



Getting Started with Digital Equity

Start with a broadband needs assessment

The first step in addressing the digital divide is understanding what causes it. A broadband needs assessment enables city leaders to explore the extent of the digital divide, who is being excluded, what broadband service is currently available and the solutions that cities could bring to the table. A broadband needs assessment is a four-part process:

- ◆ Connect with the community;
- ◆ Evaluate the digital equity landscape;
- ◆ Gather foundational data;
- ◆ Report on findings

Connect with the community

The community is a city's greatest resource in determining how to address the digital divide. Community members have experience on what it takes to use the internet in their city. They know the challenges and should actively participate in exploring and determining solutions. They can provide insight into gaps in internet service, barriers to affordable service and devices, and trainings to improve internet skills. Community members can be residents but should also include students, educators, librarians, business owners and workers so that the city gets a clear picture of the digital divide.

Ensure racial equity in digital equity efforts

Racial equity refers to an outcome in which racial identity does not predict life outcomes. In contrast, racial equality involves treating all races the same. Although an important principle, racial equality does not help close the gap if people start from unequal places. For this reason, racial equity avoids a one-size-fits-all approach and, instead, tailors policies and programs, and prioritizes communities historically and consistently excluded from access to resources. Because the digital divide particularly affects BIPOC communities, it is important to ensure that digital equity efforts investigate these differences and proactively address the digital divide in these communities.



Evaluate the digital equity landscape

No matter where a city is in its digital equity journey, stakeholders should learn from previous digital equity efforts, to inform current work. Whether the city or community led this work, it is important to know who was involved, what happened, why it worked (or did not work) and how it has affected the current causes of the digital divide. Search for these answers within and outside of the organization. Connect with community members to learn more. Look to state and federal partners to understand how the city has worked with them.

Gather foundational data

Publicly available data exists to help stakeholders assess the digital divide in the community. To know the extent of the problem, it is necessary to collect additional information to close gaps or confirm publicly available data. Some cities use surveys to gather information on current internet service, actual internet speeds and pricing information. Some state broadband offices have already undertaken this work. It may be useful to connect with them to understand their results and outreach methods. Data from the American Community Survey can help city leaders better understand things such as home computer ownership.



Use the NLC Broadband Needs Assessment to see data for your city and compare the state of the digital divide in your community to state and national data points.

Report on findings

To build momentum toward solutions and implementation, city officials should widely communicate the results of the broadband needs assessment. Consider the needs assessment as a living document. As the community's broadband needs shift, this foundational information should be updated so that current efforts reflect the change.

Visit nlc.org/resource/digital-equity-playbook-how-city-leaders-can-bridge-the-digital-divide to view the complete Digital Equity Playbook.

