



Commentary on Digital Literacy in the Richmond Region

by

Digital Divide Immersion Team 2022

Jason Ancarrow, Lorraine Blackwell, Jess Burgess, Bentley Chan, Steve Gaidos,
Robin Jones, Jennifer Kell, Daniel Obrien, Matt Scaparro, Carolyn Sears

Introduction

The Digital Divide is a broad term that captures the growing gaps in access, knowledge and skills experienced by Richmond area citizens who lack technological resources and the opportunities those resources provide. Access to internet infrastructure, like broadband, in the Richmond region is actually quite good, including 97% in the City, 99% in Henrico, 99% in Chesterfield, and 91% in Hanover. Affordability is certainly a challenge, especially for lower-income communities with between 9% and 11% of students in the region lacking household internet service. Digging in further, researchers are finding that, even with access, many people either lack basic skills or have difficulty finding help accessing available technology.

Digital literacy more acutely impacts disadvantaged groups across age and ethnicity, disabilities, English language capabilities, and other regional populations who may have access to technology but have barriers understanding it. Our research, therefore, focused on digital literacy as it relates to the Digital Divide in the region. The American Library Association's digital-literacy task force offers this definition:

Digital literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.

More simply, Hiller Spires, a professor of literacy and technology at North Carolina State University, views digital literacy as having three buckets: 1) finding and consuming digital content; 2) creating digital content; and 3) communicating or sharing it.

Obstacles to achieving digital literacy can impact a community's ability to seek basic human services, perform well in school, seek and compete for employment, and achieve the same quality-of-life as other communities not facing these issues. According to the Brookings Institute, "Put simply, people not online still face

systemic societal inequalities, only this time within new systems and applications like telehealth, online vaccination scheduling, or online job applications. All while still relegated to second-class, digital citizenship.”

Findings

In our interview with Tamarah Holmes, Director of Broadband at DHCD Interview, she noted “Digital literacy is an issue that needs to be addressed - affordability affects this - and why organizations like, the Library of Virginia and other local libraries, are so important because they have components [of their programming] that focus on digital literacy.”

Annette Cousins, Vice President, Community Engagement at The Community Foundation for a Greater Richmond, noted during our interview that “individuals that need assistance with digital literacy components are having to go to multiple places to source for help, including libraries, banks, and community centers. There is no one place to find the help you need.”

Solutions to the Digital Divide tend to focus on infrastructure needs, including internet access, networking gear, and computers. Those are key ingredients of the solution, but communities are unable to maximize the return on these investments if not accompanied by a focus on literacy at the individual level - how to connect to the internet, how to use a computer to access the internet, and how to use everyday tools, applications and productivity tools at school, at home, or in the workplace. The focus of the recommendations includes access, training, infrastructure and services that contribute to digital literacy across various demographics and community dynamics.

Recommendations & Call to Action

To bring to life the Digital Literacy challenges facing communities, a series of amalgamated personal profiles were created that highlight successes and opportunities for improvement of Digital Literacy across the Richmond region. Although the profiles are not real people, they represent real world problems faced in our communities. These profiles will form the basis of the video content and reinforce a call-to-action to close the gap on digital literacy in local communities.

The interviews with experts and additional research reinforced the case for our recommendation to form a collaborative coalition of community organizations to create a comprehensive solution to combat the challenges associated with Digital Literacy. Future analysis should be conducted to understand the literacy gaps of the community and those gaps addressed with literacy training requirements to take advantage of the technology resources that will be provided.

The 80/20 rule should be applied with a goal of addressing the literacy needs of 80% of the population in a target community with broad programs while providing specialized, more individualized programs for the remaining 20% that may have unique or special needs. This can be done in part by state and federal government programs and private sector aid organizations focusing on the digital literacy divide.

Finally, a low-effort endeavor that would likely have an immediate impact is the development of a central resource list for communities that would list out tools and programs that already exist to help close the gap on digital divide across demographic needs. This resource should be shared with organizations that are close to the impacted communities and with the communities themselves.