Connecting Digital Inclusion and Civic Engagement

PROGRAM PROFILES

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Introduction

Many different communities across the country are connecting broadband access, digital equity, and civic engagement efforts in innovative ways. In some places, organizations are developing and using local civic networks to build community connections and increase digital literacy. Other groups are incorporating conversations about civic engagement and opportunities engage into educational materials or confidence-building conversations.

As part of CIRCLE's work on broadband access and democracy with the Digital Equity and Opportunity Initiative, we have had opportunities to learn about and engage with several of these programs, learn from their efforts, and understand how they bridging gaps between connectivity and community. Below, we present brief profiles of six programs, with highlights that inform efforts by other organizations and communities.

As you read these program descriptions, we encourage you to consider how each organization is using different media, digital, and community assets to overcome challenges and support both digital equity and civic action. That is the focus of <u>CIRCLE's work on media ecosystems</u>, which demonstrates how broadband connectivity, local news outlets, nonprofits, and other features of a community can contribute to youth civic engagement—or hinder it when a community lacks these assets.

Program Profiles

The Detroit Community Technology Project

Location: Detroit, Michigan (Wayne County)
Community Type: Urban

Program Overview: The Detroit Community Technology Project has three main streams of work, each of which includes connections between digital inclusion and civic engagement. First, their Equitable Internet Initiative strives to increase broadband access throughout Detroit via community-governed local wireless networks. By collaborating with other community organizations, they seek to increase internet access, digital literacy, and neighborhood capacity for "community organizing, participation, collaboration, and resiliency."

Second, their Data Justice Program conducts programming to equip community members with information and resources to protect themselves from online surveillance. In 2020, this work included collaborations with other organizations to support communities that are historically underrepresented in the Census to understand how their data may be used.

Third, they have a comprehensive set of pedagogical tools for teaching about community technology which ensure that digital inclusion work is grounded in a community's experiences. Educational programs developed from these resources walk participants through identifying challenges and opportunities in their community and collaborating to understand community solutions, all of which are important civic skills.

Broadband Use: The project has connected over 150 homes. It also trains Digital Stewards across different Detroit neighborhoods in community organizing and wireless engineering. The Digital Stewards help demystify technology for their communities through community workshops and training, participatory design sessions, and network build-out and design. They help maximize existing structure to help support the development of digital skills and community organizing within their communities.

Program Highlights: Building on popular education pedagogies and the history of citizenship schools created during the Civil Rights movement, the Detroit Community Technology Project's digital inclusion work aims to help communities become producers of information, leaders, and organizers, transforming communities from being "consumers" relying on "experts." Within the Digital Stewards model, collaborative media & technology education gives communities the opportunity to engage in a learning process where they use all available resources, including their neighbors, to transform themselves as well as empower their own communities to seek change.

The Organization also hosts DiscoTechs, short for "Discovering Technology," a public technology fair that offers interactive, multimedia workshops to demystify technology concepts and empower community members to better their communities and build relationships. Participants learn how to do things like create flyers online; manage social media; create online surveys; find land for community trusts; and use, understand, and access open data.

Opportunities: The Detroit Community Technology Project has published an openly accessible Teaching Community Technology Handbook featuring a step-by-step guide to developing community rooted technology and curricula. The handbook features theories and methods by leaders like Grace Lee Boggs, Paulo Freire, Myles Horton and more, and takes readers through the history of popular education.

Cook County's Confidence Building Conversations

Location: Cook County, Illinois

Community Type: Urban

Overview: Through an extensive community engagement process, including both community conversations and surveys, Cook County leaders found that concern about threats online was a primary reason that community members weren't adopting internet. They believed addressing that concern, among other reasons for non-adoption, was just as important as expanding infrastructure. In order to address online safety concerns and gaps in digital skills, they made "Building Confidence" a cornerstone of their plan.

Alongside expanding digital literacy educational offerings from an array of community partners, their plan suggests conducting confidence-building conversations, with the hopes that they would further generate ideas for digital equity planners in the area. The plan offers a set of questions to facilitate such conversations, including some about civic engagement. Incorporating a discussion of civics into these confidence-building conversations highlights the inextricable link between civic information and the digital space, and the importance that digital equity planners keep in mind how their offerings can meet the concerns that community members have about civic information online.

Broadband Use: Broadband access is essential for teaching digital skills and digital literacy.

Program Highlights: Community members identified K-12 schools and libraries as important sites for digital literacy skill building and training for both adults and youth.

Educating for Democracy in the Digital Age (EDDA) at the Oakland Unified School District

Location: Oakland, California
Community Type: Urban

Program Overview: The EDDA initiative is a partnership between the Oakland Unified School District, the National Writing Project, and Mills College that provides civic action and digital literacy learning opportunities to high school students. The program worked with 40 teachers and seven high schools to develop curricular programming within the humanities that integrates civic learning, civic action, and digital literacy skills. By providing civic learning opportunities within the standard curriculum, students gain academic skills while also being exposed to models of civic engagement and political action.

Additionally, students involved in the initiative gain exposure to opportunities to work on issues they care about. In the program, students learn how to do productive online research on civic and political issues and determine the credibility of those sources. Some of these students are learning to identify issues and assets within their communities and developing plans to present to Oakland city officials. EDDA also provides models for high quality civic capstone projects for graduating seniors at participating schools and works to build a common understanding of what "community ready" graduates mean within the district. EDDA defines its goals as:

- Identify areas of the core curriculum from 9th – 12th grade where civic learning opportunities will expand and enhance students' knowledge, skills, and capacities
- Develop comprehensive plans at each high school that articulate the civic learning opportunities that will be provided to youth in a sequenced way culminating in a civic capstone project in senior year

- Build a common understanding of what it means to prepare students to be community ready through the district graduate profile
- Create models of high-quality civic capstone projects that teachers co-create, pilot, and refine for spread throughout the district

Broadband Use: The EDDA initiative leverages broadband in a number of ways. A core part of the curriculum is integrating internet and digital literacy skills into civic education. Students write for blogs, post opinion pieces, and raise awareness for important political issues on social media platforms. They learn how to conduct online on civic issues and many use broadband to complete capstone projects. For example, one student created a website with information on how to take action for the environment. Some students have also used the internet to create online surveys to reach a larger network of people while working on civics projects.

Program Highlights: Students find ways to engage civically and politically before they are able to vote. Their writing, infographics, and other information on social media allows them to express themselves and connect with others on topics important to them like safety, the environment, teen health, and teen employment. For example: one student created a blog on gender equality; two other students created a presentation on the educational divide to present to 5th graders. Additionally, students have mapped their communities' assets and deficits and developed plans to address community needs.

Opportunities: EDDA's website features replicable curricula on taking action, online research and blogging, democracy in action, and infographics for secondary school students.

Pan American Branch of the San Antonio Library

Location: San Antonio, Texas
Community Type: Urban

Program Overview: Texas's public libraries serve an important role in digital access and equity in the state. Many Texans' first interactions with the internet are at their local library, which often provides free access to internet and internet-capable devices. Some branches also provide digital navigation services; digital access is one of the strategic goals of The Texas State Library and Archive Commission.

At the Pan American Branch of the San Antonio Library, librarians teach digital skills to community members, like a class on misinformation online to small groups. The class emphasized how to fact check, the need to be skeptical and the political biases of news entities. The librarian also began teaching a class on internet safety dedicated to seniors using a packet from the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

Broadband Use: The library is an important site for many community members who have little access to broadband at home and therefore rely on the library for internet and computer access. Understanding this, the library assists community members who use the library for broadband on learning digital skills such as fact-checking online.

Immigrant Alliance for Justice and Equity - Comités Populares

Location: Delta region, Carthage, Laurel, Forrest, Morton, Utica, Crystal Springs, and Hazelhurst, Mississippi

Community Type: Rural

Program Overview: IAJE supports the work of Comités Populares, or Popular Committees, in six counties in Mississippi including the Delta region, Carthage, Laurel, Forest, Morton, Utica, Crystal Springs, and Hazelhurst. These committees are groups of concerned citizens who help spread information about immigrant rights, invest in leadership development, and educate their communities about important social and policy issues. These Comités Populares are based on a grassroots organizing model in which leadership development, social justice education and organizing are used as tools to empower and move communities forward.

Broadband Use: IAJE has leveraged Broadband by using WhatsApp to disseminate important information on health, education, and Mississippi politics. WhatsApp has also become an important tool for communication among both staff and community members, including as a way to publicize community meetings.

Opportunities: IAJE offers a form for those interested in starting their own Comités Populares

Unlocked Labs

Location: St. Louis, Missouri
Community Type: Urban

Program Overview: Unlocked Labs is an education program conducted in Missouri prisons focused on coding skills that are applicable to a career in technology, including front- and back-end web development and project management. Like many prison education programs, the long-term goals are to decrease recidivism and support employment, but research in collaboration with the Social Policy Institute showed that the intervention helped to maintain pro-social behaviors for students, while non-participants saw a decline in pro-social behaviors during the same period. Many of these pro-social behaviors overlap with civic behaviors, such as supporting others in need.

Broadband Use: Unlocked Labs emphasizes the importance of broadband access and teaches participants how to use the internet effectively to enhance their job search, connect with resources, and engage in online learning to prepare them for life in an increasingly connected society.

Opportunities: The Unlocked Labs program provides an opportunity for communities to advocate for increased broadband access within correctional facilities to ensure that all populations have the necessary connectivity to fully engage in digital literacy training.

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) is a non-partisan, independent research organization focused on youth civic engagement in the United States. We conduct extensive research on youth participation, and we leverage that research to improve opportunities for all young people to acquire and use the skills and knowledge they need to meaningfully participate in civic life. CIRCLE is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

Learn more at circle.tufts.edu