97	3
Anoka	2	0	1	1	0.17	1
Dakota	2	0	2	0	0.11	1
Isanti	2	0	0	2	0.59	1
Murray	1	0	0	1	2.19	9
Hubbard	1	0	0	1	0.97	7
Jackson	1	0	0	1	1.82	7
Lyon	1	0	0	1	0.94	7
McLeod	1	0	0	1	0.83	7
Crow Wing	1	0	0	1	0.5	4
Goodhue	1	0	0	1	0.71	4
Clay	1	0	0	1	0.37	3
Houston	1	0	0	1	1.61	3
Nicollet	1	0	0	1	0.87	3
Scott	1	0	1	0	0.28	2
Chisago	1	0	0	1	0.53	1
Le Sueur	1	0	0	1	0.93	1
Sherburne	1	0	0	1	0.46	1
Wright	1	0	0	1	0.23	1
Dodge	0	0	0	0	1.43	3
Carver	0	0	0	0	0.28	1
Washington	0	0	0	0	0.21	1

The graph below offers another visual representation of the organizations per capita measure included in the above chart. The graph shows that although urban counties appear to have more organizations serving them, rural counties have more organizations addressing digital equity needs per capita than urban counties. The graph makes clear that more organizations address the digital divide in rural counties per capita. Other barriers to closing the digital divide are steep in rural areas, though broadband infrastructure and persistent poverty represent two high barriers that create digital disenfranchisement.

Graph 1

MN Counties' Average Number of Organizations per 3,000 People by 2013 USDA Urban-Rural Continuum Code



It is important to note several shortcomings in the data used to create the chart and graph above: first, organizations that address the digital divide in Minnesota may have not completed Literacy Minnesota’s Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Survey sent in November. Additionally, U.S. Census Bureau data may not reflect present realities, and the USDA Urban-Rural Continuum dates to 2013, seven years prior to the writing of the report. Further research into the reliability of the data used as well as insight into the key questions that this report seeks to answer may be directed to the [NDIA](#) or to [Wilder Research](#). Despite shortcomings in the data used to create the chart and graph above, the data display and overcome any doubt that there remains great need in both urban and rural counties in Minnesota. Furthermore, correspondence with the NDIA and Wilder Research lend confidence that best available data were used as well that the conclusions drawn are reliable. Literacy Minnesota recommends that the implementation of a statewide Digital Navigator program complement organizations that address the digital divide in high-priority need counties as shown in the numerous lists. The following section will expand on the Digital Navigator Program and the role of digital navigators.

The Digital Navigator model was formally introduced by the NDIA in April of 2020. The concept was formed in response to the urgent need for digital inclusion services for millions of people without access to affordable devices or internet and/or the digital literacy skills necessary to find them. The model put forward by the NDIA is part of their organizational effort to facilitate coordinated digital guidance throughout localities, in collaboration with state and local governments.

Although digital inclusion services have already existed through libraries and community organizations, many of these public access points have been unable to reach the most underserved members of their communities due to the barriers of COVID-19, and because of the



digital divide. Building off of these existing efforts, the NDIA's model draws on aspects of reference librarian and case management roles to inform their digital inclusion strategy. A digital navigator, as defined by NDIA, is trained to assess a community member's needs and guide them towards the appropriate resources. Digital Navigators may be volunteers or members of community organizations, such as libraries and schools, who already have close relationships with the people they serve.

Digital navigators play a distinct role at Literacy Minnesota. Literacy Minnesota's digital navigators more closely resemble mentors and utilize a learner-centered model in the [Ramsey County TechPak program](#) and at its Open Door Learning Centers in Minneapolis, St. Paul and, now, online. The TechPak program provides laptops, prepaid hotspots and digital navigation to residents impacted by COVID-19. Through this partnership, Literacy Minnesota provides one-on-one navigation over-the-phone or in-person. Tasks includes assistance with computer set-up, connection to Zoom for future online training/classes, referrals to Ramsey County CareerForce and other available community benefits and an introduction to Northstar Digital Literacy Assessments. Navigators also work with English Language Learners to connect to Zoom for digital literacy and ESL instruction. Literacy Minnesota's participant-centered tutoring model focuses on empowering students to set and work toward their educational and career goals.

The success of the TechPak initiative in Ramsey County should serve as a model for scaling a Digital Equity Initiative state-wide. Using Northstar assessments and a standardized set of questions to collect demographic information, digital navigators would establish a baseline of each participant's digital literacy skill level and needs. This standard intake would lead to the creation of an individualized education plan for each participant, and the navigator would help guide the participant through the individualized plan to reach the participant's goals.

III. How would a statewide Digital Navigator Program complement available resources and sustainably solve persistent problems?

The Digital Navigator Program should aim to help digitally disenfranchised people set and achieve goals related to digital access. Goals related to digital access or technology should be generated by the participant, and they may include educational, employment readiness or social aspirations. The Program should achieve its goal by creating positive, safe and trusting relationships between digital navigators and participants while connecting people in need to a device, the internet and digital literacy skills. This section makes recommendations, and describes the role of a digital navigator, how the Program would complement available resources, and the need for digital navigation in Minnesota.

Literacy Minnesota recommends a learner-centered approach to digital navigation and digital literacy learning, like the learner-centered approach that it applies in ABE, its AmeriCorps VISTA national service program and its trainings and webinars. The agency recommends that organizations holding public trust host digital navigators. Community-based organizations and libraries represent excellent potential host sites for a statewide Digital Navigation Program in Minnesota. The agency also recommends that the Digital Navigator Program utilize the Northstar Digital Literacy program of Literacy Minnesota, which represents the leading technology in digital literacy learning and is available at multiple locations in each of Minnesota's 87 counties through ABE, libraries, and workforce centers. Literacy Minnesota's nearly 50 years of ABE experience as well as its emerging digital equity efforts and expertise, like the Ramsey County TechPak Program, a CARES Act project with Hennepin County, and its Open Door Learning Center equity efforts, inform these recommendations.

The role of the digital navigator is to empower participants in the Digital Navigation Program through digital access. The digital navigator provides one-on-one instruction in digital literacy skills and connects participants to resources available in their community. Resources include digital access needs, like access to a reliable computer and the internet, as well as general navigation needs, like guidance applying for energy assistance, unemployment insurance or other community resources. The first interaction between a participant in the Digital Navigator Program and a digital navigator may take up to an hour, and allows for intake questions, Northstar assessments, and individualized digital literacy education planning.

The first interaction between a participant in the Digital Navigation Program and a digital navigator produces an individualized education plan to achieve the digital or technological goals articulated by the participant. First, intake questions collect contact and demographic information while also

asking what motivated the participant to begin the Program, for example, “what brought you in today?” Then, the participant would take one, two, or three of the first Northstar assessments, “Basic Computer Skills,” “Internet Basics,” and “Using Email.” A low-level digital literacy learner may struggle with “Basic Computer Skills” and only take one assessment, while someone with higher digital literacy skills may advance through each assessment quickly. Last, the digital navigator helps the participant brainstorm a goal; together, they create an individualized plan to achieve the Participant’s goals. While excellent technology skills are not required for digital navigators, quick access to technical support is essential for a digital navigator and any Digital Navigator Program. Additionally, communities, organizations and schools may require insight into certain technical processes that a host organization with trust would address locally.

Evaluating the efficacy of the Digital Navigator Program would require an equity lens. It may employ surveys offered by organizations at intake and exit, or a tally of how many participants achieved the goals set in the individualized education plan created in the first interaction. Progress through the Northstar assessments and modules can also be recorded by host organizations for evaluation purposes. When possible, a third-party board and evaluator offers the most authoritative and precise evaluation. For example, [Ecotone Analytics](#) conducted a social return on investment study on Ramsey County’s TechPak program showing its economic benefits. The Blandin Foundation has conducted similar economic evaluations in rural areas of Minnesota. If a statewide Digital Navigator Program was centrally planned by MDE, the Governor’s Office or another statewide

THE DIGITAL NAVIGATOR MODEL

"Adding Digital Equity to Our Social Safety Net"¹

WHAT'S THE USE OF A DIGITAL NAVIGATOR?



Digital equity and inclusion cannot be achieved overnight. They require a regulated process of bringing devices, internet access, and digital literacy skills to individuals. A digital navigator is an individual at an organization who works specifically to mediate this process.

WHO IS A DIGITAL NAVIGATOR?



Digital navigators can be volunteers or staff who work at resource-giving institutions, such as libraries, social service agencies, and community-based organizations. They work directly with communities members and are familiar with resources that address digital equity.

HOW DOES IT WORK?



The digital navigator model follows that of Adult Basic Education. The process is learner-centered: customized for each site and individual. A competent Navigator assesses the needs of the individual and guides them towards the suitable resources. The Navigator works one-on-one with each community member, forming trusting relationships through repeated contact.

WHY DOES IT WORK?



The Digital Navigator Model is a replicable framework for organizations that already provide digital inclusion services. It is customizable according to each organization's capacity and, through continual, one-on-one contact, ensures that each individual's needs will be met.

¹ <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-navigator-model/>

agency, evaluation must include digital equity actors from other states as well as national actors cited in this Report. The next paragraph details estimates for potential participants and staffing requirements for a statewide Digital Navigator Program.

A statewide Digital Navigator Program in Minnesota would require an estimated 200 full-time digital navigators. Families receiving [Minnesota Family Investment Program](#) (MFIP) benefits appear a proper indicator to estimate the scale of need: if a family of three makes less than \$25,000 a year, then they likely require navigation to achieve digital equity. Additionally, the state already interacts with the more than 80,000 MFIP participants, has legislative obligations to support recipients, and uses federal funds to support them. If a full-time digital navigator could serve 400 participants in a year, an estimated 80,000 candidates for digital navigation would require 200 full-time equivalent digital navigators to facilitate digital literacy learning as well as connect people in need to a device and the internet. Training volunteer digital navigators in addition to paid, full-time staff would also allow for more digitally disenfranchised people to receive digital navigation. The Digital Navigator Program would advance digital equity in Minnesota.

A statewide Digital Navigator Program represents one way to address the digital divide in Minnesota. The Program described would be strengthened by a centrally planned, concerted and coordinated Digital Equity Initiative, and a Digital Equity Initiative would require a Digital Navigator Program to connect people to available resources, provide digital literacy skill-building and one-on-one goal-setting and mentoring as described above. The Digital Equity Initiative would connect people in need to a device, the internet and digital literacy skills. The Initiative would improve civic, economic, and educational outcomes across the state and reduce disparities. A statewide Digital Equity Initiative must engage diverse stakeholders in the public and private sectors to achieve digital equity, including broadband providers, community-based organizations, government officials, libraries and schools, to name a few important actors. We only office in the state of Minnesota capable of bringing the necessary stakeholders together to facilitate and coordinate Digital Equity Initiative is the Office of the Governor.

Conclusion: Costs of Digital Disenfranchisement & the Role of the Governor's Office

The Office of Governor Tim Walz & Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan has an unmatched ability to solve persistent problems. The Governor's Office has the capacity to bring broadband providers, community-based organizations, corporations, libraries and schools into conversations with local government officials about solving problems in their communities — including the problem of digital disenfranchisement, which the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic recession have aggravated, exacerbated and expanded. Helping people achieve digital equity proves an efficient investment because ensuring digital equity creates value. The Conclusion describes efforts around the country to provide aspects of digital equity and advocates for a coordinated Digital Equity Initiative to connect people to their right to literacy in Minnesota.

The cost of not providing universal broadband is too costly to endure. The Swank Program in Rural-Urban Policy at The Ohio State University estimated that [the average yearly economic benefit of a broadband subscription ranges from \\$1,500 to \\$2,200 in 2017](#). In Minnesota, the 2019 LEHD estimated that 28% of households do not have a fixed broadband subscription. Universal broadband adoption would produce an estimated \$10.5 million to \$15.4 million economic stimulus, a conservative estimate that only accounts for a \$1,500 to \$2,200 benefit for the 28% of Minnesota's 2,485,0354 households that did not have a fixed broadband subscription in 2019.



The Blandin Foundation found that broadband investment in rural Minnesota pays for itself, too, in their [2017 case studies that focused on Beltrami, Crow Wing, Goodhue, Lake and Sibley counties](#). The Blandin Foundation also found that the value created by the investment exceeded its original expense within the first year of investment in most counties. The [Ecotone Analytics](#) study found that Ramsey County's TechPak Program, which connected people impacted by the pandemic to a laptop, a prepaid hotspot and digital literacy lessons in 2020, produced a return of \$2.40 for each dollar invested. The means and skills to adopt universal broadband proves just as important as its accessibility.

Universal access to high speed broadband is a statutory goal in Minnesota. [The 2018 statute states:](#)

Subdivision 1. Universal access and high-speed goal. It is a state goal that:

(1) no later than 2022, all Minnesota businesses and homes have access to high-speed broadband that provides minimum download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second and minimum upload speeds of at least three megabits per second; and

(2) no later than 2026, all Minnesota businesses and homes have access to at least one provider of broadband with download speeds of at least 100 megabits per second and upload speeds of at least 20 megabits per second.

Subdivision 2. State broadband leadership position. It is a goal of the state that by 2022 and thereafter, the state be in:

(1) the top five states of the United States for broadband speed universally accessible to residents and businesses;

(2) the top five states for broadband access; and

(3) the top 15 when compared to countries globally for broadband penetration.

The statute fails to include the necessity of affordability of broadband adoption as well as the requirements for a reliable device and digital literacy skills to access, understand and utilize information available on the internet. A Digital Equity Initiative with the same status and urgency of the broadband statute would allow people to use the universal and high-speed broadband by making it affordable, connecting digitally disenfranchised people to computers and developing digital literacy skills to accomplish their goals. Without acknowledging the need for each aspect of digital equity, reaching the stated goals would prove moot. Other states in the U.S. have done more to connect residents to their right to digital equity. [The Reimagine New York Commission](#), founded by Governor Andrew Cuomo, prioritizes adoption and affordability of broadband in its connectivity vertical. In Illinois, Governor BJ Pritzker leads the \$420 million [Connect Illinois](#) infrastructure investment program to bring universal broadband access and adoption by 2024.

The most robust digital equity efforts are happening in Louisiana and Washington, where universal broadband efforts have been coupled with device distribution and digital literacy navigation. Governor John Bel Edwards allocated more than [\\$340 million to expand affordable broadband access in the next ten years, used \\$32 million in discretionary federal funds to purchase devices for students in need](#) and has implemented the Northstar Digital Literacy service at more than 40 sites across the state. Governor Jay Inslee of Washington proposed investments to close the digital divide, including \$79 million for residential broadband infrastructure development as well as \$6 million for 20 digital navigators across the state. The digital equity efforts in Minnesota lack the central planning, coordination and leadership in Illinois, Louisiana, New York, and Washington.

Local control dominates the digital equity initiatives in Minnesota. Governor Walz' Office announced [\\$23 million to fund 30 broadband projects across the state in January 2020](#) and the

[Partnership for a ConnectedMN, public-private partnership, in June 2020](#). [The Governor's Emergency Education Relief \(GEER\) funds](#), up to \$14 million in federal funding from the CARES Act, was also offered to school districts through a competitive grant process for up to \$5 million of the GEER total earlier in the year. [The Partnership for a ConnectedMN](#) is led by Best Buy, Comcast, Blandin Foundation, Saint Paul & Minnesota Foundation and the Minnesota Business Partnership, in collaboration with the state, and it has raised \$5.1 million. It is unclear the role that the state plays in collaboration with the Partnership on its website, other than the [Governor's Children's Cabinet is the primary contact](#), and there has been little reporting. July articles from [KARE11](#), [KTSP.com](#), and the [Star Tribune](#) fall to the second and third pages on a Google search for "[partnership for a connectedmn](#)," and offer little insight into how the Governor's Office fits into the Partnership. The lack of coordination limits the effectiveness of existing digital equity efforts.

Articles cite an estimate of 25,000 K-12 students in need of help accessing a computer or the internet. If 25,000 students in need were a proper estimate, the \$5.1 million raised between June and December 2020 would total \$204 per student, but likely leaves out digitally disenfranchised members of society. An investment of \$204 per student would likely allow a centrally planned device distribution program to provide computers for 25,000 students. However, two cycles of requests for proposals from ConnectedMN will have funded more than 40 distinct grants through the end of 2021, precluding a centrally planned or coordinated digital equity or Digital Navigator Program. On the other hand, the estimate of 25,000 students in need of a device, internet access, and digital literacy skills or support from caregivers appears low. The estimate of students leaves out tens of thousands of people in Minnesota not served by the K-12 system, or families who need to share devices. An improved estimate would account for the almost 29,000 families and more than 80,000 individuals receive MFIP benefits because they earn less than 115% of federal poverty guidelines because these folks likely have unmet digital equity needs.

The most efficient use of government, philanthropic and private funding would allow a single entity to organize a coordinated response. A coordinated response would not only save money but also allow for local communities to share their best practices with others around the state, creating knowledge and solving problems. A Digital Equity Initiative should solve the problem of a lack of coordination and help digitally disenfranchised Minnesotans access a reliable device, the internet and digital literacy skills.

The Office of the Governor represents the leading actor in Minnesota to advance and, ultimately, achieve digital equity. Digital disenfranchisement and disparities in education represented steep barriers to [Building One Minnesota](#) prior to 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the need for a Digital Equity Initiative to help the Office of the Governor meet its education reform goals as well as legislative obligations to provide excellent broadband border-to-border in Minnesota. The education reform goals and broadband initiatives would be supported by a statewide Digital Navigator Program, and a one-to-one device program would allow all residents in Minnesota to access the benefits and knowledge online. A statewide Digital Equity Initiative should start by serving people most in need, like MFIP recipients, but should be informed by the ultimate goal of digital equity – access to reliable device, affordable and high-speed internet and digital literacy skills for all – so that they may fulfill their potential as members of society. As life continues to move online, with education, employment, media and social interactions all occurring on screens, the digitally disenfranchised are left out. Achieving digital equity would create a more cohesive, educated and flourishing society by eliminating inequities in access across racial, geographic and economic lines. Building One Minnesota requires a Digital Equity Initiative with a statewide Digital Navigator Program.