



Cross-Departmental Collaboration Increasingly Vital to Digital Inclusion

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As life increasingly migrates into the digital realm, more agencies within municipal government are finding that digital inclusion — the effort to provide all residents with equal access to technology, as well as the related skills to benefit — is vital to the well-being of the public.

Cities such as Seattle; Portland, Ore.; Austin; Kansas City, Mo.; and Louisville, Ky., have laid out official digital inclusion strategies and forward-thinking plans, and many other cities now have appointees or departments dedicated to the issue.

At the same time, the number of tangentially related government agencies contributing to the work is rising, and as it does local government leadership is acknowledging that digital inclusion is an increasingly vital foundation for healthy, equitable cities, cities in which the entire populous has a chance to advance and thrive.

Angela Siefer, director of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, the leading group in the field, stopped short recently of calling digital equity collaborations between disparate departments common, but she did say such efforts were definitely increasing.

“Oftentimes it’s one or two people from the city,” Siefer said, “but what would really make a dent in digital equity is for more of the departments to be engaged in communitywide efforts and developing partnerships with the organizations that are increasing home broadband adoption, that are teaching digital literacy skills, and that are distributing low-cost computers.”

The Housing Authority of the City of Austin is a prime example. Although seemingly unrelated to digital inclusion, the agency has become heavily involved in obtaining digital equity for the community it serves specifically the 5,000 Austinites currently residing in public housing, about half of which are children.

“When you look at our chief aim as a public housing authority, it’s not just brick and mortar,” said Catherine Crago, head of strategic initiatives and resource development for Austin’s housing authority. “but it’s family self-sufficiency. We’re in a high growth market, and there’s an affordable family housing crisis in Austin.”

In her work, Crago has encountered adults who want badly to learn to read, parents who lack transportation to take children to the library, and seniors or residents with disabilities who could increase time with care providers if they could complete paperwork in advance online.

Crago said better digital skills would help these public housing residents overcome such issues and eventually move into their own permanent residencies.

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Google Fiber, which came to Austin in 2014, has also volunteered to help supply Austin's public housing with high-speed Internet. In Austin, the housing authority's digital inclusion work has become so prevalent that tech officials in Louisville recently said they've reached out to better shape their own digital equity work.

Kansas City, another place Google Fiber established an early presence, is also at the forefront of cross-departmental collaboration for digital inclusion. Rick Usher, Kansas City's assistant city manager for small business and entrepreneurship, heads the city's digital inclusion efforts, and he said a digital inclusion coalition began soon after Google Fiber made its initial announcement. That group now includes 30 different entities. While many are community and nonprofit partners, some are also part of the government.

While the housing authority in Kansas City has worked on digital inclusion, it's the health department there that sets the city apart. Sarah Martin-Anderson is the manager of community engagement, policy and accountability for the KC Health Department, and she said her agency's last community health improvement plan posited questions that really focusing on healthy communities. Whereas most community health improvement plans tend to focus on the prevalence of diseases, Kansas City's tackled factors that lead to better health, factors associated with education, violence prevention and economic mobility.

"What we found was every time we did a session for each one of those issue areas, digital inclusion came up," Martin-Anderson said. "It was kind of like a cross-cutting issue."

Kansas City's health department is currently helping to amass data related to health and digital inclusion, with plans to develop related interventions and policies. Martin-Anderson also stressed how vital digital skills are becoming in finding the right health-care providers and venues.

While she doesn't know the end result of her agency's work with digital inclusion, Martin-Anderson said it is an exciting and valuable catalyst for cross departmental collaborations. She said teamwork between health professionals and data and analytics statisticians has been a natural fit.

"We have so much in common, and we're just all trying to find creative ways to find social problems, and we all love data," Martin-Anderson said. "Once we realize that, everyone's on board."

But the public agencies across the country that have done the most to further digital inclusion in the past decade are, without question, libraries and parks and recreation departments. There is perhaps no better example of this than Philadelphia's KEYSPOt Program, which includes a number of public computing centers.

Andrew Buss, Philadelphia's director of innovation management within the Office of Innovation and Technology, said KEYSPOt was initially funded by a federal grant, and its creation established a physical infrastructure of KEYSPOt centers, 19 or so of which currently operate inside parks and rec buildings. Post-grant, Philadelphia has continued KEYSPOt, and other agencies are doing valuable digital literacy work, organizations such as the Office of Adult Education.

More than 700,000 Philadelphia residents visit KEYSPOt centers each year, many of which need help with seemingly basic tasks such as attaching documents to emails.

Jennifer Kobrin, director of digital initiatives with the Office of Adult Education, said many adults who have poor technology skills also have connected anxiety or insecurity. Workers from the Office of Adult Education deal with such hang-ups regularly. Once a resident has access to tech, or even to tech classes, these workers can help in a way that lends itself to real progress. The reason? It's not just teaching them about the software; it's getting them to be honest about what they don't know and why they have trepidation toward technology.

"When you get an office of adult education involved, you have that perspective that's so deeply rooted in basic understanding of adult learners," Kobrin said

To that end, Philadelphia's Office of Adult Education is offering technology tutor training so that members of the community will be equipped to help not only as a tutor, but as a resident who interacts with neighbors, grandparents and others.

"It's a learner issue, it's a human issue, it's a city resident issue," said Marjorie Morris, director of communications and development for the Office of Adult Education. "It's an entire city issue."