

## Supporting Digital Navigators for Community Development:

### An Approach from Rural LISC and the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)

As more of our daily activities move online – work, school and medical visits to retail, civic and social interactions – a reliable and affordable home broadband internet connection, an appropriate device, and the skills to use them are now understood to be necessary.

But for many Americans, this necessity remains out of reach. Rural residents, older adults, racial minorities and those with lower levels of education are less likely to have broadband service at home – including forty-four percent of low-income households in the U.S. [1] Yet a recent study found that even when presented with information about low-cost home internet options, low-income households are not adopting broadband. [2]

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, public access computers in places like libraries were available for activities like job search assistance, often with the guidance of library staff committed to digital inclusion. For the foreseeable future, learners seeking to accomplish digital tasks will need to be supported at home.

Left on the other side of the digital divide, American families cannot sufficiently access education or employment opportunities, essential services or information. For low-income households in particular, **there is simply not enough digital support woven into the social safety net.**

# RURAL LISC

## Adapting Digital Inclusion for Community-Based Nonprofits

The Rural LISC and NDIA Digital Navigator model is designed to respond to the immediate and long-term need for ubiquitous broadband and digital literacy in Rural America. Digital Navigators are connectors and coaches, and typically already work in roles involving case management or other client-facing services.

By assessing access to technology and appropriate digital skills, advising on free or affordable home internet service options and sources of affordable computers or other internet-connected devices for which they may qualify, Digital Navigators help their clients more fully participate in their communities, the economy and society – during the pandemic and into the future.

Rural LISC is piloting the Digital Navigator model with nine sites in Appalachia, helping extend the NDIA network beyond traditional digital inclusion collaborators such as libraries and urban municipal governments.

By adding a “technology layer” to the services Community Action Agencies, Financial Opportunity Centers, affordable housing organizations and human services agencies already provide, Rural LISC is building a targeted approach to increase digital equity in the places most in need.



# RURAL LISC

As the program evolves, Rural LISC looks to support Digital Navigators and their agencies in advocating for equitable digital access through universal broadband. Digital Navigators could assist with retrieving and analyzing community-level broadband adoption data, helping amplify digital divide challenges and the partnerships needed for more pronounced investment.

The following organizations have partnered with Rural LISC to develop and deliver the Digital Navigator model:

## **Community Action Agencies**

CAAs in the Rural LISC Appalachia pilot support clients with online job search, unemployment insurance registration assistance, senior-citizen social and health services, and nutrition services, on-site and at home.

## **Multi-Family Affordable Housing Developers**

Affordable housers, including those that offer wraparound services, use the Digital Navigator program to support online tenant/landlord transactions and communications, resident meetings, and in-house social service and education programs.

## **Health Providers**

Digital Navigators working in healthcare settings help clients use digital health tools such as patient portals, remote monitors like internet-connected blood pressure cuffs, and other health applications or sensors.

## **Financial Opportunity Centers**

Financial literacy coaches at LISC-affiliated FOCs cross-train as Digital Navigators to support clients with skills to manage money safely using digital tools. The digitization of financial services is increasingly viewed as a pathway to promote financial inclusion, when the learning promotes an awareness of risk and privacy.

## Community-Based Organizations

A volunteer fire service and a cultural heritage organization, two of the Appalachia Digital Navigator pilot sites, illustrate that any deeply-anchored community organization is an ally in the effort to increase productive digital participation for all. Digital Navigators will typically be cross-trained individuals who become recognizable sources of information in their communities.

[1] Who Has Home Broadband? Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>

[2] Levine, L. (2020), "Broadband adoption in urban and suburban California: Information-based outreach programs ineffective at closing the digital divide. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics In Society*.

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