Digital Access for All Idahoans: City Survey

January 2023

Idaho Commission for Libraries

INSTITUTE of Museum and Library SERVICES

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2022, the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) sent an email survey to 201 Idaho mayors and city clerks asking them to provide information about digital access in their cities. Forty-seven (24%) of the cities responded. This report is a summary of the survey findings.

According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), digital inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies.

Original Email Language –

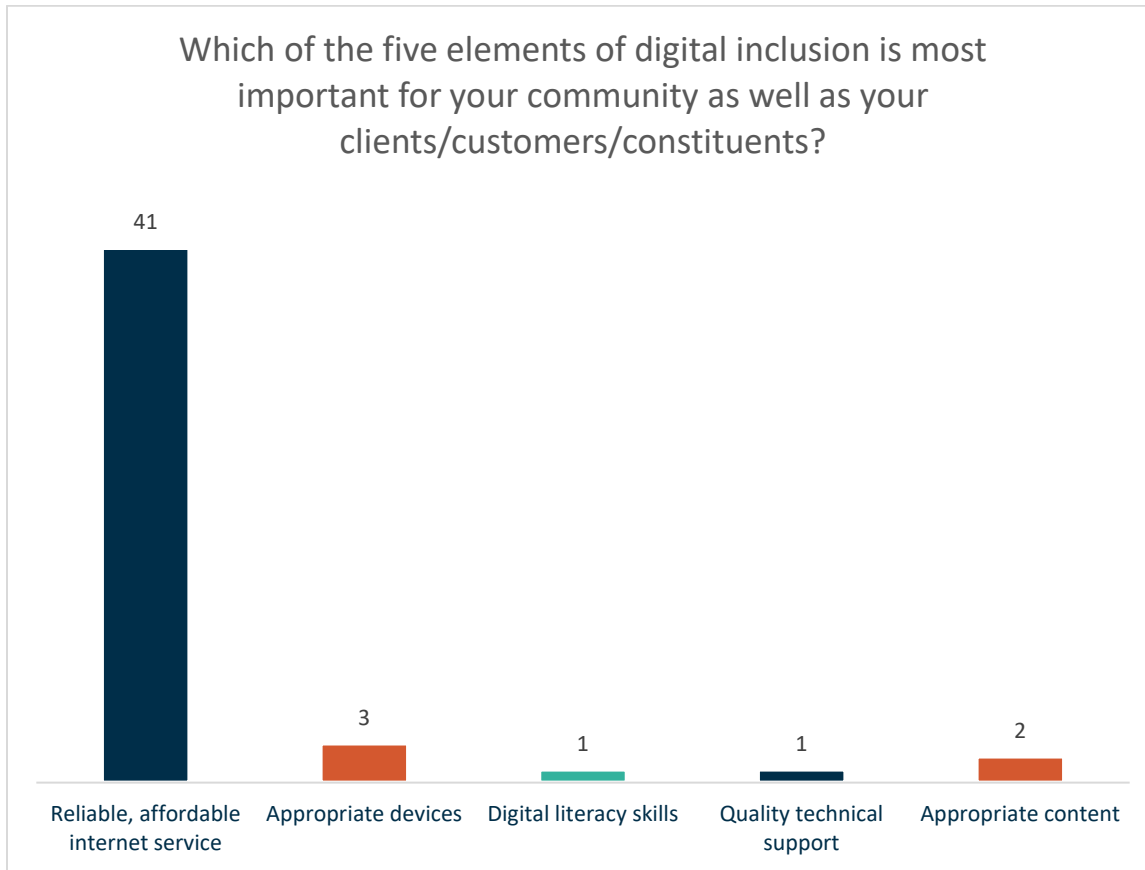Subject: We Need Your City's Input for Idaho's Digital Access Plan

Body:

Governor Little selected the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) to work with community partners in creating a digital access and inclusion plan for the state, as authorized and funded under Title III of the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act. In Idaho, we have named this plan "Digital Access for All Idahoans."

The first, and most crucial step in this process, is to identify the needs of Idahoans to inform a plan that addresses Idaho's unique challenges and opportunities. As part of that process, we are reaching out to all cities in Idaho to learn more about your communities and any efforts you may already be undertaking in creating digital access and inclusion in your city.

We are interested in hearing more about both the digital needs of the people you serve as well as the digital needs of your staff/organization in meeting your mission. Your input will help us identify and prioritize the needs of all Idahoans, which in turn will determine how Idaho plans for and implements funding made available through the recent infrastructure bill.

I have included an attachment with this email containing additional background information about the project. Additionally, we have created an online survey that we are asking each city to complete. It should take no more than 5-10 minutes of your time and will be instrumental in assisting us with learning more about your community and how our digital access and inclusion effort could directly benefit your citizens and staff. You can complete that survey here: Digital Access for All Idahoans - City Survey (jotform.com)

FIVE ELEMENTS OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

Which of the five elements of digital inclusion is most important for your community as well as your clients/customers/constituents?

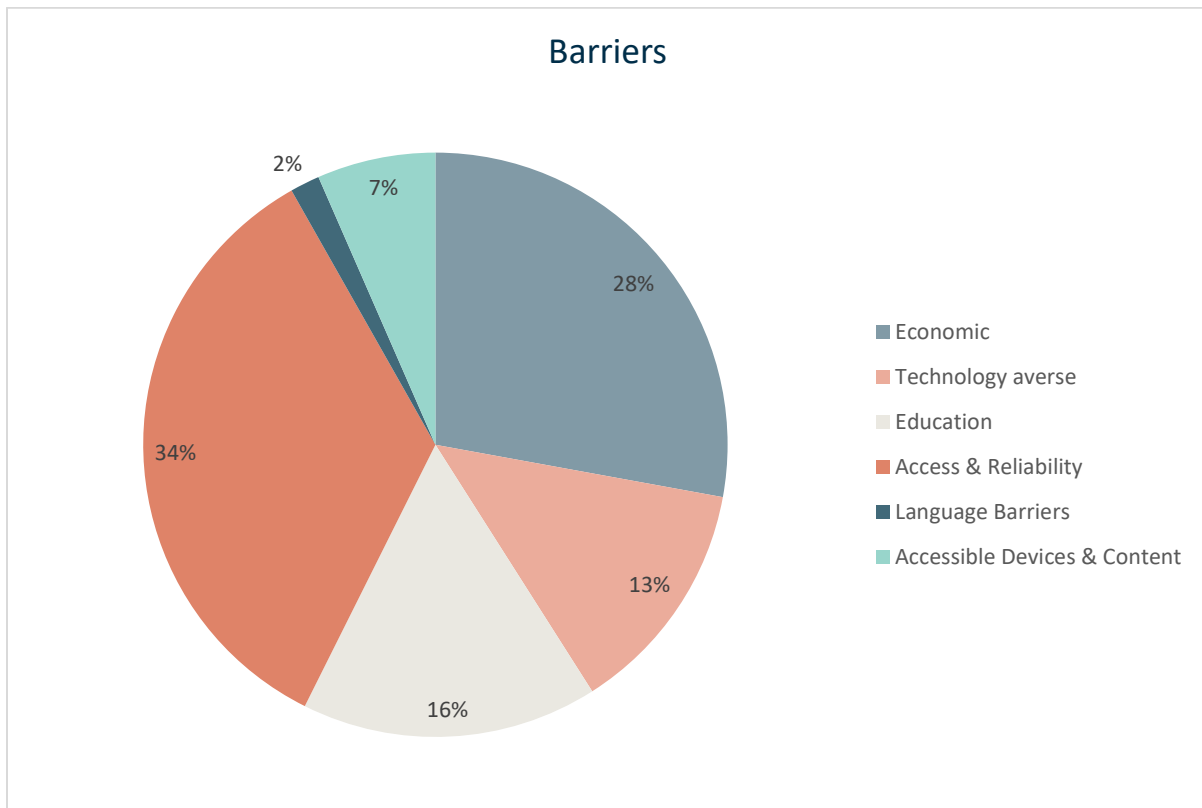| Reliable, affordable internet service	Appropriate devices	Digital literacy skills	Quality technical support	Appropriate content
41	3	1	1	2

The NDIA says digital inclusion is made up of these elements:

1) affordable, robust broadband internet service;
2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user;
3) access to digital literacy training;
4) quality technical support; and
5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

City staff and officials were asked to identify which of the five elements of digital inclusion were the most important to their clients. Almost all the respondents, 86%, said access to reliable, affordable internet service was the most important for their community.

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING FULL DIGITAL INCLUSION

Barriers

28%

13%

16%

34%

2%

7%

- Economic
- Technology averse
- Education
- Access & Reliability
- Language Barriers
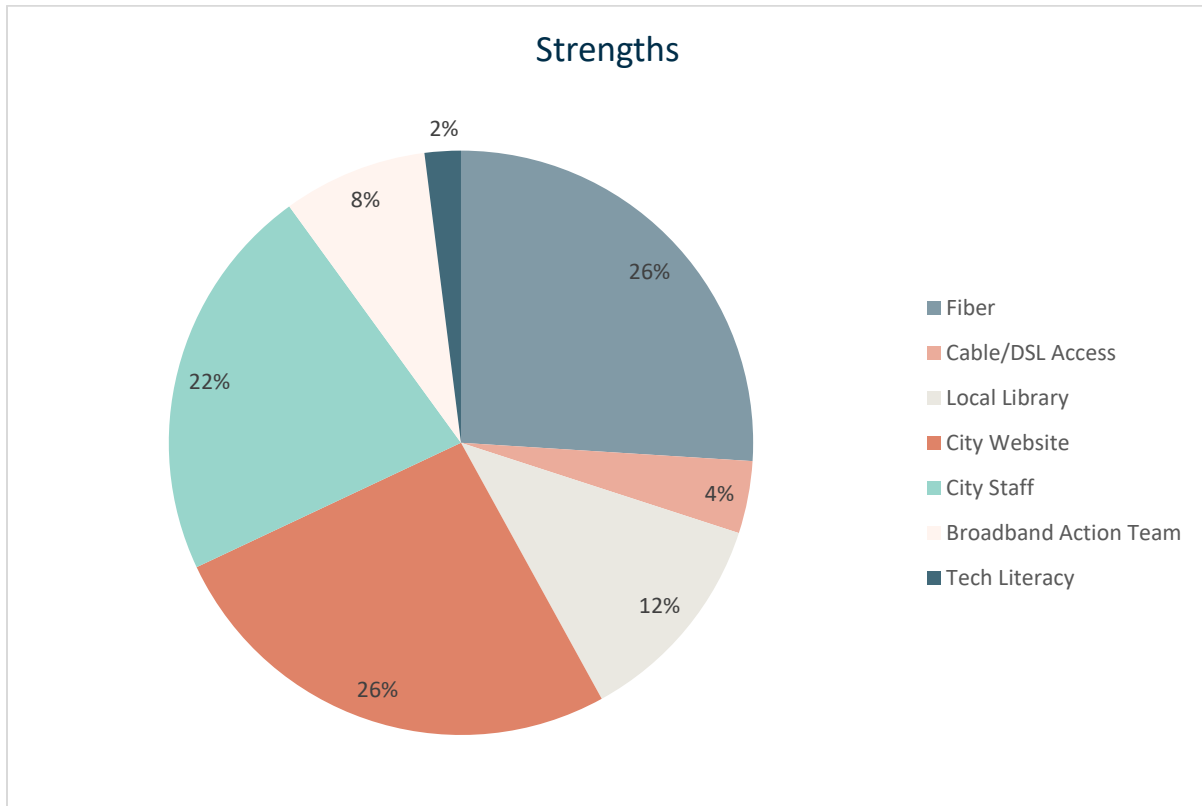- Accessible Devices & Content

City staff and officials identified internet access, reliability, and economic barriers as the most common for their city and community. City staff spoke of issues with accessing providers, the services and quality of providers, and the general unaffordability of internet access in their communities.

Other concerns and barriers were education and aversion to technology. Staff highlighted a disparity in the knowledge of their constituents that created inequity. Some staff indicated community members were not accessing the internet or its resources due to a lack of desire for connectivity.

Other barriers mentioned included a lack of accessible content for individuals with disabilities and non-English speakers.

STRENGTHS & ASSETS TO SUPPORT DIGITAL INCLUSION

Strengths

- Fiber
- Cable/DSL Access
- Local Library
- City Website
- City Staff
- Broadband Action Team
- Tech Literacy

When asked to identify their cities' strengths in addressing digital inclusion, city officials highlighted fiber access in their communities. They also indicated that city resources, including staff and websites, helped them connect to their constituents.

They spoke of the importance of the community coming together to support one another. Connection to resources through their local library was meaningful, as was broadband action teams gathering to tackle inequities.

Finally, technologically literate community members and access to cable/DSL internet were strengths some staff noted.

COMPELLING STORIES

We asked cities, "While data and research are important, individual stories are often the most compelling way to gain support from decision makers and legislators. Do you have any compelling stories or anecdotes you can share with us that help illustrate the importance of digital access and inclusion for all Idahoans?"

"In 2010, the City of Ammon began construction of a municipally owned fiber optic system. Since that time, we have invested in several hundred miles of fiber optic infrastructure. This infrastructure was initially dedicated to the operational needs of the City … Today, this infrastructure serves City operations, the local 911 dispatch center, first responders, eight different service providers, 110+ area businesses and over 1600 residential properties."

"Internet has been a want, but it is becoming a need. Technology is our future, and many American Falls families fell behind due to a digital divide during the pandemic due to poor internet access. With school, work, health care, entertainment, shopping, and other aspects of life managed online, reliable connectivity should be a high priority as to not be left behind."

"I believe that the students and patrons of Horseshoe Bend will benefit immensely on a cost beneficial internet that includes all. I have set up an ISP (Internet Service Provider) program with high school students in my past that incorporates running of a business and providing services. This can be incorporated in the school of Horseshoe Bend to work with the City of Horseshoe Bend for the betterment of all in the surrounding areas."

"The COVID-caused closure of K-12 schools across the state and also in higher education (university and community college) forced instruction to move online. The households, primarily rural, that could not obtain speedy, broadband internet access saw a disproportionate reduction in education during that time frame. In a modern society, digital connection is essential through either hard-wired/fiber or Starlink-style access."

"As you are all aware, when the pandemic was going on, a whole bunch of students and employees started using the internet from home for school and work. This has depleted our residents' financial situations and the lag time for the internet has had an effect on the way the students learn and how employees generate work."

"The world we live in is requiring more and more digital access for its population. We found if the power goes out we struggle to be able to complete our work because so much of what we do now is digital. We have a low-income housing complex in Wilder that is going through some digital upgrades and will now be requiring that applications for housing be submitted online. One of the things we have had to do to move forward is make sure we have public access computers in both English and Spanish available for prospective tenants to access their account information, complete applications, and make rent payments. We have set these up in the lobby of our Wilder Housing Authority Office and they are available during office hours."

"We have a library user whose spouse was incarcerated and her only means of communicating with him was through internet video calls. She had neither the necessary device, internet access, nor the technology skills to place such calls. To place the calls to her husband she approached the library for assistance and was provided with a private space, a laptop, internet access, and staff assistance as necessary to repeatedly and successfully communicate with her husband."

CITY-WIDE DIGITAL INCLUSION PLAN

City-Wide Digital Inclusion Plan

Is your city working on a city-wide digital inclusion plan to meet the needs of your community?
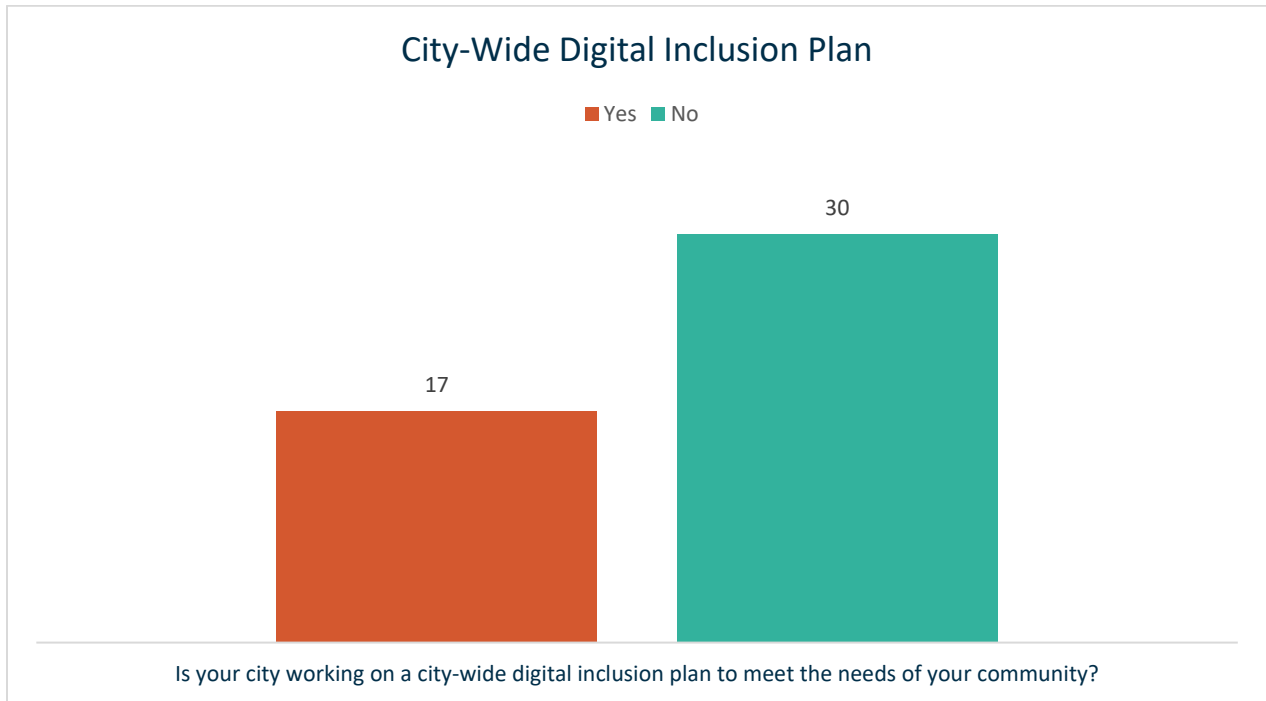
City officials were asked if they were working on a digital inclusion plan for their communities. Sixty-four percent of respondents said they were not working on a plan, while 36% said they had or were developing a plan.

SUMMARY

Digital access is a need for all communities in Idaho. The affordability, availability, and quality of internet access were top priorities for almost all the cities that responded to the survey.

Barriers to access, including economic ones, create inequities and struggles in cities throughout the state. Idahoans need internet access for everyday work and life.

The cities' strengths in the form of existing infrastructure and staff can be leveraged to help close the digital divide.

Stories from the cities highlighted the variety of needs and uses of internet access, from education to health care, and the creative ways cities and community-based organizations were tackling these problems.

Cities are working hard to create plans and tackle these issues locally, but there is more work to be done.

APPENDIX

The following is background information that was included in the email containing the survey.

Digital Access for All Idahoans (DAAI) State Plan Background Information for Partner Interviews

Questions covered in this document:

- **Why am I being contacted?**
- **What do you mean by digital access/digital inclusion?**
- **Why is Idaho creating a digital access plan?**
- **Who is the ICfL?**

Why Am I Being Contacted?

Governor Little selected the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) to work with community partners in creating a digital access and inclusion plan for the state, as authorized and funded under Title III of the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act. In Idaho, we have named this plan "Digital Access for All Idahoans."

The first, and most important step in this process is to identify the needs of Idahoans to inform a plan that addresses Idaho's unique challenges and opportunities. We are starting that process by reaching out to a variety of community partners in Idaho's digital society and economy, including non-profits, state agencies, educators, business groups, advocacy and civil rights organizations, and others.

Your organization has been identified as an important partner based on a number of factors, such as the customers you serve, the services you provide, and/or the community you represent. We are interested in hearing more about both the digital needs of the people you serve as well as the digital needs of your staff/organization in meeting your mission.

What is Digital Access/Digital Inclusion

Put simply, digital access and inclusion mean that every person in Idaho has the resources, knowledge, and skills to participate fully in the digital society and economy. These terms are also defined more specifically below.

Of special concern for Idaho's digital access efforts are people living in rural areas, as well as populations that are often underserved when it comes to accessing digital resources. These include aging individuals, incarcerated or recently released individuals, veterans, people with disabilities, people with language barriers, people with low levels of literacy, and individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group.

Digital access is defined as "the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States."

Digital inclusion is defined as "the activities that are necessary to ensure that all individuals in the United States have access to, and the use of, affordable information and communication technologies." Digital inclusion consists of the following five elements: (1) affordable internet service, (2) access to adequate devices, (3) digital literacy, (4) access to quality technical support, and (5) the availability of accessible content. Additional information about these five elements can be found on our website at: https://libraries.idaho.gov/digital-inclusion.

Why is Idaho Creating a Digital Access Plan?

Much of Idaho's economy and social connections already take place online and through digital systems. We register our students for school online, apply for jobs online, do our banking online, shop for houses online, talk to our families online, and even buy our groceries online. Ensuring digital access for everyone is good for business, good for communities, and good for Idahoans, both now and into the future.

The Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act (IIJA) provides funding for planning and implementing long-term, systematic, and sustainable solutions for the country's infrastructure. This includes the Digital Equity Act (DEA), which provides states with funding to create and implement digital inclusion plans. States will receive federal funds to support the planning process, and those that complete the planning process will qualify for additional funding to implement their plans.

While other parts of the IIJA address the physical infrastructure required to bring high-speed broadband to communities across the country, the DEA focuses on the human side of the issue. The purpose of the Digital Equity Act is to ensure that all individuals and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity needed to reap the full benefits of our digital economy.

The opportunity the Digital Equity Act provides to states is the chance to step back and thoughtfully design a statewide digital inclusion strategy to holistically meet the unique needs of our state's residents, leverage our state's assets, and identify innovative and creative solutions to achieve digital access for all Idahoans.

Who is the ICfL?

The ICfL is a state agency. Our mission is to assist libraries to build the capacity to better serve their communities. Libraries have been on the forefront of digital inclusion efforts for many years, and the ICfL has a strong history of partnering at the federal, state, and local level to bring valuable resources to communities throughout Idaho.

Nearly every community in Idaho, even the most remote and rural, has a library of some type. Our connection with these libraries, and their connection to the communities they serve, makes the ICfL uniquely positioned to lead Idaho's digital access planning process. You can learn more about us at www.libraries.idaho.gov.