TO:	Daniel Key, Information Technology Department Director
FROM:	David Nash-Mendez, Senior Management Fellow *DNM*
SUBJECT:	Digital Equity Initiative Focus Group Report
DATE:	August 16, 2018

Summary

At the request of the Information Technology Department Director, staff is providing a final report on the Digital Equity Initiative focus groups. This report outlines the background and methodology of the focus groups, summarizes the results of the individual focus groups, provides an analysis of the findings, and recommends potential actions and programs which would advance Digital Equity in Tacoma. Key findings include:

- All focus groups identified a strong need for fast, reliable, publicly accessible Wi-Fi in places like clinics, courthouses, community centers, schools, and shelters where they interact with any level of government or receive services.

- The majority of focus group participants indicated that they primarily use their phones for web access but face significant barriers in accessing public computers in situations where a full desktop operating system is required.

- All focus groups recognized the importance of digital literacy for employment, education, connectivity, and accessing services. They specifically identified low awareness of available trainings, the price of tuition of participation fees, and inaccessible class times as barriers to becoming more digitally literate.

- All focus groups identified a strong preference for accessing the internet or receiving digital literacy training at comfortable and familiar places like churches, non-profits, and schools.

Background

Information Technology Department (ITD) established its Digital Equity program in 2016 as a direct outcome of the City Council's strategic planning efforts. Based on their concern about a "digital divide[1]" in Tacoma, ITD conducted a community needs assessment to better understand the needs of residents relating to internet access and use of technology. The Community Technology Use Survey found that,

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[1] "Digital Divide" is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the problem of some members of society not having the opportunity or knowledge to use computers and the internet that others have"

while individual residents across the City face barriers accessing the internet, and Latinx[2] residents and residents of the Hilltop experience statistically significant disparities accessing and using the internet.

Based on the findings of the survey, ITD developed the following goals for the Digital Equity initiative:

- **Public Internet Access**: Residents of Tacoma have access to publicly accessible Wi-Fi, kiosks, workstations, etc. in places that are convenient and accessible.
- **Home Internet Access:** Residents of Tacoma have access to high-speed internet services in their place of residence at a price that is affordable for their level of income and have the hardware necessary to access the internet in the form of desktops, laptops, tablets, phones, etc.
- **Digital Literacy:** Residents of Tacoma have access to programs and information on how to use computers and the internet to achieve their goals, whether in workforce readiness, communication, access to information and services, safety and security online, or otherwise.

In order to design an equity program truly responsive to the needs of those experiencing the digital divide, ITD partnered with local organizations to host focus group sessions with individuals from the respective communities. Staff further expanded the scope of the focus groups beyond the Latinx and Hilltop communities to include the voices of those that were not captured in the original survey due to survey design, including other immigrant communities and Tacomans experiencing homelessness.

Methodology

When designing the structure of the focus groups, staff made a deliberate effort to reduce the impact of known response biases that often arise when interviewing traditionally marginalized communities. Working with organizations with strong connections to their respective communities, staff developed a questionnaire to guide facilitators through discussions around public internet access, home internet access, and digital literacy. Partner organizations vetted these questions for cultural sensitivity and translated as necessary. Partners provided participants with food, childcare, transportation vouchers, and a participation incentive. Facilitators recruited 14 to 16 participants per group, with an emphasis representing the diversity within the communities. Facilitators chose a format, time, and location for the focus groups that responded to the needs of the respective communities. This flexibility in facilitation

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[2] 'Latinx' is a gender-neutral word for people of Latin American descent.

occasionally resulted in incomplete answers and disparities in the detail of response. Finally, facilitators chose whether City staff would attend the focus groups.

Staff coordinated with Jason Scales of Tacoma Community House to facilitate focus groups held in Russian & Ukrainian, Spanish, and Vietnamese. To include the voices of Tacomans experiencing homelessness, staff worked with Bailey Meade of Catholic Community Services at Nativity House. Finally, staff partnered with Brendan Nelson at Peace Lutheran Church to include residents of the Hilltop in focus groups held at Peace Community Center, McCarver Elementary, Brotherhood Christian Church, and the McCarver Housing Project. In all, partner organizations facilitated nine focus groups.

Staff had endeavored to host a Korean focus group, a Cambodian focus group, and a focus group of families experiencing homelessness, but was prevented in doing so due to challenges in recruiting members of these communities and due to capacity constraints of partner organizations. While service providers familiar with these communities share that the findings of the other focus groups largely apply to these communities as well, future focus groups are recommended when capacity allows.

Focus Group Results
1. **Spanish Language Group at Tacoma Community House**
   a. Home Access: Participants shared that they primarily accessed the internet through their cellphones. Some participants had high speed internet at home, but the majority did not, citing cost of services as a barrier. Many participants were ineligible for low-cost internet services which require subscribers to receive public benefits or have children who receive free/reduced price lunches at school.
   b. Public Access: Participants shared that they want fast, reliable, and accessible Wi-Fi in places where they already needed to be, such as bus stops, laundromats, Sea Mar Community Health Centers, and Tacoma Community House. Participants highlighted the need for publicly accessible Wi-Fi in health care facilities and courthouses so that they could safely navigate these systems which carry a high risk for non-compliance. Participants acknowledged that public computers with a desktop operating system (OS) are vital for activities which cannot be performed on a phone, such as applying for jobs or monitoring academic progress, and suggested the City work to expand accessibility to public computers.

c. Digital Literacy: Participants shared a high interest in expanding their digital literacy, especially related to their needs of being able to securely save and access important paperwork in the cloud, keep their families safe online, use online banking, and access government services provided online. They specifically mentioned language and scheduling as barriers to accessing digital literacy trainings, encouraging the City to support access in Spanish and at different times of the day. They preferred receiving training at places they trust, like Tacoma Community House or at the schools their children attend.

2. **Ukrainian and Russian Language Group at Tacoma Community House**

   a. Home Access: Participants had varying levels of home access to high speed internet, identifying both cost of hardware and cost of service as barriers. Tablets were identified as a preferred medium for home internet access.

   b. Public Access: Participants had a wider availability of access to Wi-Fi in public places than other groups, citing locations like shops and cafes where they often went to access the internet. They cited the need for publicly accessible Wi-Fi to be convenient and close to their homes for it to be useful.

   c. Digital Literacy: Participants identified a high interest in digital literacy training, with the majority sharing that they did not use a computer as much as they would want because of unfamiliarity with certain features or programs. They recommended greater advertising of programs and trainings offered in the community.

3. **Vietnamese Language Group at Tacoma Community House**

   a. Home Access: Participants had varying degrees of access to laptops and tablets, but all participants had smart phones that they used to access the internet.

   b. Public Access: Participants highlighted the importance of having internet access while shopping to enable price comparisons and identified schools and places where they receive services as important places to have internet access.

   c. Digital Literacy: All of the participants had received digital literacy training in their mother tongue and felt comfortable using the internet for communication and entertainment, though some identified a desire to learn to use office productivity software like spreadsheets and word processors. They identified a preference for learning through their existing networks and at places they receive services, like Tacoma Community House.

4. **Hilltop Group 1 at Peace Community Center**

   a. Home Access: Not one of the participants had home high speed internet, accessing the internet through data plans on smartphones instead. Participants identified the ongoing service cost as a barrier to home internet access, but also shared their experiences with expensive overages on cell phone data plans.

   b. Public Access: All of the participants identified publicly accessible Wi-Fi as crucial to maintaining their access to the internet, allowing them to minimize their cell phone data use and prevent costly data overages. Participants expressed concern that locations of a business in the Hilltop did not offer public Wi-Fi while public Wi-Fi was offered at other locations of that business in Tacoma. Participants identified the necessity of computer and Wi-Fi availability for families with children in school.

   c. Digital Literacy: All of the participants identified themselves as having very limited typing skills and half of the participants were open to some sort of digital literacy training.

5. **Hilltop Group 2 at McCarver Elementary, including parents of Jason Lee**

   a. Home Access: Most of the participants in this group had tablets or laptops at home and had high speed internet at home. Those without high-speed cited cost as the primary barrier. Some participants without home high-speed used their phones as hotspots to access the internet on their laptop or tablet. Those with computers at home still identified printer access as a barrier and often had to print at school or work.

   b. Public Access: Participants suggested that publicly accessible Wi-Fi be available throughout the Hilltop because of the amount of low-income individuals and families. They encouraged the City to provide refurbished laptops and computers to organizations to be made available for public acess.

   c. Digital Literacy: While the group did not mention specific digital literacy needs, they encouraged the City to work with small organizations to provide computer-training classes to parents in the community.

6. **Hilltop Group 3 at Brotherhood Church**

   a. Home Access: The vast majority of participants did not have laptops or tablets at home, accessing the internet primarily through their phones. Fewer than half had high-speed internet at home, relying instead on cell phone data.

    b. Public Access: The participants expressed a strong interest in being able to provide publicly accessible Wi-Fi and computer resources at their Church to help people in accessing employment or housing. They believed that there should be programs to allow even low revenue businesses on the Hilltop to offer publicly accessible Wi-Fi and were bothered that grocery stores on the Hilltop did not have publicly accessible Wi-Fi while stores of the same chain in other parts of town did have Wi-Fi.

    c. Digital Literacy: Participants were primarily older residents of the Hilltop and expressed interest in taking digital literacy training if it were offered at a church or another trusted community space. Participants expressed the importance of collaborating with community partners to expand access to literacy training instead of relying solely on the libraries.

7. **Hilltop Group 4 at McCarver Housing Project**

    a. Home Access: None of the participants had high-speed internet or computers at home, citing cost as the primary factor. Most of the participants used pre-paid phone services that limited their ability to use data plans on their phone to access the internet. Participants identified that these barriers limited their ability to pursue employment or education.

    b. Public Access: Participants expressed a strong preference for having internet access at home rather than in public places as many low-income people have limited access to transportation, creating barriers to access and use.

    c. Digital Literacy: Participants suggested that the City work with the Housing Authority to provide computers and training to residents and that this program should be free.

8. **Tacomans Experiencing Homelessness Group 1 at Nativity House**

    a. Public Access: As all participants in this group were experiencing homelessness, all of their access was of a public nature. Though most had smartphones, very few had data plans and all expressed challenges in keeping their devices charged. Participants encouraged institutions like Tacoma Community College and the University of Washington - Tacoma to make their computer labs available to the public, as school environments were much more motivational and encouraging than those of public libraries or government agencies where public computers are available. Participants expressed the challenges of completing certain tasks during the time limits on library computers, as job applications or benefits paperwork often took longer than an hour to

finish. Participants shared that transportation constraints often limited them from accessing computers or Wi-Fi at locations without time limits. Finally, they expressed a preference for accessing Wi-Fi in places they already receive other services, such as Nativity House.

  b. Digital Literacy: Participants expressed a lack of awareness of digital literacy trainings, despite their interest in learning more. They encouraged the development of programs where people could take digital literacy trainings and then be provided access to computer labs at UWT and TCC. They emphasized the importance of a welcoming environment in which to receive trainings.

9. **Tacoma Experiencing Homelessness Group 2 at Nativity House**

  a. Public Access: As participants were all experiencing homelessness, all of their access was of a public nature. Most participants had phones or other portable devices they could use to access publicly accessible Wi-Fi, though charging was frequently a challenge. Participants emphasized the importance of having greater accessibility to public computers and for these terminals to have sessions longer than one hour each. One of the participants was a Domestic Violence survivor and shared the difficulty of navigating resources and tracking the court system within the time constraints of currently available public terminals. Participants urged the City to provide publicly accessible Wi-Fi in shelters, health centers, parks, and community centers to increase access.

  b. Digital Literacy: Group 2 did not discuss digital literacy.

Analysis

Considered together, strong commonalities emerge between the needs of different groups facing barriers to internet access. However, the differences between the groups highlights the importance of working with community partners to meet the needs of those experiencing the digital divide.

All focus group participants identified a strong need for more accessible computer access and Wi-Fi access. All groups voiced frustration with the time limits and limited hours of publicly available computers and the weak signals of publicly accessible Wi-Fi, voicing a strong preference for robust and reliable public Wi-Fi in places such as health centers, grocery stores, and places they receive public services. They wished for accessible computers with a desktop OS in comfortable and familiar places like churches, non-profits, and schools.

Hilltop residents highlighted the disparity of grocery stores on the Hilltop having locked Wi-Fi while locations of the same company elsewhere in Tacoma have unlocked Wi-Fi. The immigrant and refugee communities called for public Wi-Fi at the courthouse and healthcare facilities so they can use online translation services to ensure they are correctly navigating the two systems. Clients of Nativity House shared the daily challenge of keeping their Wi-Fi enabled devices charged and in completing job applications within the one-hour window allowed at the Tacoma Public Libraries.

The majority of focus group participants identified that they primarily accessed the internet on their phones, identifying that the monthly cost of access was as much of a barrier as the upfront cost of the equipment. The immigrant and refugee communities shared that undocumented members of their community often did not qualify for reduced cost home internet service because qualifications for these services are based upon participation in government programs which are restricted to US Citizens. Residents of the Hilltop all expressed a preference for home high-speed internet but shared it was often difficult to justify the additional cost since they are already paying for internet on their phones.

All of the focus groups identified desires to become more digitally literate, expressing the importance of digital literacy for employment, education, connectivity, and accessing services. However all groups identified barriers to accessing training and highlighted a need for training in familiar and comfortable environments. Immigrant and refugee communities expressed an additional barrier to accessing digital literacy trainings because most classes are only accessible in English. Clients of Nativity House expressed that their low levels of familiarity with computers make it especially difficult to access government services within the time constraints set on public terminals. Residents of the Hilltop requested classes at their churches or neighborhood centers.

Recommendations

Based on the needs expressed by participants of the focus groups, staff created preliminary recommendations for programs or actions that Information Technology Department or other City of Tacoma departments could build or perform that would advance Digital Equity in Tacoma.

- Expand publicly accessible Wi-Fi access in Tacoma: potential avenues to explore include encouraging ISPs to provide free or low-cost internet access to human service providers in Tacoma,

partnering with MetroParks and Pierce Transit to provide City-provided Wi-Fi in public parks and transit locations, and working with Anchor Institutions like schools and hospitals to provide publicly accessible Wi-Fi in their facilities.

- Expand home high-speed access in Tacoma: potential avenues to explore include encouraging ISPs to provide more accessible low-income high-speed internet options for those without school-age children or those not receiving/eligible to receiving housing subsidies, and providing mobile Wi-Fi hotspots for check-out at libraries.

- Expand public computer access in Tacoma: potential avenues include providing surplus computers to refurbishers who would deliver refurbished computers with a desktop OS to community organizations and faith communities to provide access in their establishments, and working with Tacoma Public Schools, Tacoma Community College, Bates Technical College and the University of Washington - Tacoma to expand community access to computer labs.

- Expand home computer access in Tacoma: potential avenues include working with Anchor Institutions to include their surplus devices in the City's refurbished computer program, allowing for distribution of refurbished to qualified individuals in addition to the community partners included in the scope of the City's current program.

- Expand digital literacy in Tacoma: potential avenues including advertising existing resources in places like libraries schools, service providers, etc. and asking that community partners receiving refurbished computers from the City use the computers to provide digital literacy training.

The City of Tacoma has a number of ways that it can use its position within the community to expand access to computers, the internet, and digital literacy training to bridge the digital divide in Tacoma. The Digital Equity Focus Groups showed that Tacoma already has a wealth of community organizations, anchor institutions, and service providers who are familiar and accessible to those experiencing disparities in access. A successful Digital Equity program will work with these organizations to increase access to the internet and technology and further Digital Equity in Tacoma.