Finding pathways to close the digital divide

We often take for granted how easy it is to open a laptop or grab a smartphone to get on the internet. However, for millions of people, access to wireless connectivity and the latest devices isn't a given, it's a luxury.

The pandemic unearthed just how wide the digital divide is in communities throughout the country. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), 97 percent of Americans in urban areas have access to high-speed, fixed wireless service, compared to just 65 percent of rural residents and 60 percent of Americans who live in tribal communities.[1] A separate study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that nearly seven percent of students from low-income households don't have access to the internet, compared to just under two percent of students from non-low income households.[2]

Addressing the digital divide will expand access to government services and could improve economic and educational outcomes in many parts of the country. To devise actionable solutions for fostering digital equity, Amazon Web Services (AWS) recently convened a roundtable of government and technology leaders. Here's their perspective on five key strategies to help close the digital divide.

Understand the root causes of the problem

Discussions about the digital divide often center around connectivity, affordability, and infrastructure, but the problem is often much more multifaceted than this, says Tanya Hannah, chief information officer (CIO) for King County, Washington.

"I think there are other things that we have to realize, like whether or not someone has an internet-enabled device. Even if it's a laptop or a tablet or even a phone, many people may or may not have data plans that allow for unlimited data usage," she says. "Other things we have to acknowledge are whether or not someone has appropriate digital literacy skills and are able to navigate the internet and understand the cybersecurity and privacy issues that may exist."

Andrew Buss, Philadelphia's deputy CIO for innovation management, adds that language barriers often widen the divide, particularly when it comes to delivering digital government services.

"Post-pandemic, the conversation has changed a little bit now to where we are at least thinking about barriers beyond connectivity," he says. "In Philly, and I imagine in a lot of other cities, there are a lot of language barriers to using some of these applications, so you have to think about how you're going to address that as a city if your users speak a lot of different languages."

As governments focus on digital service delivery, understanding the scope of the problem and the underlying factors that worsen the digital divide in their communities will be a critical first step in forming effective strategies to address this challenge.

Embrace a data-driven approach

There's often limited information for state and local governments to truly understand the digital needs of constituents, but they can address this challenge by doing research and gathering data to better target and tailor digital equity initiatives.

Philadelphia, for example, has traditionally relied on survey data. However, the city recently launched a benchmarking study to gather more granular data about where it can best direct funding, such as federal aid from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). King County has launched a study that collects household-level data to better understand which households would be classified as underserved.

Whether it's survey data, a benchmarking study, or a longer-term research project, municipalities should take the time to understand where digital gaps are most pronounced in their community and where they can best allocate their resources to drive better outcomes.

Meet constituents where they are

Jon Walton, a digital equity advisor to state and local governments, says public sector organizations can do a much better job of providing technical support to constituents.

"We put a lot of equipment out there, a lot of connectivity out there, but then people really were left to their own devices to figure out how to make that work and how to get the best experience out of it," Walton says. "I hope if we learn anything from it, [it's that] government has to transform itself and provide better technical support directly to the public to get better use out of these systems over time."

To address this, the city of Philadelphia has established a public computing center program designed to meet both digital literacy and access needs. The centers are open at least 15

hours a week with an on-site instructor to help residents of all digital skill levels. The centers also offer digital citizenship training to help residents learn about topics like internet safety, data security, and privacy.[3]

In addition, the city has focused on making its websites more accessible for residents who speak another language or who are hearing or visually impaired.

"There's also just the basic improvement of digital literacy, where you're building applications that are easy to use instead of very difficult to use and that work well for all literacy levels," Buss says.

Leverage existing resources

Some municipalities are using existing resources to narrow the digital divide.

Hannah says King County has collaborated with the local housing authority to bring free or heavily subsidized high-speed internet to individuals living in public housing. In San Mateo County in California, local libraries have been an invaluable resource for underserved populations, Walton says. The county libraries, which already had staff who were multi-lingual and trained to serve younger and older populations with varying digital skills, implemented a program where patrons with a library card could check out laptops and mobile hotspots to access the internet at home — just as they would a book or DVD.[4]

"That kind of goes to the government being a help desk, if you will, but an in-person help desk," Walton says. "I'm all for AI and chatbots, but for some of the more disenfranchised populations who are really struggling to bridge this gap, you need the human touch."

Collaborate with non-governmental partners

State and local governments can also collaborate with community organizations and technology partners to close the digital divide.

Hannah says King County has worked with community-based organizations to try to engage hard-to-reach communities, such as seniors and veterans. During the pandemic, the partnership helped families and students who had difficulty using different digital products access support resources. Hannah says working with community partners is effective because people tend to go to the organizations they trust.

"It really does take a community," she says. "It takes a village to support and really try to move forward and lessen this whole digital divide."

Shonte Eldridge, an executive government advisor at AWS, says state and local governments can also lean on technology providers with deep public sector expertise to help them formulate effective digital equity strategies.

"Rely on your partners to not only provide the service, but rely on them for their expertise," Eldridge says. "What have they seen work in the market? What have they seen that's successful? What have they seen as lessons learned from other people who don't do it as well?"

With an influx of federal stimulus relief, governments can also take advantage of this opportunity to forge public-private partnerships with technology providers and build out their broadband infrastructure. Closing the digital divide will require a collaborative, ongoing effort, and technology companies and other private partners can help state and local governments leapfrog their progress.

Conclusion

The digital divide will continue to persist if governments don't harness all their resources and available funding to tackle this challenge head-on.

Over the last two years, we've seen the ripple effect of digital inequities and how a lack of connectivity or a reliable device can prevent students from learning, an individual from finding their next great job opportunity, or a parent from earning income their family really needs.

However, some municipalities are beginning to make meaningful progress and focus on closing the digital divide. Philadelphia has launched several digital equity programs and has even hired a digital equity fellow who will be dedicated full time to this work. King County has collaborated with community and private partners to expand digital access, and San Mateo County has used its library system to better serve disenfranchised groups in its local area.

Hannah says, the "the time to act is now" for state and local governments, and that closing the digital divide will require a comprehensive, integrated strategy that narrows this gap and doesn't further widen it.

"This is something that needs to be done holistically to make sure you're meeting all of the needs of all of your constituents and not just implementing new technology, because there's a lot more that goes into digital literacy, the digital divide, and digital equity besides just the technology."

1. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/01/covid-digital-divide-learning-education/
2. https://www.epi.org/blog/access-to-online-learning-amid-coronavirus-and-digital-divide/
3. https://www.phila.gov/2019-01-10-six-things-you-can-do-at-our-public-computing-centers/
4. https://www.urbanlibraries.org/innovations/wifi-hotspots-bring-the-internet-home

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