

BRIDGING THE LOCAL DIGITAL DIVIDE

What is the Center for Inclusive Innovation?

The Center for Inclusive Innovation (CENTII) is a Portland Metropolitan Statistical Area (Portland Metro) coalition of public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic members that operates on the premise that everyone, regardless of background or ability, should have the right to participate in technology advances and the freedom to innovate using online technology. Mobilized by Dwayne Johnson, CENTII works to address the long-standing disconnect between anti-discrimination policy and the provision of economic and career-building opportunities for historically marginalized communities and vulnerable populations such as the elderly, the working poor and the disabled, as well as for entrepreneurial small businesses.

Why is CENTII acting now?

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and widened historical digital disparities and underscored their effects on the health and well-being of underserved communities. Many entities in the public and private sectors rushed to address these conditions. The City of Portland, Multnomah County, and the Multnomah County Library had already committed to the Digital Equity Action Plan (DEAP) of 2016 to identify community-developed strategies and monitoring mechanisms. However, DEAP lacked the capacity to update and implement its strategies to ensure the effectiveness of efforts to mitigate these deep-seated problems.

The time to act locally is now to take advantage of growing national support for digital inclusion. In fact, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) met in Portland in February 2022. In addition, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has committed

to supporting broadband grant programs as part of the Infrastructure, Investment and Jobs Act. They will fund efforts at the national and state levels that can strengthen short-term local actions.

How is CENTII Bridging the Digital Divide?

In 2020 we began a research project to assess both pandemic crisis-based and longer-term efforts to mitigate digital disparities. The research team aimed to survey as many stakeholder organizations as possible to assess both pandemic crisis-based and longer-term efforts to mitigate digital disparities and to identify opportunities to adapt or improve strategies and services. This project documents the experiences of more than twenty organizations that attempted to adapt or improve strategies and services to address the digital divide during the pandemic as short-term, crisis-funded deployments end.

What did the research say?

Findings showed that those efforts resulted in tens of thousands of Portland regional residents receiving aid in digital connectivity and access to needed services. There are substantial examples of success with programs having a positive impact, but findings also provide a picture of siloed efforts due to a lack of regional coordination. Researchers found that many government funding agencies and philanthropies depend on dispersing resources through Community Based Organizations (CBOs), relying on their existing relationships with underserved communities. While a commendable amount of activity was undertaken, CBOs and other community-facing entities were themselves coping with the effects of the pandemic.

// **Universal, affordable, open, high-performance broadband is an important ingredient for a more just America, a healthier society, and an economy that offers true opportunity for everyone.”**

– Benton Institute for Broadband & Society
Digital Beat, February 7, 2022

FEATURED SUCCESS:

City of Portland Digital Divide Technology Kit Project

The most significant publicly funded program during the COVID pandemic in Portland was the City of Portland’s Digital Divide Technology Kit (Tech Kit) Project, funded with resources from the City’s COVID-Response CARES Act. Through the Tech Kit Project, the City distributed more than 4,000 devices and more than 8,400 Visa gift cards to help cover the cost of internet service for one year.

The Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and the Office for Community Technology led the project in collaborative partnerships with 24 CBOs. The City of Portland has since committed \$3.5 million of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to the Office for Community Technology to continue the project.

DIGITAL DIVIDE TECH KIT DISTRIBUTIONS BY THE NUMBERS

- 500 LTE Chromebooks with unlimited data plans
- 3,000 Chromebooks with basic training
- 547 iPads and protective cases with assistive tools such as styluses and keyboards for people with disabilities
- 8,429 Internet assistance cards to cover the cost of internet service for one year
- Warranties for all devices
- Training materials on the Smart City website

Connectivity and accessibility are imperative

Unanimously, every stakeholder confirmed the importance of providing digital connectivity: access to digital devices and broadband service so residents can be aware of critical information, work remotely, and communicate

in a rapidly evolving public sphere. In addition to connectivity, stakeholders said adopting digital technologies is essential, even where there is hesitation surrounding their use due to cost or lack of training. Successful adoption depends on input from historically marginalized individuals and communities and the organizations representing them. Given the dramatic effects of the pandemic on all students in the public school system, a significant emphasis was placed on connecting students to digital access. Portland Public Schools handed out more than 27,000 Chromebooks and 8,000 hot spots to students’ families.

Where do we go from here?

Regional organizations have common goals under the Digital Equity Action Plan, so there are opportunities for better coordination and cooperation. Furthermore, the findings of this research suggest that local and regional efforts to address the digital divide require support from collaborative efforts, such as the Center for Inclusive Innovation, to coordinate the successful involvement of the many stakeholders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. CENTII plans to incorporate these research findings into its work of building coalitions to implement real-world bridges across the digital divide.

Research Team

Principal Investigator, Dwayne Johnson, Center for Inclusive Innovation; Dr. Beth Fitz Gibbon, Pathfox Partners Venture Development; Brenda Sparks Prescott, Balaat Consulting LLC; Adin Becker, Jessica Simms, and Harrison Schreiber, We All Rise Consulting.

This research project was made possible by the Meyer Memorial Trust’s generous support and visionary commitment to building stronger communities and by CENTII’s fiscal sponsor, NTEN. The full report is available at centii.org.