DIGITAL EQUITY

Leadership Brief: Digital Equity in the Age of COVID-19

ABOUT THIS LEADERSHIP BRIEF

This Leadership Brief spotlights the urgent need for a new approach to making sure everyone, regardless of income, can participate fully in digital life in the pandemic era and beyond. It calls on library executives to take on a more active and intentional role in advocating for digital equity through broadband in every household and ensuring community-wide digital literacy.

OVERVIEW: While the coronavirus pandemic didn't create the digital divide, it exposed and intensified the harsh realities of what it means to be unconnected in our hyper-connected world, particularly for our most vulnerable residents. It's hard to ignore the stories of children trying to complete online school assignments or unemployed adults searching for jobs and applying for government benefits online while stationed in the parking lots of closed buildings with open Wi-Fi networks — at all hours of the day.

These stories are all-too-familiar for public libraries and their leaders, who have been on the front line of digital inclusion for decades. Millions of people depend on libraries for access to the internet, devices, tech support and digital skill-building opportunities. The widespread closures of library spaces due to COVID-19 was a shock to the digital inclusion infrastructure of North American communities, exposing a need for libraries to immediately and aggressively evolve their work and community role.

The pandemic has shown that many of the go-to digital inclusion approaches — including reliance on physical spaces for offering digital access — are not viable as long-term solutions. To better meet the daily digital needs of students, families, employees and small businesses, libraries must actively and intentionally lead the charge to increase awareness of the digital divide's impact across their communities and spearhead collective action to make progress on achieving digital equity. And there's no time to waste.

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL

"The coronavirus has really brought home the urgency of addressing the digital divide, particularly because of its impact on African Americans and other minorities who have been far more likely to lose their jobs, miss out on school's online classes and fall ill. We need to work together to ensure that no one is left on the wrong side of the digital divide."

— Mayor McKinley Price, Newport News, President, African American Mayors Association

KEY DEFINITIONS

- **Digital Divide:** The economic, educational and social inequities between those who do and do not have access to the internet, adequate devices, digital skill-building opportunities and tech support.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Access to affordable broadband, internet-enabled devices and training and support to achieve digital literacy.
- **Digital Equity:** When all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy.

AN URGENT NEED EXPOSED

The coronavirus pandemic's impact on unconnected populations is not a surprise. Despite some progress over the past decades, 18 million or 14% of U.S. households still don't have broadband. Fifteen million of those households are in urban areas where broadband is available yet unaffordable for many who are also dealing with housing and food insecurity.

Surveys consistently show that homes lacking high-speed internet or computers disproportionately belong to low-income families. Forty-four percent of U.S. households with incomes less than $30,000 are without broadband or a computer. In Canada, 66% of households with incomes less than $32,000 don't have home broadband or computers.

Libraries support technology access for everyone, regardless of income levels. Their digital offerings range from physical assets — public computers, loaned hotspots, techmobiles and 3-D printers and other cutting-edge devices — to online resources such as in-library Wi-Fi, digital literacy skills training, streaming media and e-books.

Even when the pandemic forced libraries to temporarily close their buildings, many continued to provide a digital lifeline by running their Wi-Fi 24/7 for use outside buildings and distributing hotspots and laptops to those most in need. Yet, it has become clear that the good work of libraries on digital inclusion is, at best, a temporary fix for a basic need and right – access to the internet, devices and digital skill-building opportunities for education, work, social engagement and communications. It is time for library leaders to address the long-allowed digital divide that further widens education, employment and economic divides.

A NEW LIBRARY LEADERSHIP ROLE

As experienced stewards of digital inclusion, public library leaders are well equipped to take on a more transformational role to achieve *digital equity* for all community residents by:

- Highlighting COVID-19's impact on people who rely on the public library for internet access including providing data on pre-pandemic use of library technology resources to increase awareness of how many people really have no access.
- Acknowledging the limitations of in-library access and loaned devices, such as hotspots and laptops, in meeting ongoing digital needs.
- Regularly making the case for home broadband and devices as a necessity and the only solution to education and economic divides.
- Using their convening power to bring together key stakeholders, grow grassroots awareness of the need for home broadband and facilitate grassroots support and action.
- Building on their deep community connections, ability to reach the least connected, first-hand knowledge of what it means to be unconnected in a hyper-connected world and commitment to race and social equity.

"If there is a small silver lining to COVID-19, it is that the pandemic has raised awareness of an issue that hadn't gotten the attention it merited. There's a lot more interest in finding solutions now."

— Jo Anne Mondowney, Executive Director, Detroit Public Library

"There is increased momentum for in-home broadband and greater awareness of the need. Libraries can be a community conscience for digital equity because we are where people are getting free access and can talk about the need in a powerful way."

— Gina Millsap, Chief Executive Officer, Topeka and Shawnee County Library

ACTION STRATEGIES FOR LIBRARY LEADERS

The following action strategies provide a framework for library leaders to carry out this new role.

Connect with local leaders and stakeholders.

The challenge of ensuring that everyone has in-home broadband, computers and the skills and support needed for digital success requires the active involvement of stakeholders from the public, nonprofit, technology and private sectors. In particular, the collective power of local elected, school and library leaders will help align diverse nonprofit and private initiatives that may be underway or launch new strategies to bring key players to the same table. Top elected leaders, especially, are in the best position to provide the political will to produce real results.

Make promoting digital equity through home broadband a high priority.

Libraries must make an explicit commitment to advocating for home broadband, internet-enabled devices and skill-building for achieving digital equity. While being a backstop for internet access will remain a necessary function, libraries can't settle for returning to a business-as-usual digital inclusion role in a post-pandemic community when the limitations of this service model have been exposed. In fact, libraries' work in filling home broadband access gaps may have unintentionally allowed digital inequities to go unnoticed and unaddressed by local leaders.

Know the broadband landscape.

Library leaders must be well-versed in broadband gaps, obstacles and challenges in and around their service area in order to advocate confidently for home broadband. Useful information includes:

1. Data on broadband availability and adoption in the library service area, including availability and adoption specifically in low-income areas.
2. Background on local and state initiatives supporting broadband access and laws or policies that block local efforts to increase access.
3. A full overview of primary internet service providers in the library service area and whether they offer discounted services that put broadband in reach for low-income households.

Library leaders also should be smart about building relationships with broadband providers to increase their potential as allies rather than adversaries.

KEY MESSAGES ABOUT DIGITAL EQUITY

- Digital equity is integral to race, economic, educational and social equity.
- High-speed internet is as essential to 21st-century life as clean water and electricity.
- Achieving digital equity is a community responsibility which requires sustained collaboration among public, nonprofit, technology and private sector stakeholders.
- COVID-19 exposed the limitations of a digital inclusion service model that relies on physical spaces and loaned tools to meet daily needs.
- The good work of libraries on digital inclusion is, at best, a temporary fix for ensuring that everyone can participate fully in digital life.
- Affordable in-home broadband, computers and the skills and support needed for success are the path to achieving digital equity.
- Collaboration among top elected officials, school leaders and library executives provides a springboard for action on digital equity.
- The pandemic intensified what it means to be unconnected in a hyper-connected world and created a window for action.

Fully own the digital literacy/skill-building space.

As libraries work to lessen their focus on providing internet access, they must deepen their role in serving as the place where children and adults can be introduced to new technology and level-up the skills they need to succeed throughout their lives. Libraries must become the leader for more advanced skill-building beyond the basics. The scope of skills needed today relate to artificial intelligence, virtual reality, access to sophisticated applications and technologies and more.

COMMUNITY COALITIONS SUPPORT DIGITAL EQUITY WORK

Below are examples of how libraries are already leading community coalitions that align a range of resources to advance digital equity.

- **Kansas City Public Library** leads the Kansas City Coalition for Digital Inclusion, an open, collaborative group of nonprofits, individuals, government entities and businesses focused on fostering internet access and digital readiness in the greater Kansas City area.
- Within the **Toronto Public Library**, digital inclusion and literacy is one of the five priorities in the library's new strategic plan, with equity at the core of all its work. The library's key partner is the City of Toronto as it addresses barriers to digital access while serving as the leader for digital literacy and innovation.
- Digital C is a nonprofit focused on making Greater Cleveland's digital future more equitable. The executive director of the **Cleveland Public Library** serves on Digital C's board of directors along with corporate and nonprofit executives.
- A coalition of government, education, nonprofit and business leaders, including **Columbus Metropolitan Library**, is working together to address the "sudden, massive public need for trustworthy digital inclusion services" caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tailor language, data and stories to make the most compelling case for digital equity.

Community-specific data and anecdotes that tell the story of limited neighborhood connectivity can highlight pressing pain points and provide the needed "gut punch" to stimulate action. Knowing that 80% of households in the library service area have home broadband is important baseline information. Knowing that 80% of a low-income neighborhood does not have home broadband along with other key data points including neighborhood unemployment and education levels presents a compelling picture of systemic inequities that diminish opportunity for those already marginalized.

Sustain the momentum and visibility of the library's digital equity advocacy.

Libraries can use their trusted voice and convening capacity to ensure sustained attention to the urgent need for broadband in every household and community-wide digital literacy as the path to digital equity. That requires library leaders, especially executives, to step forward and be vocal about the importance of seeking long-term solutions for meeting digital needs rather than defaulting to short-term fixes. Library leaders must keep their pedals to the metal until the goal of digital equity is achieved.

The Urban Libraries Council is an innovation and action tank of North America's leading public library systems. We drive cutting-edge research and strategic partnerships to elevate the power of libraries as essential, transformative institutions for the 21st-century. We identify significant challenges facing today's communities and develop new tools and techniques to help libraries achieve stronger outcomes in education, workforce and economic development, digital equity and race and social equity.

This Leadership Brief is a product of ULC's Digital Equity action team, as an extension of ULC's **Going Forward from the Pandemic Initiative**. This initiative is being led by six action teams of ULC library leaders who are focused on identifying immediate ways that all libraries can overcome key challenges in the COVID-19 era, including issues related to:

- Digital Equity
- Entrepreneurs and Small Businesses
- Partnering with Schools
- Race and Social Equity
- The Leaders Library Card Challenge
- Redefining the Library's Role

Learn more at urbanlibraries.org.