

THE STATE OF DIGITAL INCLUSION:

A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF INTERNET ACCESS AND DIGITAL LITERACY IN ILLINOIS

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A REPORT BY LITERACY WORKS



Introduction

Digital literacy and internet access are crucial needs for anyone today. This is especially true now after connectivity needs were brought to light at the start of the pandemic. The move to virtual interactions in 2020 created a shift in digital priorities that will continue to affect the way we learn, work, and socialize with each other in the years to come. We can no longer afford to wait to think about digital literacy and internet access - we must act now.

The switch to virtual life was a welcomed choice for some, but for others it was an incredible burden made more difficult by limited resources and misinformation.

The Secretary of State (SOS) provides funding to many adult education programs throughout Illinois and, for some programs, SOS funding is their largest source of financial support. As it stands, organizations that are funded by SOS are prohibited from using those funds to purchase digital equipment.

This means that the spending restrictions imposed on SOS grantees can have a direct impact on the digital access a program can provide.

We believe that SOS has the power to enact great change and increase capacity to adult education throughout Illinois by changing the grant rule.

This needs assessment was developed in response to calls from community members and volunteer coordinators who need help supporting their participants with their internet and digital literacy needs. This report was created to share this information with the Secretary of State of Illinois.

The data suggest two main issues: there is a need for more internet access as well as education about how to get that access and there is a continuing need for support of digital literacy resources and training.

More Access to the Internet

Nearly a quarter of respondents report that they do not have access to internet at home.

23%

of respondents report that they do not have access to reliable internet access at home which directly impedes on their ability to learn with instructors and tutors virtually.

Many cited affordability, confusion about setting up the service, and lack of a device as the primary reasons they do not have access to the internet at home.

One respondent stated: "My internet isn't fast because high speed internet costs a lot of money. I only have a smart phone and a slow computer at the moment. using Zoom makes it difficult". This is a common situation for many adult learners. Of the 23% without enough internet access at home, nearly 12% report that limited data plans restrict them from using their smart phones to join online classes or engage with tutor instruction.

Several respondents reported that getting access to reliable internet service along with a digital device and training on how to use it, would allow them to continue on their education journey.

Connectivity Counseling

Changing the funding rules for SOS grantees could allow organizations to support these needs with connectivity counseling.



of the respondents that do have internet access in their home, 82% reported that they use a smart phone to do most things on the internet

Counseling around the set-up and installation process of high-speed internet is a new concept currently being championed by Community Tech Network, a nonprofit organization with offices in San Francisco, California and Austin, Texas. They believe that the internet is a utility like electricity or natural gas.

With programs like LIHEAP (Low-Income Heat and Energy Assistance Program), community members are able to get help to apply for energy assistance and have direct contacts that they can reach out to when they encounter an issue. Currently, because internet is not a utility, these programs are not in place.

This means that if someone wanted to activate internet service at their home, they would not have access to help navigating the process of the initial set-up.

While groups like Community Tech Network do offer this type of support, the limited funding in this area forces them to relegate their services to their direct community members and are not accessible to our members in Illinois at this time. However, this model of support could easily be replicated in Illinois if funding and training were available to support staff in this work.

One respondent reported that after signing up for low-cost internet through Comcast, they realized that the price was only an introductory rate and soon their bill was unaffordable. She was forced to cancel the service and discontinuing her tutoring sessions.

Instances like this could be avoided if participants were given access to connectivity counseling or training in how to set-up their internet service and how to navigate bills and rate changes.

Digital Equipment

Changing the SOS funding rules to include spending on digital equipment would allow organizations to purchase WIFI hot spots and digital devices such as laptops or Chromebooks to share with participants who would otherwise not be able to gain access at home.

However, simply passing out equipment will not be an effective strategy for closing the digital divide for our learners. With flexible funding could come the expectation that organizations would teach their participants how to use the equipment before use.

Funding for Digital Equipment

The adoption of online learning has been a great move in accessibility for many learners who were not able to join in-person classes and tutoring sessions. Now, even those with child care or transportation issues can still get the education they desire.

Yet, those without access will continue to fall behind on their educational goals simply because they do not have the resources or support to join the online learning space.

Having flexible funding for digital equipment and internet access would ultimately increase the reach of adult education organizations and allow them to serve even more adult learners throughout Illinois.

Support for digital literacy

The majority (61%) of respondents reported that they are interested in digital literacy offerings. Many stated that while they may have internet and a device at home, they are often lost regarding how to use them.



many adult learners rely on their family members to help them with digital needs

One respondent shared: "I'm pretty technologically uneducated given my age and exposure to technology. I use smart phones and laptops for bare minimum communication."

Many others gave similar statements, demonstrating that access and equipment alone are not effective in supporting an online learning environment. These stories are not surprising.

We know that digital literacy is crucial for everyone, including adult learners. Yet, organizations still struggle to provide appropriate and effective instruction in this area.

Digital Literacy Help

Of the 61% reporting a need for digital literacy, over half stated that they receive help from spouses and family members. However, some reported that family members were not a sustainable form of help. One respondent noted their grandchild was getting tired of helping them with Zoom.

Relying on family members and household expertise is not always an option for some adult learners as one instructor points out. They emphasized the need for digital literacy in a safe space. During the beginning of the pandemic, this instructor quickly realized that just sharing equipment was not enough.

Some of their students were unable to use their devices due to violence and instability at home.

24% of respondents report that they rely on tutors and instructors for their digital literacy needs

This instructor advocates for safe digital spaces for those that are unable to learn virtually from home. Their organization was able to set up a "very crude but practical computer lab in [their] facility for individuals ... to come and attend [their] online classes in safety." However, the amount of effort spent improvising a digital literacy plan was an additional responsibility on top of their instructional duties. In the long-term, this kind of over stretching may contribute to higher rates of burn-out among paid teachers and a decrease in retention of volunteer tutors.

Improvised Digital Literacy

The reality is, many adult learners are looking to their organization to provide the help they need. 24% of respondents said they are getting support from their teacher or tutor. This means that despite limited training and resources or the funds to hire a digital literacy instructor, teachers and tutors are offering digital literacy support because the need is that great.

Without funding for training and the hiring of knowledgeable digital literacy instructors, organizations are left to fend for themselves as they try to support the digital literacy needs of their participants.

With the majority of adult literacy work conducted by volunteers, programs are limited as to what they can expect from their tutors.

Some tutors reported the stress of having to learn how to teach digital literacy skills in lieu of their planned ESL lessons with little support or guidance. Some coordinators have reported (outside of the context of this survey) that they have seen a decrease in tutor retention with many leaving due to issues around the digital literacy levels of their learners.

Funding for Digital Literacy

With more flexible funding rules, organizations could let tutors and teachers focus on their main goal while also offering more in-depth tech support for those participants that need it.

The funding would allow more training and additional staff to support the increased need in digital literacy and tech support among adult learners.

Summary

Digital literacy, digital equipment, and access to reliable internet are imperative for adult learners in Illinois. These skills can no longer be regulated to supplemental interests. Digital literacy is literacy.

While the pandemic continues to cause an increase in virtual learning, it is clear that this format is not going away - nor should it. Many tutors and learners have touted the move to online learning and find that returning to in-person learning would be difficult for them.

Others report that they are open to virtual learning but without the proper training, equipment and support would be unable to do so. In either case, virtual learning is here to stay.

There is a need for more access to the internet and education about how to get that access. Funding flexibility would allow organizations to decide how to spend the funds to best support the needs of their participants in this area.

There is a need for more digital literacy and SOS funding can help support additional classes, staff, and the hiring of knowledgeable staff. The majority of respondents reported that they are interested in digital literacy offerings that are not available to them at present.

SOS provides funding to many adult literacy programs throughout Illinois. Some organizations receive additional grants from larger funding streams like the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and are able to use supplemental funding to fill in gaps in digital needs. Many of those organizations, however, rely on SOS for the majority of their funding. In fact, 48% of respondents came from organizations that do not receive funding from ICCB. Which indicates that nearly half the organizations who responded to the survey may not be able to supplement their SOS funding to cover the gaps in digital literacy and equipment.

This puts SOS in a unique position to increase the viability of these programs by advocating for funding rule changes.

SOS has been vocal about the need for digital inclusion and have advocated for prioritization in this area. Their leadership and encouragement have not gone unnoticed and have increased awareness among adult education programs about the importance of digital literacy. With that information, several organizations have begun reaching out to Literacy Works for guidance regarding digital literacy and acquiring digital equipment. There is a powerful energy in this area that, if supported, has the potential to change the scope of adult education in Illinois.

However, until the funding rules change, organizations will not have the flexibility to make digital access a reality at their programs. Changing these rules will have incredible impact on adult education in Illinois and will increase capacity to support adult learners on their educational journeys

Survey Details

This survey was conducted online through a Google Form format. Information packets including video tutorials and text-based instructions were shared along with the survey to ensure wider access for respondents. Tutors, instructors, and learners were encouraged to complete this survey and share their thoughts on the state of digital inclusion in their community. Tutors were also encouraged to help their learners complete the survey as needed.

All responses were anonymous and were not linked to any email address or identifying information. Although the name of the organization where they were learning, working, or volunteering was required to track where in the state the information was coming from and to learn more about the needs of particular organizations. This report will be shared with participating organizations for them to use as they wish.

The tools and practices used in this project were learned in the class "Expanding Home Connectivity in your Community" provided by the organization, NTEN.



Literacy Works

About Literacy Works

Literacy Works promotes literacy justice and communication equity. Founded on principles of popular education, we support a membership of community-based adult literacy programs across Chicago and Illinois. We also work closely with mission-driven organizations to prioritize clear, effective communication in our communities so people can access information they need to thrive. You can learn more about this work at litworks.org.

Survey Responses by the Numbers

- 97 responses were recorded
- 75 organizations were represented
- 50 zip codes were represented
- 17 respondents were staff
- 52 respondents were learners
- 28 respondents were tutors