A selection from the Digital Equity Community Needs Assessment Report for the Minnesota Department of Education, December 2020, is below. The Executive Summary can be found here, and the full Report here.

The selection answers the question: How would a statewide Digital Navigator Program complement available resources and sustainably solve persistent problems? And recommends required components of a statewide Digital Navigator Program with evaluation tools and framework.

Questions may be directed to Joseph Janik Miller

Direct: +1 651-251-9097
Email: jmiller@literacymn.org

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

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/

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 a statewide 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.