

The Digital Divide Endangers Our Future

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By **Parisa Vinzant**

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Growing numbers of people rely primarily on internet to access jobs, education, healthcare, benefits, social services, city services, voting and more services. While the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified this reality and escalated the trend in the short-term, the trend itself is long-term and will have far-reaching implications for how, and how well, local governments operate and serve the public. As cities expand their use of technology to address residents' needs, public administrators face the urgent task of finding innovative ways to remedy digital inequities that could undermine the effectiveness of government or even worsen inequality in general. There may be no perfect or one-size-fits-all approach to close the digital divide but efforts by the City of Long Beach, California, are worth noting.

What stands out most about Long Beach's digital inclusion efforts is that it is a multi-year, multi-department and multi-stakeholder endeavor that deployed a collective impact framework and made racial equity a central underpinning. Instead of relying solely on industry partnerships, Long Beach substantively involved community-based groups and nonprofits most affected by the digital divide, thereby minimizing the often-outsized role and influence by internet service providers. Also, leadership at all levels of the city played a pivotal role in advancing digital inclusion by generating momentum and allocating resources and funding.

Long Beach's digital inclusion initiative was born from the economic inclusion priorities of the city's 10-year *Economic Development Blueprint*, published in 2017 by the Economic Development Commission and Economic Development Department. In September of that year Mayor Robert Garcia charged the Technology and Innovation Commission (TIC) and the Technology and Innovation Department (TID) with studying the digital divide and its impact on city residents, and with developing strategies and policies to close that divide. TIC conducted a survey and facilitated small-sized focus groups and community conversations in trusted community locations that included Long Beach's most marginalized groups such as Latinx, Black, and Cambodian residents. TIC then published a report in January 2019 titled, *Analysis and Recommendations for Advancing Digital Inclusion in Long Beach*.

Before COVID-19, the digital divide affected about 28% of Long Beach residents who lacked home access to the internet and internet-capable devices:

- Residents of color lacked home internet at twice the rate of white residents.
- Nearly 11% of Black residents lacked computer access at home—nearly three times the rate of White residents.

Next, Long Beach created a new position filled by Rebecca Kauma, who was tasked with leading and developing the city's first-ever digital inclusion policy. Funding to support the creation of a digital inclusion initiative did not come until several months later in March 2019, when former Councilwoman Lena Gonzalez provided \$40,000 from 1st-district council office district-priority funds. This new funding not only helped ensure that the city had the capacity to deploy a robust racial equity and collective impact approach, but it put the entire process on fast-track.

By mid-2019 the city had initiated a Digital Inclusion Stakeholder Committee—comprising multiple city departments, community-based organizations and nonprofits, internet service and telecom providers, educational institutions, libraries, elected leaders and members of the public—to co-develop a blueprint for ensuring that all Long Beach residents have equitable access and use of digital literacy training, internet and technology devices. Acting as the backbone organization, the city deployed a racial-equity-informed collective impact approach that brought together the community and cross-sector partners in a structured and ongoing format to solve the complex problem of the digital divide. This focus on racial equity helped to engage, disrupt and shift systems that maintain underlying racial inequities.

Further, the city chose to define digital inclusion and equity so that it encompassed access to low-cost and quality internet from home along with necessary devices and digital know-how. This inclusive definition helped disrupt the false narrative that digital inclusion equals any internet access at all. It also exposes the inadequacy of low-income internet plans offered by internet services providers as a key remedy for lack of access, as they do nothing to address the obstacles of purchasing or renting a modem or an internet-capable device. TIC's quantitative and qualitative data from 2018 revealed Long Beach residents without internet at home could afford no more than \$20 per month for access and equipment. The pandemic has made even this amount unrealistic and suggests that access to the internet is unacceptably fragile for too many vulnerable people.

When the pandemic hit, the city pivoted to address immediate concerns by creating the COVID-19 Digital Inclusion Response Working Group from its Digital Inclusion Stakeholder Committee. This group prioritized short-term and quick-win strategies to ensure Long Beach's unconnected and under-connected communities had home-based access to devices, internet connectivity and digital literacy training. A number of program ideas from this group were immediately implemented by the city with CARES Act funding, including the Digital Inclusion Resources Hotline and the Free Internet Services and



Computing Devices Program. To date, over 1,100 hotspots and 1,600 computers have been distributed to households most in need of internet and computer access. The city is in the process of finding sustainable funding sources to continue these and other crucial programs while it works to finalize its long-term digital inclusion policy.

Solving the digital divide will not be easy, cheap or quick. It will take sustained resolve and innovation, as well as a fuller understanding of the debilitating effects of the digital divide not only on vulnerable communities, but also on the vitality and future of our cities.

Author: *Parisa Vinzant, MPA, is an equity/inclusion consultant, strategist, and technology/innovation commissioner in Long Beach, CA. Parisa applies a social/racial equity lens in her writing exploring topics ranging from ethics, education, democracy, technology, and community engagement. Any views expressed herein are hers alone. Contact her at info@vinzantgroup.com and [@Parisa_Vinzant](https://twitter.com/Parisa_Vinzant) (Twitter).*

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