

Community-Based Solutions for Digital Advancement

Findings from the Digital Integrators Pilot Program

**CENTRI
TECH
FOUNDATION**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In April 2022, Centri Tech Foundation (CTF) launched the Digital Integrators Pilot Program to foster community-led innovations in digital equity. The foundation awarded more than \$195,000 to community development organizations working to connect digital skills to equitable economic development. Our aim was to highlight community-based approaches for digital advancement that could inform local digital equity planning efforts.

Five organizations formed the program's inaugural cohort: **Equitable Internet Initiative**, Detroit, Michigan; **ExCITe Center at Drexel University**, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; **LIFT-NY**, Bronx, New York; **Metropolitan Area Planning Council**, Boston, Massachusetts; and **Byte Back**, Washington, DC. The grantees participated in an independent qualitative program assessment, a national cohort experience, and an online peer exchange.

The program marked CTF's first on-the-ground initiative to promote digital advancement, a new mindset to leverage investments in digital access and adoption to promote economic justice in the digital economy. The Digital Integrators grantees' pilot projects demonstrate how community organizations can leverage broadband access and adoption to improve and modernize workforce development and economic mobility programs. From deploying affordable broadband networks and

connecting residents across public housing in the Greater Boston area, to building a pipeline for digital workforce development in Detroit, to modeling a 2-generation approach to digital skills learning for families in Washington, DC, the Digital Integrators grantees tackled a spectrum of challenges that cities face in the promotion of digital advancement.

Program Evaluation

The Digital Integrators Pilot Program was evaluated in partnership with **Dr. Colin Rhinesmith**, Founder and Director of the Digital Equity Research Center and Senior Fellow at the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society. We are proud to share the findings and insights from that study in the report, *Community-Based Solutions for Digital Advancements: Findings from the Digital Integrators Pilot Program*.

Rhinesmith applied a digital equity ecosystems framework to gain a deeper understanding of the role Digital Integrators play in promoting digital advancement in their communities with other organizations and individuals. Through interviews with directors and staff members of the organizations and observations of grantee cohort meetings, Rhinesmith identified three essential success factors and lessons learned. These are presented together as a community development framework for digital advancement.

Community Development Framework for Digital Advancement

Meaningful Community Engagement	Intentional Community Partnerships	Strong Community Relationships
Digital Integrators center community members in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs to ensure their needs and aspirations are considered	Digital Integrators listen to the needs and aspirations of their community partners and, in response, develop mutually beneficial partnerships that advance common goals.	Digital Integrators center the “entire person” in their support of community members, as they work together to achieve digital advancement.

Recommendations

To promote digital advancement, we recommend the following actions for stakeholders –

1. Community-Based Organizations

Apply the Community Development Framework for Digital Advancement to local digital equity and inclusion efforts. Community groups can use the tool to guide program design, implementation and evaluation; partnership development and pursuit of common goals; and resident engagement that centers the “entire person.”

2. Intermediary Organizations

Provide strategic support for community organizations to design and adapt programs toward digital advancement. Intermediaries, such as regional planning councils and national organizations, can leverage resources, knowledge, and networks to strengthen local capacity, facilitate collaboration and peer exchange, and foster innovation.

3. Philanthropy

Support the development of digital equity ecosystems to enable effective collaboration and community engagement. Funders can invest in local solutions for digital access and programs for devices, tools, and skills. They can also fund digital equity planning and help communities meet federal matching requirements. Funders can seed program innovation, support local coordination, and invest in digital equity leaders.

4. Government

Leaders who are engaged in digital equity planning for federal investment opportunities, such as the Digital Equity Act, can begin by embracing digital advancement as a mindset for social impact. Local, state, and federal policymakers can collaborate with communities to identify barriers to equitable broadband access and adoption and co-design long-term strategies for promoting digital advancement.