

Digital Equity Community Report – Project FINE

Project FINE is grateful for the opportunity to submit this report to Literacy Minnesota regarding the state of digital access among refugee and immigrant populations in Winona County. We have been providing various forms of technology education for the families we serve since 2011, and most of our programming has been focused on providing devices and basic training on Microsoft Office and social media for adults. In the fall of 2020, we received funding from ConnectedMN to address the emerging needs of students and parents related to virtual learning. All of our programming has been developed in response to the challenges or needs of the community and we have incorporated our lessons learned and best practices into the responses below.

How does your organization address issues of equity in your community?

Equity and inclusion are central to our mission at Project FINE, and all of our programs and services take a proactive approach to increase access for participants. Our educational programs are created with input from cultural consultants, who work with program staff to ensure that topics and methods are appropriate. They also provide advice to any presenters who are involved in program activities. Because we are an interpreting agency and have bi-lingual staff, all of our activities and services are provided in multiple languages. On staff, we have several community liaisons, whose role is to develop strong relationships within the community to build trust. These relationships are critical to our outreach efforts, as they are the foundation for all of our interactions with the refugee and immigrant community.

What strategies have you used to address digital inclusion? What has worked or not worked well?

Through our technology programs, we have used several strategies to address digital inclusion, but all have been based on a clear understanding of the needs of the community and the unique barriers faced by our participants. When we first started technology education back in 2011, we started by talking about communication methods and how communication has changed through time (foot messengers, telegraph, phone, etc.) because many participants were not aware of the functions of a computer and did not understand how learning about technology would benefit them. We then moved onto the components of a desktop PC and the function of each. Only then did we start turning on the computers and working on navigating, word processing and other simple tasks. As the skills of participants progressed, we kept adjusting our programming to suit the needs and interests of participants. They conducted online research on a topic they were interested in and created a PowerPoint presentation to share with the group, they created Facebook pages to stay in touch with friends and family, and they worked one-on-one with staff to learn how to access online banking and other services.

This constant communication with participants to understand their interest areas and current skill level contributed greatly to the success of our technology programs. In addition to education, we partnered with others in the community to provide devices and low cost internet to ensure that participants had the tools needed to continue to use technology. With the COVID-19 pandemic, new needs arose in the community related to virtual education. In addition to the challenges faced by students who now needed to access all their classes online, parents were not aware of how to access information about

school like attendance, grades or which days their child was to attend when classes were in hybrid format. Because we were aware of these needs, we developed a program to visit families in their homes and provide basic training on how to access the school platforms for both parents & children. We also provide tutoring for students and help them navigate their online assignments. This program just began in October, but we have already provided over 35 hours of support to 22 children and their parents. Our advice to others who would like to address digital inclusion is to begin with a deep understanding of the needs of the community, design programming that is flexible and accessible, conduct outreach with trusted individuals in the community, and be willing to adjust as needed to be the most effective.

How have you reached clients/participants since March?

Since March, we have continuously adapted our programming and services to adhere to COVID-19 safety guidelines while also meeting the growing needs of those we serve. During the Stay-at-Home period, our staff worked from home and were in daily contact with clients via phone to connect them to resources to meet their basic needs. Because we are located in Southeastern Minnesota (outside of the metro), we do not have local news sources available in languages other than English, so we provided daily updates on our Spanish & Hmong Facebook pages with accurate and relevant COVID-19 information. During this time, we continued to provide our programs via conference call and virtual sessions to maintain our relationships with community members and provide them with ongoing education and connection. Over the summer, we shifted our programming to outdoor gatherings in small groups and those continued through the fall. With the latest direction from Governor Walz limiting gatherings, our programming has moved back to a hybrid format where we deliver a 'kit' of activities to participants, then have a group virtual meeting to complete the activity together and have a discussion. Our Language Services has been operational throughout the pandemic, with in-person, phone and virtual interpreter options available. We have been providing in-person services and home visits since June (using appropriate PPE and distancing). Although there have been additional costs to provide PPE and investments of time to provide individual programming, we are committed to continue providing programs and services because the needs of the community are higher than ever and there are no other organizations in our area who provide the same services.

What adaptations has your organization made in response to COVID-19 that will remain after the pandemic?

We have made several adaptations that we anticipate will remain in place after the pandemic, but the most impactful changes have been internal. Over the past several months, we have learned as an organization that we can always learn, change and grow, and that our board and staff are willing to be creative and do what has to be done to serve the community. For example, 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. We anticipate that we will continue offering virtual options, both for our programming and also for operational and board meetings, as many of our participants are spread across Winona County.