FULL CASE STUDY: DIGITAL EQUITY COUNCIL

> "Go to where people are at and teach them based on where they are. Go to churches, go to their block club. Go into the senior buildings and meet with them! Show them in person what to do."
>
> *- Auburn Gresham Digital Equity Council participant*

TITLE: Digital Equity Council

POLICY AREA: Community Development, Education/Workforce, Housing, Technology, City Services

TEAM MEMBERS: Office of Equity and Racial Justice (OERJ), Chief Financial Officer Team (CFO), Mayor's Office Policy Team, Digital Equity Council, Philanthropic partners, federal government

Problem Statement

"The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not" (NTIA). Lack of these digital resources creates further inequities in accessing health, education, jobs, and participation in civic life (such as registering to vote and engaging with essential city services). In the ten least connected neighborhoods in Chicago, 72% of community members are Black and 25% are Hispanic.

Reflection Questions

• How can we work together to achieve digital equity?

• How do we break down barriers for those most impacted by low-quality internet, lack of devices, and lack of tech skills?

• How can we coordinate departments to work together effectively?

• How do we center residents most impacted by the problem?

REFLECT ON OUR PAST

Access to the Internet is as essential to daily life as electricity or water, but it is not a utility and is therefore an unregulated service. Oversight is minimal and only happens at the federal level, leaving tens of thousands of Chicagoans at the mercy of major internet companies. Before the pandemic, digital equity was low on the city policy agenda (both from the government and community perspective). As Kids First Chicago noted in their April 2020 report highlighting that 1 in 5 CPS children lacked home-based internet, **"The COVID-19 pandemic has not made the internet indispensable – it has revealed that it always was."**

In mid-March 2020, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) sent students home due to the pandemic and had to quickly set up a remote learning structure. Unfortunately given inequitable access to home-based internet, many Black and Latinx low-income families did not have access to internet and thus their children could not attend school. To stem the immediate crisis, a public-private coalition created Chicago Connected, a $50M 4-year partnership between Mayor Lightfoot, Chicago Public Schools, Kids First Chicago, 10 philanthropic donors, 20+ community partners, and three internet service providers to expand K-12 broadband access. In its first two years, the program connected 60,000 households, or approximately 100,000 students, to at-home broadband. While this program was successful, it was not addressing the root cause of the internet access gap.

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RECLAIM OUR PRESENT

"[The Digital Equity Council] did a wonderful job creating this community with very diverse individuals with different backgrounds, levels of education, and fields...We did not leave anyone out, from little kids to older adults, in the need to access appropriate Wi-Fi connection, devices, and digital education. A subject like digital equity needs the point of view of members of the community who have experience firsthand of the barriers and challenges in this quickly changing society. Seeing how much inequity exists with a service so essential makes me realize how important this work the City is doing is."

- Karina Aguilar, Belmont Cragin Parent,
and a member of the Digital Equity Council Guiding Team

The success of Chicago Connected led to a demand to expand the city's broadband work to all Chicagoans. Therefore, the City launched the Digital Equity Council (DEC) in May 2022. **The DEC is a cross-sector group of community members most burdened by the digital divide and organizations committed to eliminating digital inequities.** Through months-long on-the-ground community engagement, the DEC surfaced nuanced barriers to digital equity, identified work already happening within communities, and co-created community-driven recommendations for Chicago. Each member of the DEC contributed significant time and energy to get the word out about the effort and helped ensure all community conversations were well-attended by our target audience. Everything from location to recruitment to content to facilitation was shared among DEC members, which led to high turnout at all events.

The DEC and the Mayor's Office released the Chicago Digital Equity Plan in January 2023, which summarizes our approach, findings, and recommendations to achieve digital equity in Chicago. Recommendations are categorized into four themes (affordability, technical, digital literacy, and consumer experience) and then further categorized into Governance and Coalition Building, Internet, and Devices and Digital Learning.

Throughout this effort, the priority has been on a co-designed and co-led model with the government and the community members most impacted. This co-design process is messy but ultimately builds a stronger outcome. For example, community members pushed us to do more community conversations which delayed the publication of the Digital Equity Plan. Ultimately, although this pushed publication into the middle of the election cycle, government leaders trusted their community partners that this would be best. True to their word, the community partners remained steadfast supporters of the effort and the issue did not get caught up in politics.

REIMAGINE OUR FUTURE

Chicago has committed $36 million to support high-speed internet in the least connected neighborhoods and in public areas such as park district field houses. The City is now poised to implement many of the recommendations in the report. The City just submitted its application for state funding to increase high-speed internet in one of the least connected areas of the city— Greater Englewood. If successful, the city will be able to increase reliable connections in this neighborhood that has nearly 1 in 3 residents without high-speed home-based internet.

Beyond the funds, this effort has galvanized a diverse, motivated coalition into pushing for policy change around the digital divide. Broadband access is included in the city's new We Will Chicago plan and has started to be highlighted in civic tech spaces such as ChiHackNight. The multi-year coalition between community and government partners was essential to the rise of this issue on the agenda. **Now there are dedicated funding streams and partnerships in place to bring high-speed internet, digital skills training, and devices to the neighborhoods most in need.**

Crises can be moments of decline or opportunity. In the case of digital equity, there was a moment the digital redlining could have hampered all recovery efforts. Instead, the deep partnerships and commitment from players across sectors and across the city led to one of the most robust digital equity endeavors in the entire nation and a permanent coalition to champion progress.

OERJ HEALING INSIGHTS

- **Center community voices in the design and implementation** – Ensuring community voices are part of each step of the process is essential for success. DEC did an excellent job of balancing in-depth small conversations with the most impacted people and a widespread citywide survey. DEC also effectively leveraged its leadership councils in executing far more focus groups in impacted neighborhoods than the government team could have alone.

- **Effective co-design requires resources** – Much of the DEC work was able to happen due to philanthropic partnerships. Some of these resources are significant, such as a dedicated project manager to organize and communicate with external guides. Others, such as having food at community conversations, parking, and color copies of resource guides, are actually key to making residents feel valued.

- **Education and awareness is essential** - Particularly in complex policy areas like those involving technology, ensuring partners have the tools, resources, and knowledge they need to be fully active participants is key to success. For example, many community members in DEC focus groups had no idea there was a federal program that could give them access to free monthly internet. If we had not built in that education while we had community conversations, they would have missed out on a significant opportunity to improve their immediate lives.

- **Healing is not just a local issue** - you sometimes have to think about state and federal intersections and should be aware of how these impact residents.

LEARN MORE AT

http://chicago.gov/digitalequity

Digital Equity Council in North Lawndale neighborhood, Chicago