



National Digital Navigator Corps Key Findings and Recommendations Brief

May 2026



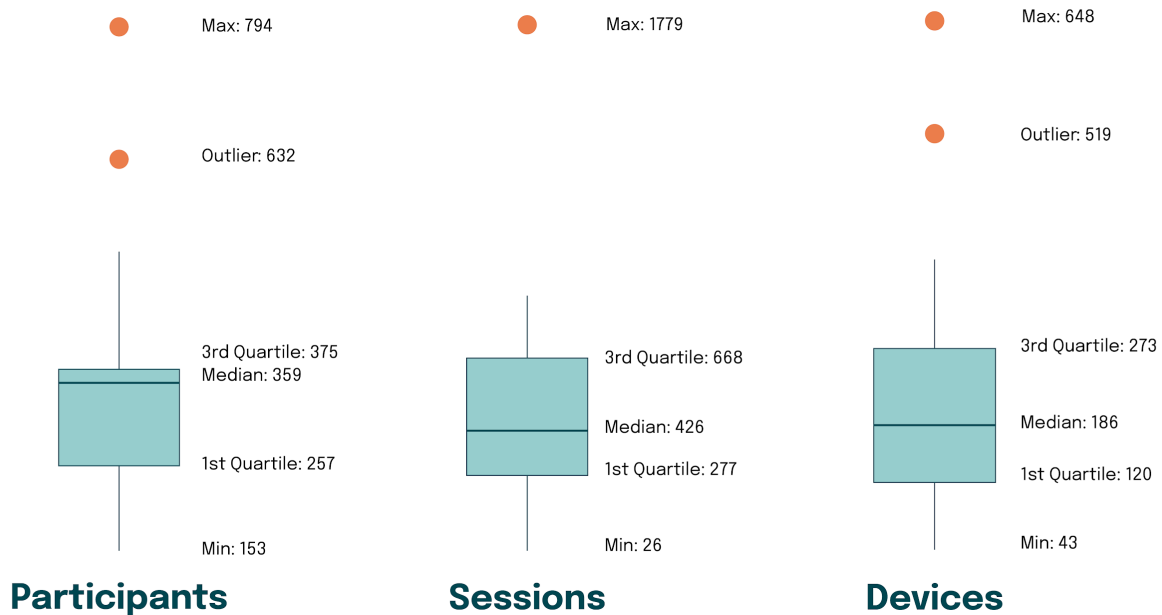
National Digital Navigator Corps

Key Findings and Recommendations Brief

The National Digital Navigator Corps (NDNC) is a multi-year pilot program administered by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), with funding from Google.org, to create or expand digital navigator programs in rural and Tribal communities. The program set out to adapt the established digital navigator model for implementation in rural and Tribal communities where barriers to digital equity, such as poor broadband availability, geographic isolation, and a lack of community resources, are particularly acute for economically vulnerable residents.

In 2022, 18 organizations, spanning 15 states, were awarded subgrants to establish or expand digital navigator programs serving rural and Tribal communities. Along with program partner AMERIND Critical Infrastructure (AMERIND/ACI), NDIA led the program and provided training and ongoing support to the subgrantees. Over a period of 31 months, the subgrantees delivered comprehensive digital navigator services to more than 6,500 community members, held more than 9,200 sessions, and distributed more than 4,100 devices. Figure 1 illustrates the range of total program participants, sessions, and devices distributed among the NDNC subgrantees.

Figure 1: Distribution of Total Participants, Sessions, & Devices Among Subgrantees



The following key findings and recommendations from the NDNC program are summarized from the full [National Digital Navigator Corps Program Evaluation Report](#). These findings were developed using information from the following sources:

- program participant data collected by subgrantees throughout the grant period;
- individual program evaluation reports prepared by each subgrantee;
- self-assessments completed by staff at NDIA, AMERIND/ACI, and subgrantee organizations; and,
- a subset study with four of the subgrantees, consisting of individual staff interviews, participant focus groups, and detailed program data analysis.

Key Findings

The National Digital Navigator Corps affirmed and strengthened the core value proposition of the digital navigator model. Through NDNC, NDIA and the 18 subgrantee organizations established digital navigators as trusted community resources who served more than 6,500 community members with ongoing, individualized support for accessing affordable and appropriate connectivity, devices, and digital skills. The goals they addressed and impacts achieved were as diverse as the program participants they worked with; a few examples include:

- Helping veterans get connected and acquire digital skills
- Enabling elders to maintain independence by building skills to connect with family and friends, protect their information, and manage their healthcare online
- Assisting local small businesses to modernize and accept digital payments and grow their customer base
- Improving access to resources, job searches, and college coursework for individuals impacted by the justice system
- Enrolling eligible households in discount plans and subsidy programs to reduce the cost of broadband service
- Providing clients of homeless shelters and soup kitchens with internet access to research employment, housing, and other critical services

NDIA's understanding of and partnership with rural and Tribal communities has increased considerably, and there is more room for growth. Since the start of NDNC, and due in large part to the partnerships established through the program, NDIA has significantly expanded its work with rural and Tribal organizations and communities. Some highlights include:

- Hosted Net Inclusion 2025 in the Gila River Indian Community, the first time the conference has been held on Tribal land

- Launched the Seven Star Communities program to recognize Tribal governments and Native-led organizations leading the way in digital inclusion work, and recognized the inaugural class of eight awardees in 2024
- Established and continue to support the Indigenous Digital Inclusion Working Group
- Supported the creation of Community Connectivity Plans in more than 30 Appalachian communities through Connect Humanity's Appalachia Digital Accelerator Program
- Presentations on digital inclusion at Tribal Broadband Bootcamps and Native conferences

Several subgrantees suggested that, as a national organization serving a diverse network of Affiliates, it is important that NDIA continues to incorporate rural and Tribal perspectives into communications and the resources it publishes. This includes recognizing that certain language, issues, and activities may be perceived differently among rural or Tribal audiences than with many of NDIA's affiliates located in urban areas. Tribal subgrantees recommended that NDIA must maintain and grow its partnerships with Native-led organizations to continue effectively supporting digital inclusion work in Native communities.

The investment in NDNC produced lasting impacts beyond the digital navigation services subgrantees provided to community members. While developing and supporting the subgrantee digital navigator programs, NDIA created new resources and guidance that have advanced the digital navigator model. These resources are freely available to digital navigator programs throughout the country:

- New or updated program manager, digital navigator, and data manager job descriptions

- Digital navigator data platform template in Airtable, and accompanying data collection forms
- Sample marketing materials and a social media toolkit
- Digital navigator program evaluation template
- [Digital Inclusion Manual \(2024\)](#) and [Digital Navigator Program Toolkit \(2025\)](#) that compile the above resources and present guidance and recommendations for running digital navigator programs
- [National Digital Navigator Corps Stories](#)

The NDNC program has also raised the profile of the subgrantee organizations and of digital navigators as a service delivery model. Impacts of the program have been featured in media coverage, legislative visits to Capitol Hill and Congressional testimony, and NDIA's blog series featuring the subgrantees and describing lessons learned along the way.

Delivering digital navigator services in rural and Tribal communities requires shifting expectations and strategies. Low population densities across large geographic areas combined with low broadband access and adoption, creates real limitations on the capacity of digital navigators serving rural and Tribal communities. Programs serving small, tightly-knit (if physically dispersed) communities of a few thousand people, as was the case with several Tribal subgrantees, also face limits on the total potential participant base and may require more time to build trust and interest in the program.

In addition to geographic and population factors, sites developed strategies tailored to their local contexts. Some iterations on the model unique to rural and Tribal communities included scheduling appointments with family and friends first and then relying on word-of-mouth for referrals; leveraging religious or Tribal events to build awareness; taking advantage of reduced demand during harvest, winter, or rainy seasons to conduct professional development, create program materials, and build new partnerships. Many subgrantees also found that capacity limitations among community partner

organizations hindered their ability to build effective referral networks and identify suitable sites for meetings with participants.

Building awareness of digital navigator services and a referral pipeline takes time. Despite most subgrantee organizations being trusted and well-known in their communities and hiring digital navigators from within the communities they serve, most sites initially struggled to build awareness and interest in their digital navigator services. Throughout the grant period, sites tested new outreach methods, adapted language to resonate with local audiences, and built out their partner networks. The most effective outreach strategies varied between sites; however, most organizations ultimately relied heavily on one specific outreach strategy to attract participants. Given the initial challenges with attracting participants, this might suggest that most doubled-down once they found a strategy that worked.

Digital navigators took on many roles, risking becoming overburdened and burning out. In addition to their primary role providing technology training and support to program participants, some of the additional roles NDNC digital navigators were tasked with included building awareness of the digital navigator program and driving referrals with partner organizations and internal colleagues; collecting and entering data, functioning as the data manager in some cases; and serving as the face of their program both locally and nationally. Oftentimes, these responsibilities exceeded their capacity and several digital navigators expressed that others at their organizations lacked the capacity or understanding of their work to fully support them.

Consistent and standardized data collection presented an ongoing challenge due to a range of technical and programmatic reasons. Subgrantee organizations entered the NDNC program with vastly different levels of data collection experience—some had established systems and practices and struggled to incorporate new requirements and software, while others had no prior data collection or analysis experience and required

ongoing technical support. Additionally, the decision to co-create the digital navigator Data Platform and data collection requirements with subgrantees ultimately resulted in a lack of clarity regarding particular data collection and reporting requirements. Combined, these factors resulted in significant consistency and quality disparities in the data collected across subgrantees. Despite these differences, 13 of 18 subgrantees felt that their organization's data expertise increased over the course of the NDNC program.

Digital navigators emphasized the value of building durable career skills.

When reflecting on the most valuable skills and knowledge they gained, most focused on learnings that transcend the role of a digital navigator rather than technical skills associated with providing technology support services. Key skill-building for digital navigators clustered around three primary themes: (1) building relationships, trust, and credibility in the communities they served; (2) gaining a better understanding of the needs and barriers faced by community members; and (3) developing greater patience and empathy.

Lack of funding is the primary barrier to subgrantees continuing to offer digital navigator services. After the NDNC grant ends, four subgrantees plan to continue their digital navigator programs, 11 will be unable to continue supporting a digital navigator but intend to adapt their approaches to continue offering some level of digital inclusion support services, and three plan to cease offering digital inclusion services. Subgrantees that have wound down their digital navigator programs overwhelmingly cited a lack of funding as the primary reason for doing so. Most emphasized the value of the program to their organizations and the community, and a desire to continue offering digital navigator services should funding become available.

Recommendations

Devote time to learning about the local community and partner organizations prior to program initiation. For grant programs like NDNC, funders and program administrators should allocate time and budget, after selecting recipients but before initiating services, to learning about the funded organization(s) and the communities they serve. Along with gaining important local context, this provides an opportunity to make adjustments to program requirements and activities according to grantees' unique needs and capacities before services begin.

Establish measures to understand the holistic value of a digital navigator program to the host organization and the community it serves. Create realistic program output targets by estimating the number of weekly participants served, sessions, and other metrics, taking into account practical limitations on a digital navigator's capacity, and then extrapolate those to longer timeframes. Consider how to measure the impacts of the digital navigator program that go beyond direct service provision. For several NDNC subgrantees, new community partnerships and increased organizational capacity, such as the digital equity and data collection expertise they gained, proved to be among the most lasting outcomes of participating in the program. Similarly, the expanded connections to rural and Tribal partners, as well as the evolution of the digital navigator model, are outcomes that will benefit NDIA and the broader digital equity field upon completion of the NDNC program.

Make a plan for outreach and education about the digital navigator program with community partners and internally within the host organization. Leverage NDIA's sample digital navigator marketing materials and social media toolkit to create outreach materials for distribution to community partners to build awareness and simplify the referral process. Conduct internal learning sessions to ensure colleagues at the host organization are aware of

and can make internal referrals. Allocate significant time following the program launch for the digital navigator or communications staff to conduct outreach and relationship-building efforts, and adjust other program metrics accordingly.

Surround digital navigators with sufficient organizational support to grow and manage the program. Establish clear roles and responsibilities for digital navigators and other staff supporting the digital navigator program, including the program manager, data manager, and, ideally, communications staff. Ensure other internal staff understand the digital navigator services offered and how to make appropriate referrals. Leverage existing networks and relationships to support digital navigators in conducting outreach and building partnerships, particularly with lower-capacity community-based organizations. Check in with digital navigators frequently to identify additional responsibilities or types of support that are required. NDNC program managers often checked in with their digital navigators on a weekly basis, and NDIA held monthly digital navigator cohort meetings.

Establish clear data collection requirements in consultation with digital navigators and budget time for training, data entry, and management. Digital navigator program staff should collectively agree on the data to be collected for monitoring program performance and measuring impact. Processes for how and when the digital navigator will collect data should be clearly defined. The digital navigator and data manager should establish a regular cadence to catch up on data entry (for data not captured in real-time), cleanup, and reconciliation—ideally at least weekly.

Prepare for digital navigator turnover by identifying career paths that keep them serving the community. Digital navigators are often early-career professionals who are passionate about serving their communities. As they develop their skills and grow as leaders within their organizations and communities, many will naturally seek new opportunities, which can lead to

high turnover rates. Cultivating their career growth opportunities strengthens the local social sector and benefits the program if they join partner organizations. Host organizations should develop recruitment pathways and ensure program continuity during transitions through documented procedures, job shadowing, partnership awareness, and collaborative work.

Develop a sustainability plan for digital navigator programs. As direct service programs, digital navigator services are particularly vulnerable to disruptions in funding—without sustainable funding, staff positions get cut and services cease. Even if funding is restored at a later time, it may be necessary to hire and train new staff and rebuild referral pathways, partnerships, awareness, and community trust. Creating a sustainability plan that identifies diverse and overlapping funding sources can ensure the program is not reliant on any single funding source, mitigate the risk of funding losses, and ensure the program does not experience gaps in funding or service.